

**“I Can’t Get Excited for a Child, Ritsuka”: Intersections of Gender, Identity, and Audience Ambiguity in Yun Kôga’s *Loveless***

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In December 2007, ICv2, a leading consulting firm and information source on North American pop-culture commodities, held its first conference on Japanese *anime* (animation) and *manga* (comics) in domestic markets (“ICv2 Conference”). The conference’s subtitle, “Inside the Otaku Generation,” underscores a distinct change in the language and visibility of Japanese pop-culture fandom, one that has been underway for several years. The word *otaku*, an honorific originally used to refer to someone else’s house or family, became associated with a distinctly unsavory brand of fan in the 1980s, due largely to “The Otaku Murderer,” a high-profile Japanese serial killer whose home was, according to media reports, overflowing with comics and videos. As demonstrated by ICv2, however, it has been reclaimed and (mostly) stripped of its negative connotations.<sup>1</sup> It wasn’t long ago when North American otaku had to go to extraordinary lengths to obtain the materials of their obsession. Distant conventions, *n*th-generation bootlegs, and overseas shipping were part of Japanese pop-culture fandom. Simply put, otaku had to work hard at being otaku—which is exactly what made them the kind of unsavory fans the term *otaku* once referred to.

Now such fans need only look as far as their local Best Buy or online Barnes & Noble. The explosive success of imports such as *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Pokémon*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach*<sup>2</sup> has opened a veritable floodgate of Japanese pop-culture materials, and buyers have eagerly snatched them up. In 2004, Rob Walker reported in *The New York Times* that “the [2003] manga market in the United States and Canada

added up to something between \$90 million...and \$110 million [USD] last year, an increase of nearly 50 percent over 2002” (“Comics Trip”). Since then, manga sales numbers have exploded. *Wired* states that in 2006, manga sales made up approximately two-thirds of all comic and graphic novel sales, with Viz Entertainment’s manga serial *Shonen Jump* boasting double the subscription numbers of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Thompson 226). Manga’s high profile has, in turn, boosted the sales of all graphic novels in America. In six years, the comic and graphic novel industry’s revenue jumped from \$75 to \$330 million (225).

Although manga has been a tremendous part of the Japanese reading culture since World War II, its overwhelming presence in the US market is a recent phenomenon. One of the key figures of manga’s rise in America is Stuart Levy, CEO of Tokyopop. A worldwide leader in manga distribution, Tokyopop (originally called Mixx) first began publishing manga stateside in 1997 with *MixxZine*, a “motionless picture entertainment” serial that offered popular titles such as *Sailor Moon* alongside relatively unknown titles like *Parasyte*. However, the images were reversed to correspond with English left-to-right reading order, an industry practice known as “flopping,” and some translations left much to be desired.<sup>3</sup> It wasn’t until 2002 that Levy, prompted by licensors, distribution chains, and the success of Viz Entertainment’s unflopped release of the *Dragon Ball Z* manga, changed Tokyopop’s publication strategy to offer what he termed “100% Authentic Manga”: volumes that preserved right-to-left print format, Japanese systems of onomatopoeia, and other artistic, linguistic, and cultural differences (227). This less-is-more approach lowered production costs, allowed the company to undercut the

competition, and quickly brought huge returns on their investments.

Today, Tokyopop's approach to manga marketing and publishing is considered by many to be the industry standard, and the number of titles they release is a testament to their success. As in Japan, America has manga titles that cater to every age group, interest area, and stylistic preference, so Tokyopop instituted a ratings system<sup>4</sup> in order to help buyers make informed purchasing decisions. According to a company-produced white paper, there are five ratings for their titles: A (All Ages), Y (Youth, ages 10+), T (Teen, ages 13+), OT (Older Teen, ages 16+), and M (Mature, ages 18+) ("The Librarian's Guide" 14). The guide clarifies its ratings with short descriptions, noting that titles for older audiences may feature content that may not be suitable for young children. Unfortunately, these ratings are reductive at best and do not address the disconnect between intended and actual audience.

