

Origins of the *Shōnen-ai* and *Yaoi* Manga Genres

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Abstract. This article discusses mainly the works of Japanese manga authors of the 1970s – Takemiya Keiko and Hagio Moto, who created the manga genre *shōnen-ai* (boys’ love). This manga genre, intended for female audiences and developed in Japan, had been considerably influenced by European art, especially by French literature and cinema. Such films as “This Special Friendship” (1964) or works of Jean Cocteau and other French writers formed a special aesthetics of manga about beautiful boys who love each other.

Keywords: Aesthetic fiction, female comics, Japanese literature, French art, homoeroticism, manga, shonen-ai, yaoi, Year 24 Group.

From the beginning of the 1970s, such manga genres as *shōnen-ai* (boys’ love) and later *yaoi*, which portray relationships between male characters, became very popular in Japan. These stories are created by women and for women. Currently there is no strict division between the two genres, and Japanese publishing houses unite such products under the common title “boys’ love” (ボーイズラブ), sometimes abbreviated as “BL”.

Researcher Mizoguchi Akiko says: “The term “*yaoi*” was coined in the early 1980s by amateur fanzine writers of the *ani-paro* (parodies of popular animation shows) subgenre as a self-derogatory term” [Mizoguchi 2003, p. 50]. *Yaoi* is an abbreviation formed from the initial characters of the Japanese phrase “Yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi (“no climax, no punch line, no meaning”), which was used to characterize low-grade stories, mostly of pornographic content, created by fans and non-professional writers. Therefore, the term “*yaoi*” is commonly used in Japan in relation to amateur non-commercial works called *dōjinshi*. There were other terms to refer to the stories about same-sex relationships, such as *bishōnen manga* (beautiful boy comics) or *tanbi shōsetsu* (aesthetic fiction), but they do not reflect the essence of this phenomenon so well.

The development of women's comics, and the *shōnen-ai* genre in particular, is associated primarily with the development of periodical manga magazines since the late 1960s. As the frequency of issues increased and they switched to tighter deadlines, additional resources were required and, as a result, women became actively involved in the comic books industry. Besides, the generation of baby boomers, who grew up reading manga, were eager for new themes and subjects. Before that, manga for girls was created by male authors, who set the style and theme of *shōjo* manga (girls' comics).

But the situation changed with the advent of young women in the manga industry. They turned their view to new subjects and genres, performing the function not of a mentor, but rather an "elder sister" for the readers. In the 1970s, such authors as Ikeda Riyoko, Takemiya Keiko, Hagio Moto, Aoike Yasuko, Ōshima Yumiko, Yamagishi Ryōko, etc. started their careers as manga artists. Subsequently, they became known as the "Forty-Niners" or the "Year 24 Group" (*Nijūyo-nen gumi*), as the majority of the authors were born in 1949, or year 24 of Showa era according to the Japanese calendar.

The birth of the "girl dressed as boy" character

One of the earliest popular *shōjo* manga created by a man is "Princess Knight" ("Ribon no Kishi", 1953) by Tezuka Osamu, where a "girl dressed as boy" character appears for the first time. This manga tells how, due to an angel-in-training Tink's fault, Princess Sapphire got two hearts, male and female, and in order to inherit the throne she had to play the role of a prince – she wore a man's suit, rode a horse and skillfully fenced with a rapier. There is no doubt that such a work, depicting a female character dressed as a boy and behaving like a young man, referred to the Takarazuka Revue actresses, as the peculiarity of this theater (founded in 1913) was that all roles were performed only by women.

To this day, there are two main roles in the Takarazuka Revue: the male role called *otokoyaku* and the female role called *musumeyaku*. The *otokoyaku* are appreciated much higher because the more talented and physically stronger girls are selected for this role. Besides, the *otokoyaku* actresses enjoy incredible popularity among the audience. All the women acting in the Takarazuka Revue are obliged not to marry and not to have affairs with men throughout their career. Moreover, an *otokoyaku* actress is not allowed to appear in public with a man because it can harm her image.

The name of the theater comes from the name of Takarazuka city near Osaka. The "god of manga", Tezuka Osamu, grew up in this place. Tezuka's mother was a big fan of the Takarazuka Revue and often took

her son with her to see the performances, which later influenced him to create a “girl dressed as boy” character.

But Tezuka was inspired not only by Japanese, but also by European sources. The manga “Princess Knight” contains references to the names of famous historical figures who behaved like the opposite sex. When villains in the manga are trying to usurp the throne and accuse Sapphire of having links with pirates, which, according to the laws of the Kingdom, is punished by death, the Princess hides in the Palace. Court ladies refuse to give out Sapphire and decide to join the battle together with men. When they put on the uniforms, they feel like Joan of Arc or George Sand [Tezuka 2011–12, vol. 3, p. 20].