Some of these questions of intent can be answered by noting that the Japanese have different ideas about what is objectionable to, and inappropriate for, young readers. As "The Librarian's Guide" points out, "It is important to understand that manga is very much an East Asian import, filled with diverse themes and situations" (3). Therefore, manga's social and cultural conventions do not always correspond to those of North America. The Tokyopop ratings system was designed and implemented to educate adults unfamiliar with the genre, not to assist children in choosing their own titles. What purpose these ratings actually serve, however, is up for debate, as manga purchases are often unrestricted. Although some publishers shrink-wrap adult titles and some

sellers request proof of age before purchase, such practices are non-compulsory and only acknowledge general content. They do not, and cannot, address more specific aspects such as theme, character, or plot—nor do they recognize the possibility of an ambiguous audience or work that falls beyond rating limitations.

Among the many titles that demonstrate this problem of ambiguity is *Loveless*, a fantasy manga by established female *mangaka* (manga artist/author) Yun Kôga.<sup>5</sup> *Loveless* is rated “OT” by Tokyopop, which means that it is “appropriate for ages 16 and up” and “[m]ay contain profanity and strong language, moderate violence and gore, moderate sexual themes and sexual violence, nudity, moderate fanservice [an industry term meaning gratuitous pandering to the audience], and alcohol and illegal drug use” (“The Librarian’s Guide” 14). *Loveless* does, in fact, meet many of the aforementioned criteria, but its content goes beyond simple, categorical reductions. Kôga’s story draws upon a legacy of romantic, often explicit, manga titles to create a nuanced tale of love, identity, self-discovery, and the power of language. Additionally, the North American release of *Loveless* is preceded by a Japanese release history that suggests a much older audience.

Yet the performance of gender, sexuality, and identity within the manga speaks directly to an audience too young and/or malleable to have made any lasting judgments about its own physical, social, and sexual identity. It is impossible, as Tokyopop attempts with its ratings system, to reduce *Loveless* to an easy series of evaluative standards. However, by examining historical precedents, release history, and thematic issues, it is

possible to analyze the text's strategies for navigating the boundaries between children's literature and adult literature. Through its use of gender ambiguity and outward representations of sexual identity, *Loveless* negotiates a threefold audience of pre-adolescent, adolescent, and adult women, touching on themes and concepts designed to interest a large body of readers.

*Loveless* is the story of Ritsuka Aoyagi, a 12-year-old boy tormented by amnesia, an abusive mother, and the murder of his older brother, Seimei. Two years prior to the manga's events, Ritsuka underwent a dramatic personality shift; he went from being a popular-but-average student to an aloof-but-outstanding student. This change was the impetus behind his mother, Misaki's, abuse. With the loss of Seimei, the only person who defended him, Ritsuka grew increasingly distant. The manga opens with his first day at a new school, where Soubi<sup>6</sup> Agatsuma, a mysterious 20-year-old art student who claims to have been sent by Seimei, confronts Ritsuka. When they are attacked by a pair of middle-school students referring to themselves as "Breathless," Soubi reveals that he is a "Fighter," a magician who attacks using specialized linguistic spells, and that Ritsuka is a "Sacrifice," one who assumes all damage in a spell battle. Together, the two form the team "Loveless," and Ritsuka is initiated into a world of magic and intrigue. Over the course of the manga, Ritsuka works to discover what really happened to Seimei and forges a deep bond with Soubi based on mutual trust, desire, and submission.

Currently, *Loveless* runs in Ichijinsha's *Monthly Comic Zero-Sum* and has been

compiled into nine volumes (“Japanese Comic Ranking”), eight of which have been translated into English by Tokyopop (“Loveless [Manga]”). Although Tokyopop categorizes the title as fantasy, *Loveless* falls neatly into a much larger category genre known as *josei*, or “ladies’ comics,” manga written specifically for adult women. As long-running translation and review group Aqua House points out, *josei* is often confused or conflated with *shōjo* (girls’ comics) because both genres address female audiences, but *josei* tends to feature male leads instead of female leads, as in *shōjo* (“[faq]: Manga Publishing Houses”). Another distinguishing characteristic of *josei* is its lack of *furigana*, small *hiragana* and *katakana* glosses to help readers with comprehension and pronunciation. *Furigana*, notes Aqua House, is most prevalent in manga for younger audiences who need *furigana* to work through complex *kanji* within the text (“[faq]: Glossary of Terms”). Generally, *Loveless* lacks *furigana* except to clarify name pronunciations, since most *kanji* have multiple readings (“Loveless 6, page 18”; “Loveless 6, page 111”). Their exclusion is a strong indication that Kōga’s intended audience was one with the educational background required to effectively read and comprehend her language.

Because *josei* is marketed to women, it is not surprising that women write the majority of its titles. What *is* surprising about *josei* and *shōjo* is that a subgenre known as “boys’ love,” manga that explores male/male romance, is also written by women.<sup>7</sup> Boys’ love emerged in the early 1970s, just as female mangaka were beginning to overtake men in the *shōjo* world (Welker 841). Its titles run the gamut of explicitness—from innocent expressions of platonic love to outright pornography<sup>8</sup>—and are characterized by the

presence of one or more androgynous male characters. As James Welker illustrates, these *bishōnen* (roughly translated as “beautiful boys”) are considered stand-ins for women. “[The] beautiful boy,” he says, “is visually and psychically neither male nor female” (842) and is designed to be the character that females most identify with.

At first, female identification with *bishōnen* appears backwards; such figures take their visual and romantic cues from women, not the other way around. However, manga critic Yukari Fujimoto suggests that during the formative years of the boys’ love genre, female readers could not “positively accept their own sexuality as women” (qtd. in Welker 842). During the 1970s “neither same-sex desire nor schoolgirl interest in sexuality was considered appropriate,” and Welker indicates that these women required texts that “transgressively [offered]...new models of masculinity and romance” (842-3). Boys’ love introduced female readers to visual representations of a subversive, yet safe, brand of sexuality. Also, because boys’ love titles appealed to a broad spectrum of Japanese women, the division between *shōjo* and *josei* blurred further, with several titles appealing to female readers across a variety of ages and lifestyles—a movement that has continued as boys’ love has grown in popularity and social attitudes have changed.

Kōga is no stranger to the history and conventions of boys’ love. One of her previous works, the acclaimed manga series *Earthian*, is a classic of the genre. In the case of *Loveless*, Ritsuka and Soubi are her primary *bishōnen*. Ritsuka’s pre-adolescent body has the slender build of a petite woman, but it lacks the standard female markers of delineated hips and breasts. Additionally, because he has not yet reached puberty, he

cannot be identified (literally or visually) as a man. Soubi's body is also willowy and feminine, and his long hair appears to signify womanhood; the only outward representation of his masculinity, other than clothing, is his height. In fact, most of the males in *Loveless*, with their androgynous figures and longer-than-usual hair, conform to the bishônen stereotype.

Despite their "maleness," Kôga inscribes her characters' bodies with qualities that suggest femaleness without resorting to its traditional imagery. Still, as Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

The sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of "the body" that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance. This "body" often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as "external" to that body. Any theory of the culturally constructed body, however,...ought to question "the body" as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as passive and prior to discourse. (129)

Questioning the sex/gender distinction of these supposedly male bodies opens up the possibility that *Loveless* is an examination of gender performance. Boys' love has experimented with gender roles from the beginning, crossing the divisions between male and female in a fantastic, non-heteronormative space where sex is not presupposed by the body.

The concept of such spaces is nothing new to Japan. Despite the Japanese people's stereotypical reputation for sexual oppressiveness, Welker reminds us that "[g]ender as performance has long been an integral part of Japanese theater" (842). As in English theater, women were barred from the Japanese stage for centuries, and men, real-life bishōnen in their own right, played all female roles. This fact, combined with the contemporary success of the all-female Takarazuka Revue Company (an all-female theater that became extremely popular during the 1970s for its gender-bending performance of the shōjo classic *Rose of Versailles*) demonstrates Japan's tradition of gender performativity in art. In this regard, *Loveless* is no different than men masquerading as idealized females or women playing men in "trouser roles" (Welker 847). Ritsuka's youth and Soubi's fashion allow them to be both female and male, thus casting their unusual love affair into both orthodox heterosexual and subversive homosexual contexts.