The Takarazuka Revue is still a place where women’s dreams about an idealized man without roughness, played by female actresses, come true. The Takarazuka repertoire is based mostly on adaptations of famous literary and manga works. The show “The Rose of Versailles”, based on a manga by Ikeda Riyoko, where the main character lady Oscar also appears in the image of a “girl dressed as boy”, has great success among the audience of the Takarazuka Revue.

One of the main features of female comics in Japan is the ambiguity of gender, and such genre as “boys’ love” is the most striking expression of this trend, along with the presence in the stories of an androgynous heroine displaying a male type of behavior.

A female writer who anticipated the *shōnen-ai* aesthetics

Before the appearance of the *shōnen-ai* manga genre in the 1970’s, novels for girls called *shōjo shōsetsu*, whose origins date back to a series of short stories “Hana Monogatari” (“Flower Tales”, 1916–1924), created by Yoshiya Nobuko, were popular in Japan. A typical *shōjo shōsetsu* heroine is a beautiful, innocent girl who suffers from misfortune, but, after overcoming all hardships, she finally becomes happy. A novelist Mori Mari (1903–1987) worked in this genre for a long time. But, among her works, we can also find three stories dedicated to male homosexuality: “The Lovers’ Forest” (“Koibitotachi no mori”, 1961), “I Don’t Go on Sunday” (“Nichiyōbi ni wa boku wa ikanai”, 1961), and “The Bed of Withered Leaves” (“Kareha no nedoko”, 1962). A keen interest in Mori Mari’s works arose quite recently, only in the early 2000’s. Before that, not a single one of her novels had been translated into English or any other foreign language. When scholars began to study her literary heritage, besides the recognized works for which she received various literary awards in Japan, they found

stories about homoerotic love. They were criticized in literary circles at the time, but later were highly appreciated by manga researchers.

Mori Mari was a daughter of a famous Japanese writer Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) – the founder of Romanticism in Japan and a translator of German literature and especially Goethe’s “Faust”. During the period of Japan’s modernization known as Meiji era (1868–1912), the young Mori Ōgai was sent by the Army to study military medicine in Germany, where he also developed his interest in European literature and culture. Later, after returning home, he gave all his children European-sounding names. The name of Mori Mari itself comes from the name “Maria”, and her brothers and younger sister were named Otto, Louis (Rui), Fritz, and Anna.

As a child, Mori Mari was surrounded by the luxury of European interiors, wore beautiful European dresses and called her father “dad” (パパ) in a foreign fashion. After her marriage, she went to Paris, where she learned French and worked as a translator. Her vast knowledge of European culture influenced the environment of her stories significantly.

The novel “The Lovers’ Forest”, published in 1961, was written in the genre of aesthetic fiction *tanbi shōsetsu*, the roots of which go back to Oscar Wilde’s novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray” (1890). For this work, Mori Mari was awarded the Tamura Toshiko Literary Prize, which is presented to female novelists for their literary works. This story shows a love affair between a 19-year-old boy Paulo and a 38-year-old professor of French literature named Gidou. At the end of the story, Gidou’s wife finds out that her husband has an affair with a young man and kills Gidou with a gun.

Many scholars pay attention to how Mori Mari depicts the main characters. First of all, they are the so-called “*hāfu*” (mixed). For example, Professor Gidou de Guiche is half French and half Japanese. Paulo is described as a young man with grey eyes and brown hair: “Paulo’s beauty, as a child born from a mixed marriage of an Englishman and a Frenchwoman, captivated Gidou so much that he didn’t want to leave him for a moment, while the innocent perversity and cunning of the young man pleasantly tingled Gidou like rose thorns. He imagined Paulo biting into him like a young hot pink thorn that has first appeared on the rose stem. A spoiled boy, he didn’t even know how poisonous he was. A little destructive poppy flower. That’s what he has done. He was like opium. Gidou didn’t know his genealogy, but it was clear that European blood flowed in his veins. His dark eyes glowed grey like a kabuto beetle’s carapace, the Japanese do not have such” [Mori 1993, vol. 2, p. 50–51, *trans. by Yu.M.*]. Thus, Mori Mari was one of the first Japanese writers who turned to the theme of *hāfu* – people of mixed ethnic

background. Manga characters also blur the boundaries of ethnic identity and cannot be attributed to any particular race.