Still, it is not accurate to call the Ritsuka/Soubi dynamic a disguised heterosexual relationship, nor is it safe to suggest that it is merely a thinly veiled homosexual relationship. Both characters swap between traditional masculine and feminine roles. Soubi, a master Fighter, is Ritsuka's entrance into and information source on the Fighter-Sacrifice world. He is the keeper of worldly knowledge and reveals it only when he chooses to.<sup>9</sup> Ritsuka submits because he views himself as Soubi's Sacrifice in the most literal sense, as well as his physical, mental, and social inferior. Yet, because Fighters are at the command of their Sacrifices, Soubi acquiesces to Ritsuka's will

whenever Ritsuka chooses to exert it. He is at the boy's beck and call, even going so far as to purchase Ritsuka a cell phone so he can call at any hour (Kôga 1: 145). Perhaps one of *Loveless's* most illustrative moments is during Volume One, when Soubi borrows an ear-piercing gun and forces Ritsuka to pierce his ears. With this act, Soubi both dominates Ritsuka into performing a sadistic act and submits to the creation of scars, a physical reminder of his masochistic surrender (1: 169-73).

If one accepts the convention of masculinity as "dominant" and femininity as "submissive," this early scene allows readers to interpret the Ritsuka/Soubi dynamic in multiple ways. The assertive Fighter defends his passive Sacrifice, yet it is the Sacrifice who commands him. Soubi is older, more forceful and persuasive in his language, yet he allows a child to rule him. Ritsuka, an innocent and social inferior, commands the elder's body and life. Ritsuka does not conform to the traditional image of masculine dominance, but his exerted influence allows him to be read in such a way. Conversely, Soubi's age, height, and experience grant him physical and social power, yet he allows himself to be commanded by his smaller, weaker partner. They continuously exchange authority within their relationship, complicating the standard divisions between masculinity and femininity, dominance and submission.

Although this early scene begins to articulate the complex connections between dominance, sadomasochism, and sexual identity within the manga, later volumes make these themes palpable. Fighters cast all damaging spells, but their Sacrifices assume the damage. The visual imagery of spell battles, and the damage taken while engaging

in them, suggests bondage; instead of being wounded, the Sacrifice is painfully restrained in chains, cuffs, and collars. Kôga pushes the imagery even further by representing Ritsuka and Soubi in promotional art wearing outfits that resemble the bondage paraphernalia of the Fighter-Sacrifice battles. Ritsuka in particular is often illustrated with piercings and clothes covered in straps and laces, none of which he ever wears during the course of the manga. The actual physical wounds Ritsuka suffers from Misaki contrast these costumes. There is hardly a single panel that does not show him wearing a bandage of some sort. Ritsuka tolerates the pain because “[a]s long as Mother is at home with me, I’m happy with that” (Kôga 5: 126). Ritsuka’s admission that he’s “fine with the way she treats [him]” prompts Soubi to wonder if the boy is “a masochist...or an angel” (5: 127). Recall Soubi’s demand for ear piercings: upon completing them, Ritsuka asks, “Soubi, do you like pain? People like that are called masochists” (Kôga 1: 173). The act of giving and receiving pain becomes impossibly tied up in gender performativity and desire.

Butler posits another way for readers to consider Ritsuka’s relationships with Seimei, Misaki, and Soubi:

Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire....The identifications consequent to melancholia are modes of preserving

unresolved object relations, and in the case of same-sexed gender identification, the unresolved object relations are invariably homosexual. Indeed, the stricter and more stable the gender affinity, the less resolved the original loss, so that rigid gender boundaries inevitably work to conceal the loss of an original love that, unacknowledged, fails to be resolved. (63)

Ritsuka's melancholia over the loss of Seimei, his father substitute, is unresolved throughout *Loveless*. Even when it is revealed in Volume Five that Seimei is alive, Ritsuka still cannot cope with his brother's loss. Coupled with the revelation that their relationship bordered on incest (Kôga 5: 49-50), the impact on Ritsuka's psyche becomes obvious. Soubi, the man closest to his brother, becomes a Seimei substitute and love interest. Ritsuka's involvement in the Fighter-Sacrifice battles brings him closer to understanding the world his brother inhabited. Conversely, Misaki, as Ritsuka's remaining parent, comes to embody everything destructive about his relationship with Seimei. Ritsuka accepts her abuse because he sees it as punishment; each wound he suffers is both penance for the sin of loving his own brother and reminder that his brother lives within him, Misaki, and the Fighter-Sacrifice world.