But an even more interesting thing is the fact that the age of the protagonist Paulo coincides with the age of Mori Mari when she lost her father. Also, the bar where we first meet the main characters is called “Marie”, while the title of the novel, “*Koibitotachi no Mori*”, contains the surname of the writer. This allows foreign researchers to consider her story within the framework of psychoanalysis. The key concept in this case is the “Electra complex”. The name of the complex comes from the name of an ancient Greek tragedy heroine – the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The term “Electra complex” was introduced by Freud’s student, Carl Jung, who identified it as the Oedipus complex in girls. In other words, a girl becomes very attached to her father and, as a result, she becomes jealous of her mother.

If we consider “*The Lovers’ Forest*” from the point of view of psychoanalysis, then, according to this theory, Mori Mari encodes herself in the image of Paulo, her father – in the image of Gidou, and her own mother – in the image of Gidou’s wife. In such an allegorical and unconscious form, Mori Mari presents her experiences and hidden feelings associated with the loss of her father, whom she idolized since her childhood. She wrote her stories about same-sex love at the age of 57, when she was left all alone, after two unsuccessful marriages.

Researcher Keith Vincent has called Mori Mari “Japanese Electra” and has demonstrated how the image of a young man Paulo is, in fact, imbued with female character in “*The Lovers’ Forest*”. He notes: “There was something in Mari’s fantasy world that would capture the imagination of a whole new generation of women beginning in the 1970s for whom marriage and heteronormative adulthood was looking less and less attractive” [Vincent 2007, p. 69].

Despite the fact that the authors of the “Year 24 Group” were not familiar with Mori Mari’s works, they, however, were also interested in the theme of human relationships, and the narrative in their stories focused exclusively on male characters. In particular, there are some elements in Mori Mari’s works similar to *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga genres: 1) a handsome young man, who is attractive to female audience, but chooses another man as an object of love; 2) the action taking place in European countries; 3) the type of story, according to which forbidden love between male characters certainly ends with a tragic finale.

Indeed, if we turn to the early works of the *shōnen-ai* manga genre, we see that, very often, they take place in such countries as France or Germany, the characters belong to European nobility, and the story often ends with the death of one of the characters.

As noted by Nagaike Kazumi, Paulo and other characters of Mori's trilogy are a kind of a male version of "femme fatale", being "*homme fatal* young boys, whose extraordinary beauty and sexual power lead their partners to tragic end" [Nagaike 2007, p. 40–41]. She sees a protest against the foundations of the patriarchal culture in this type of hero, when the desire to break the rules and to overthrow the Father authority is expressed in such a symbolic way.

Influence of European art on the development of the shōnen-ai manga genre

Since the middle of the 19th century, after the end of its self-isolation policy, Japan has often been influenced by European and American cultural trends. Cultural borrowings and adaptations continued into the 20th century, receiving a new impetus in the works of female Japanese comics authors.

In the 1960s, the number of manga readers increased in Japan, and, along with the growth of boy's manga magazines, girl's manga magazines, such as "Shōjo Sunday", "Nakayoshi", "Margaret", "Ribon", "Shōjo comics", etc., gained huge popularity. Women started to try themselves in new manga genres – science fiction or stories about same-sex love. Such comics were highly appreciated by critics and became popular not only among the teenage audience, but also among older readers.

In addition, under the influence of the sexual revolution, the position of women in modern society has been changing since the late 1960s. More often, young women began to pursue an independent lifestyle, not burdened by housework or care for children. The development of contraception and the overall improvement of quality of life also contributed to this.

When a group of young female manga authors, at that time only about twenty years old, began to create their own stories about beautiful boys in the late 1960s, they were inspired not only by Japanese, but also by European sources. This can be seen if we refer to their autobiographies or interviews.

In her recently published autobiographical book entitled "Boy's name is Gilbert" (Shōnen no na wa Jirubēru, 2016), Takemiya Keiko notes how, in the 1960s, she visited an exhibition dedicated to a group of the Barbizon school French painters. She was struck by the rich story and narrative power that was felt in every single picture. She particularly liked the picture "Daphnis and Chloe" by Jean-Francois Millet, where two lovers, a shepherd and a shepherdess, are fishing.

This ancient Greek motif is often depicted by many artists in different works. Takemiya liked the “Daphnis and Chloe” by Millet so much that she even put its reproduction in her own room [Takemiya 2016, p. 30]. The shepherd and the shepherdess’ figures occupy a relatively small space in the picture, while dense forest fills most of the canvas. Although the picture is made in dark colors, a bright stream of light illuminates the bare feet of Daphnis, which forced Takemiya to think about male eroticism for the first time.

Later, there were other sources that caused female manga authors to think about same-sex relationships more deeply. These were European literature and cinema, and the person who played the key role in introducing the young Takemiya Keiko and Moto Hagio to them was Masuyama Norie – a screenwriter and part-time producer of Takemiya¹. She lived next door to Takemiya and Hagio, who rented an apartment together in the Ōizumi area of Tokyo at the beginning of their careers. Here, in a place that would later be known as the “Ōizumi salon” (*Ōizumi gaku*en), they managed to gather a team of female manga authors – future members of the “Year 24 Group”. If Takemiya Keiko took the theme of homosexual relations with enthusiasm, Hagio Moto, on the contrary, didn’t show much interest in it.

However, they were both very impressed by a French film “This Special Friendship”, released in 1964. The idea of going to see this movie also belonged to Masuyama. It was a film adaptation of Roger Peyrefitte’s novel “Les Amitiés Particulières”, written in 1944. In the Soviet Union, the novel was banned as condoning homosexual relationships. However, the film itself does not contain any explicit scenes. It shows an intimate friendship between a 14-year-old boy Georges de Sarre and a 12-year-old boy Alexandre Motier at a Catholic boarding school. The priests soon become aware of their “special friendship”. They ask the boys to confess, and Georges agrees, but little Alexandre continues to insist that their relationship is a private matter. On his way home, unable to withstand the betrayal and separation from his older friend, Alexandre commits suicide by throwing himself from a train.

This film largely explains why the first works in the *shōnen-ai* manga genre were devoted to boys boarding schools and why such a style was chosen. It is reflected in such works as a single-volume manga “The November Gymnasium” (1971) by Hagio Moto and its sequel, published under the different title of “The Heart of Thomas” (1974, 3 volumes), as well as the 17-volume manga “The Song of Wind and Trees” (1976–1984) by Takemiya Keiko.

¹ Masuyama Norie, being a scriptwriter, created a manga series “Hensōkyoku” (“Variation”, 1974–1985) and a novel “Kami no kohitsuji – Agnus Dei” (“The Lamb of God – Agnus Dei”, 1990–1994) together with Takemiya Keiko.

But the very first *shōnen-ai* manga was Takemiya Keiko's "In the Sunroom" ("Sunrūmu nite"), published initially under the title "Snow and stars and angels..." ("Yuki to hoshi to tenshi to...") in a special issue of the "Shōjo comics" magazine in 1970. Here, "like most early *shōnen-ai* manga, the work's protagonists were beautiful boys in love with each other and the story was set in Europe" [Welker 2011, p. 212].

After that, Hagio Moto created a manga "The November Gymnasium" ("Jūichigatsu no Gymnasium", 1971), which tells about a boys' relationship at a German boarding school. At that time, it was very risky to print manga about love between male characters. As Hagio Moto mentioned in her own interview, she tried to make a story about girls, but it turned out to have a very different atmosphere, so she finally decided to keep the male version of "The November Gymnasium" [Thorn 2005, pp. 138–175]. In the center of this work is a story about twin brothers Erich and Thomas, separated in their childhood, who accidentally meet at school. Suddenly Thomas dies of pneumonia during school holidays, and Erich begins to investigate the story of his mother's secret love.

The next work was a 3-volume manga "The Heart of Thomas" (1974) about Thomas Werner, who commits suicide and leaves a letter to his beloved Julusmole. Thomas argued that Julusmole would fall in love with him, but Julusmole had never had such feelings and rejected Thomas's love. Soon, a new student named Erich Fruehling, who looks like the deceased Thomas, arrives at school. Hagio Moto continues to develop the twin brothers theme in this work in the same way as in "The November Gymnasium", where sudden death of one of the characters also entails the protagonist's torment and a series of new investigations. In addition, at the beginning of this manga, we see a football playground which is very similar to the scene from the film "This Special Friendship".

The influence of "This Special Friendship" is also felt in Takemiya Keiko's manga "The Song of Wind and Trees" (Kaze to ki no uta, 1976–1984), which is considered a *shōnen-ai* manga classic. This manga takes place in French Lacombrade Academy near Arles. It tells a story about the relationship between two students, Gilbert Cocteau and Serge Battour. The manga ends with the death of one of the characters. In visual terms, not only the theme of a boys gymnasium is borrowed, but also some characters, as well as a greenhouse as a place for romantic meetings.

To create "The Song of Wind and Trees" manga, Takemiya Keiko also collected albums with illustrations and photos. She had an album with Paris photographs by a French photographer Eugene Atget (1857–1927) – one of the urban photography pioneers. Takemiya inherited her love for

France from Masuyama Norie, who adored European cinema and collected film booklets [Takemiya 2016, p. 147].