All of these themes gesture toward an intended adult audience capable of responding to these nuances, yet the manga's most distinguishing characteristic may be the reason behind its popularity among—and Tokyopop's decision to market it to—teen readers. In the *Loveless* universe, all people are born with a cat's tail and a pair of cat's ears. The presence of these *nekomimi* (literally "cat-ears") lends a certain childish fantasy to the

story. Yet even this lends itself to mature themes. In *Love/less*, a person's nekomimi disappear whenever he or she "becomes an adult," a euphemism for sexual initiation. This fact points to the mixed history of nekomimi characters in Japanese culture. Just as the Western figure of the Playboy Bunny juxtaposes the vulnerability of a baby animal with unbridled female sexuality, the nekomimi clothes fetish objects in the garb of innocence. *Love/less's* anthropomorphism, like shôjo manga's use of the schoolgirl uniform to symbolize the apex of girlhood and burgeoning adolescence, is at once a call to childhood and adulthood.

Kôga's choice to inscribe her characters with a physical trait representing their sexual initiation is a calculated one, but the exact process of sexual initiation is unclear. She never directly identifies which non-penetrative and/or penetrative acts result in nekomimi loss. For this reason, it is difficult to ascertain what exactly causes *Love/less* characters to lose their ears and tail. The manga offers some clues. Heterosexual coitus is, of course, one method, but it is definitely not the only one. A flashback reveals that Soubi's male teacher "took" his nekomimi at a young age (Kôga 8: 20-23). Lesbians Kouya Sakagami and Yamato Nakano, the female Fighter-Sacrifice team known as "Zero," are involved in a committed relationship and lack nekomimi (Kôga 3: 183-90). Meanwhile, acts like kissing, hugging, touching, and non-genital massage do not appear to cause nekomimi loss. Despite these and other depictions, the manga remains surprisingly ambiguous on the topic of sexual initiation.

Of course, this move allows Kôga to identify certain characters as "innocent," but it also

blurs the definition of adulthood. This is clearly demonstrated when Hitomi Shinonome, Ritsuka's female teacher, is threatened by Youji and Natsuo Sagan, the male Fighter-Sacrifice team known as "Zero."<sup>10</sup> They identify her as an "adult" in terms of her age, but because Hitomi retains her nekomimi, she is teased and mocked. In fact, they resolve to take her virginity and complete her transformation into "adulthood" (Kôga 2: 139-144). Neither Youji nor Natsuo manages to rape her; Soubi ultimately saves the day. However, this moment helps draw a stark division between "adulthood," as defined by sexual initiation, and maturity, as defined by adult-like actions and thoughts.

Because the world of *Loveless* features an outward representation of one's sexual initiation, its social dynamics are strikingly different from our own. Ritsuka immediately recognizes Soubi as an adult by his lack of nekomimi, and he treats Soubi as such. During their first meeting, Ritsuka says that he had no idea his brother "had an adult friend," prompting Soubi to respond, "Don't worry. I won't do anything to you" (Kôga 1: 33). This brief exchange is followed by a kiss, causing Ritsuka to wonder at the true nature of Soubi and Seimei's relationship. Because Seimei still had his ears and tail before (and after) his disappearance, his relationship with Soubi could not have been a consummated love affair, yet the intimacy Soubi shared with Seimei (and seeks to share with Ritsuka) indicates a mature connection. Of course, a sexual relationship between the two would be inappropriate; in fact, Ritsuka says in Volume One, "My mom would flip if I lost my ears at my age" (1: 38). Despite several instances of kissing and heavy petting by both Soubi and Seimei, Ritsuka retains his nekomimi. Still, his concern over their possible loss clearly demonstrates the social expectations of his peers.

Other characters also deal with the social ramifications of the presence, or loss, of their nekomimi. Hitomi retains hers, despite being older than Soubi. Because of this, her co-workers consider her immature, “a bit meek” (Kôga 1: 13), and not completely adult. Additionally, she clashes with Soubi, who treats her as an inferior. In an attempt to displace this difference, Hitomi refers to him as “Agatsuma-*kun*,” his surname combined with an honorific used to address a younger male. His merciless teasing causes her to, at first, resent him. After a while, however, she affirms her decision to preserve her virginity and becomes more confident in herself, essentially becoming the “adult” that she truly is, in spite of her nekomimi. On the opposite end of the spectrum are Yamato and Kouya. Interestingly, Yamato proudly flaunts her “adulthood” in public and among her friends, while her lover and partner, Kouya, wears false ears and tail. It is only in each other’s presence that they are both sexually honest (Kôga 3: 183-90). These gestures, along with Hitomi’s interactions with Soubi, reveal that possession or lack of one’s ears and tail reflects a certain status.

These motions allow Kôga to avoid the obvious issue of pedophilia concerning Ritsuka’s sexual initiation.<sup>11</sup> After all, several characters, including Soubi’s friend Kio Kaidou, tell Soubi that his relationship with Ritsuka is perverse and strange. While Soubi doesn’t feel this way, Ritsuka occasionally does. Over time, he becomes more comfortable with his relationship, even going as far as ordering Soubi to strip in a public place to determine whether or not Seimei had physically abused him (Kôga 7: 23-9). Still, because there is no representation of inappropriate physical relations between Soubi

and Ritsuka, their love remains intimate but unconsummated. In giving her characters an outward sign of their sexual experience, Kôga makes concessions to a younger audience. By allowing Ritsuka to retain his virginity, despite his knowledge of sex and desire, she courts an audience of young-adult females that can read Ritsuka and Soubi's relationship as sexually and heteronormatively "safe." Alongside Hitomi, a woman who refuses to submit to social pressures, Ritsuka becomes a model for chastity in the face of overwhelming temptation to have sex and become an adult. This allows readers to avoid interpreting *Loveless*' gender performativity as a deliberate challenge to societal and heteropatriarchal norms, keeping the manga firmly in the realm of fantasy.

Another aspect of the text that suggests a plural audience is its use of duality. Much of the action in *Loveless* takes place within two major spheres: the social realm, which consists mainly of home and school, and the hidden world of Fighters and Sacrifices. There is a great deal of crossover between these two spheres. Fighter-Sacrifice teams often invade the social realm because of the dual lives they lead; most maintain ordinary existences, and their battles overlap with day-to-day activities within homes, schools, and public areas. On several occasions, Soubi enters Ritsuka's home unbidden, but he is careful to avoid detection by and maintain distance between Misaki and himself. This is, in part, due of her instability, but Soubi also recognizes that Ritsuka wants to keep "Ritsuka" distinct from his "Loveless" identity. This issue of dual identities plays out in multiple arenas. Ritsuka's personality shift and amnesia suggests that before he ever discovered his "true name," he was already divided. Even his best friend

Yuiko Hawatari comments upon first meeting him, “You’re so *weird*. Like you live a double life!” (Kôga 1:22). This statement angers Ritsuka, but he knows deep down that she is right. The child that is Ritsuka coexists with the near-adult Loveless.

Nevertheless, the one place where the text speaks most directly to a younger audience is in Ritsuka’s junior-high school, where he deals with average pre-adolescent issues. Within its walls, he struggles to make friends and cope with the social dynamics of his fellow classmates—activities kept distinct and separate from his life as a Sacrifice. Among his fellow students, he is an outsider. His brother’s murder, outward signs of abuse, and friendship with the goodhearted Yuiko make him a target of gossip and intimidation. Bullying is a common trope in manga due to its underground proliferation in Japanese schools, but in *Loveless*, Ritsuka responds with precocious maturity. Rather than allow his tormentors to alienate him further, he stands up to them. When a group of girls ruin a jar of homemade strawberry jam Yuiko brings to share with Rituska, for example, he confronts them, declaring, “It’s inhuman....You hurt Yuiko. People who hurt others break the *real* rules, the rules that matter” (2:28-9). Kôga uses moments like these to speak to younger readers who identify with Ritsuka’s daily trials.

Below the surface, however, an attention to burgeoning sexuality remains. When Hitomi takes Yuiko aside to comfort her after the jam incident, Yuiko says, “From his first day, I thought [Ritsuka] was cool. And I wanted to be his best friend. And today I liked him even more....He supported [and] protected me. I’d do anything for [him]...even die” (Kôga 2: 33). Hitomi is shocked and thinks, “She doesn’t know that this is love. She can

feel it, but she can't name it. To say you're willing to die...I envy that" (2: 33-4). Yuiko's youthful naïveté does not enable her to name what she feels toward Ritsuka, yet she is one of the only characters whose emotions are not checked by social conventions. It's no accident that Kôga represents Yuiko as innocent (retaining her nekomimi) yet fully developed (tall, with full breasts and hips). Because she looks more "adult" than her classmates, she is able to give voice, if not name, to adolescent sexual awakening.

*Loveless* has issues and themes that speak to readers across multiple demographics, yet despite Kôga's experienced storyteller's hand, many North American fans continue to misread the manga as "adult." Certainly the series is a deeply ambiguous text that does not provide its readers with easy answers to questions of intended audience. However, the North American readership of *Loveless*, if current fan attitudes can be accepted as "proof" of anything, considers the work to be something much more explicit than what it is actually printed. Some of this confusion stems from the fervent devotion of female fans to a subgenre known as *yaoi*. An acronym for the Japanese phrase "*yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi*" (roughly, "no climax, no point, no meaning"), *yaoi* is primarily used by English-speaking fans to refer to manga and *dôjinshi* (fan comics) that feature sexually explicit relationships between male characters. Although they are distinct terms, non-Japanese fans nonetheless conflate *yaoi* and boys' love, and this conflation gets young readers into trouble.

As Eliza Strickland reports in her examination of the *yaoi* subculture, "Underage fans put the genre as a whole at risk....The proliferation of young fans has already led the

shutdown of a few beloved yaoi Web sites when outraged parents figured out what their kids were looking at” (“Drawn Together”). She goes on to note that in 2006, *Loveless* was number five on IGv2’s list of manga best-sellers, yet she also tells of underage girls scrambling to get their hands on yaoi and boys’ love titles.<sup>12</sup> Their desire to read yaoi and boys’ love can be traced to the formation of personal literacies. Contemporary adolescent readers, who are well versed in the techniques of reading multimodal texts, respond to *Loveless* quite positively. Kate Allen and John E. Ingulsrud point out in “Reading Manga”:

School literacy as prescribed by the curriculum is represented by classroom textbooks and library books. These texts tend to reflect the values of those in power....On the other hand, personal literacy is determined by the readers themselves. For many young people, part of the pleasure of this kind of literacy is knowing that it is frowned on in school, hence the enjoyment of secretly reading *forbidden* [emphasis mine] texts. (265)

As these pre-adolescent and adolescent girls come to terms with their own sexual and social power, they reach out to texts that allow them to challenge authority and vent their frustrations. Boys’ love is the perfect outlet. Through its bishōnen characters, they explore alternate modes of love, gender, and sexuality—allowing them to construct a space where they can formulate and answer questions about their own identity. *Loveless*, with its complex explorations of adult themes in a young-adult world, functions as both a critique of adult society and a proposal for society’s future adults.

Regardless of its popularity among younger readers, much of the content and release history for *Loveless* suggest that it was never meant for underage consumption. Its 2005 Japanese television adaptation ran in a post-midnight timeslot, well after bedtime for most children. Even Tokyopop's release embraces a more sophisticated, literary audience. Each volume concludes with a short critical essay; some respond directly to the plot, some touch on characterization, and others explore deeper issues that permeate the series. Not surprisingly, none of the essays address the sexual dimensions of and gender performances within the text. Surprising, though, are those that deal with topics including duality, language as magic, and pain as education. These topics, while of great interest to adult readers able to understand Kôga's explorations, are likely over the heads of younger readers. Their inclusion illustrates that Tokyopop is well aware of *Loveless*' crossover appeal.

The most telling of these essays is Lillian Diaz-Przybyl's "Speak Like a Child: The Inner Thoughts of Children in *Loveless*" at the end of Volume Four. On the subject of Kôga's characterization of Ritsuka, Diaz-Przybyl writes, "It's surprisingly difficult for a writer to capture the inner mind of a child. Characters either end up seeming younger than their years, or just like miniature adults, and kids are far more complex than we grown-ups usually give them credit for" (197). Her use of the word "we" immediately divulges the audience for whom she believes she is writing—adults reading an adult story. Underage readers are not in her scope, except, perhaps, in her abstract. However, she also recognizes the complexity of the child and concedes that adults underestimate

children's abilities. Though children may not be reading the essays at the end of *Loveless* volumes, Diaz-Przybyl acknowledges that some of them likely are.

Perhaps, then, *Loveless* is the perfect title for these “complex” children—pre-adolescent and adolescent girls coming to terms with, and making decisions about, their sexual and social agency. Kôga's intended audience may have been one of adult women seeking an escapist fantasy populated by half-veiled women in trouser roles, but she has also attracted a new audience. Thanks to Tokyopop, North American pre-teens and teens seeking critique of and proposal for their national sexual culture can turn to the revolutionary space Kôga has created within her manga. Young women on the cusp of, or fully embracing, their emerging sexual identities can abandon traditional notions of gender, identity, and love. Still, *Loveless*, built on ideas once so revolutionary to an entire generation of Japanese females, is incomplete. Ritsuka has more discoveries ahead of him in coming chapters and volumes, and it is likely that, as Kôga further develops this universe, she will continue to court the ambiguous audience most in need of her vision. To these readers, the roses, butterflies, and bishônen of boys' love are more than just romantic symbols; they are the promise of sexual freedom.

## Notes

1. For more information on the history of *otaku* as both a derogatory and complimentary term, see Lawrence Eng's "The Politics of Otaku," Volker Grassmuck's "'I'm alone, but not lonely': Japanese Otaku-Kids Colonize the Realm of Information and Media; A Tale of Sex and Crime from a Faraway Place," and Thomas Lamarre's "An Introduction to the Otaku Movement."
2. All provided titles of anime and manga are those under which they were released in America.
3. I refer specifically to the controversy surrounding *Sailor Moon*. The anime was already very popular by the time Tokyopop/Mixx began publishing the manga version in *MixxZine*. In an attempt to avoid conflicts with the anime's translation and storyline, certain liberties were taken with the manga's translation. Additionally, per industry practice at the time, the images were flopped. This outraged fans that were already disgusted by the American release of *Sailor Moon*, which was heavily edited for syndication. However, unlike many of Tokyopop's early titles, *Sailor Moon* has never been, and is unlikely to be, re-released under the "100% Authentic Manga" line due to complicated licensing issues.
4. Tokyopop later instituted a symbolic code to identify a title's genre (a stylized unicorn head for "Fantasy," an alien head for "Sci-Fi," etc.). Early titles in the "100% Authentic Manga" line do not feature these glyphs printed on the covers.
5. Surnames are first in Japanese name order, but for the purposes of this paper, I have reversed it to correspond with traditional English name order.
6. All names featuring the double-O vowel sound—generally represented as "ô"—are

spelled with “ou” in Tokyopop’s English rendition of *Loveless*. I have retained this feature, despite my use of “ô” elsewhere.

7. The boys’ love genre is also known as “*shônen ai*,” a Japanese term which translates to “boy-love.” The term *shônen ai* has fallen out of favor in Japan, as it is too often associated with pederasty. However, it is still popular among North American fans and used interchangeably with “boys’ love.”

8. There is some controversy as to whether boys’ love titles that feature explicit sex should be considered a separate subgenre. Because there is no explicit sex present in *Loveless*, I refer to it as a boys’ love title, despite insistence by some readers that it should be categorized elsewhere.

9. Soubi’s careful dispensation of knowledge is largely the work of Seimei, Soubi’s previous Sacrifice, who ordered Soubi not to reveal too much to Ritsuka.

10. As of Volume Eight, there are two teams known as “Zero”: one all-female and one all-male.

11. As noted in 8, boys’ love does not indicate relationships between pre-adolescent boys and older men. There are manga genres dedicated to such relationships, but they are very specific and not germane to my discussion.

12. When purchasing *Loveless* at my local bookseller, I asked the clerk how the issue was selling. She replied that it was “very popular” and had already sold many copies—some to girls “no older than thirteen” but “mostly girls between sixteen and twenty-two.” Upon further inquiry, she admitted that she had not asked a single buyer for proof of age.

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