The main character of “The Song of Wind and Trees” is Gilbert Cocteau, whose name is not accidental and alludes to a French writer, poet, and film director Jean Cocteau (1889–1963). Takemiya and Hagio were well acquainted with the works of this writer, especially with his autobiographical novel “The White Book” (1928), where he writes about the awareness of his unusual sexuality.

Jean Cocteau was an eccentric creative personality, a frivolous aesthete, known for his homosexual tendencies. During the war, he helped Jean Genet (1910–1986), another French writer who touched on the homosexuality theme, to publish his novel “Our Lady of the Flowers” in 1943. Subsequently, the name of Jean Genet served as the title for a Japanese magazine “June”, publishing *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga since 1978. The French surname “Genet” in Japanese sounds like “June” (ジュネ), which is consonant with the English word “June”, which is written in Japanese in the same way as the French writer’s name. The influence of the magazine was so great that there even appeared a special term “*sōsaku June*” (works in June manga magazine style), which was used together with such definitions as *shōnen-ai*, *tanbi shōsetsu*, and *bishōnen manga*. From the beginning, the “June” magazine had a section called “Drawing classes” (*Oekaki kyōshitsu*), the editor of which was Takemiya Keiko. She helped amateur authors to create manga and gave various recommendations – what movies to watch or what literature to read on this topic.

There were other works devoted to boys’ boarding schools which influenced the *shōnen-ai* manga style, such as the British drama film “If...” (1968) about the protest of high school students at an English private school, or the novel “Beneath the Wheel” (1906) by Hermann Hesse about a talented boy from a small village sent to study at an elite seminary. Hagio Moto also mentioned in her interview [Thorn 2005, pp. 138–175] the French-Italian co-production film “Death in Venice” (1971), which was an adaptation of Thomas Mann’s novel. The theme of same-sex desire was touched upon again in this film, where a great composer, who came to Venice for a vacation, is fascinated by a beautiful adolescent boy named Tadzio from an aristocratic Polish family.

Despite strong European influence, the term “*shōnen-ai*” was borrowed by Takemiya Keiko from a Japanese writer Inagaki Taruho (1900–1977), who published an essay “The Aesthetics of Boy Loving” (“*Shōnen-ai no bigaku*”) in 1968. Inagaki described various examples of love between beautiful young boys of the same age in this essay [Angles 2011, p. 235],

which subsequently influenced the representation of male characters in Takemiya Keiko's manga, who do not have a big age difference.

In search of a new aesthetics, female manga authors turned to the works of European high literature writers with queer sensibility and films about same-sex love. As women, they were interested in male characters, but they could only find the view of a man as an object of adoration in the homoerotic tradition. So it is no wonder that the works of such writers as Roger Peyrefitte, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Genet, as well as the movies "This Special Friendship", "If...", and "Death in Venice", were taken by the members of the "Year 24 Group" and reinterpreted by them within their own style, characterized by beauty, grace, and melancholy.

Homoeroticism influence: Was there a boy?

In spite of the fact that the *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga genres borrowed many elements of gay culture (the names of writers with queer sensibility, the style of their literary works and film adaptations), these have never been stories about gays or for gays.

For example, there was a case in Japan when a gay activist Satō Masaki published an angry open letter to the readers of *yaoi* manga in a feminist journal called "Choisir" in May 1992. His main claim was that the representation of love between male characters in *yaoi* had nothing to do with real gay relationships. In other words, the same-sex relationships between beautiful young boys called *bishōnen*, which are portrayed by women in *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga, are just female fantasy [Vincent 2007, p. 70]. For many readers, Satō's letter was a real shock and caused active disputes around *yaoi* (*yaoi ronsō*).

Trying to escape from the idea of themselves as sexual objects, women preferred to portray only male characters in their stories. So, it would be wrong to link the *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga genres only with the theme of homoerotic relations. There are two basic character types in boys' love manga: *seme* (the active partner) and *uke* (the passive partner). While the *seme* character represents strong masculinity and aggression, the female audience often associate themselves with the more passive *uke* male character. In addition, many researchers note that boys' love manga characters are neither boys nor girls, but rather representatives of the so-called "third sex". Because readers of this manga genre are mostly teenage girls, androgynous characters represent an idealized relationship on equal terms. It is known that, during

the puberty period, boys and girls first pay attention to their own sex: “One of the tasks imposed in the object selection consists in not missing the opposite sex. This, as we know, is not solved without some difficulty. The first feelings after puberty often enough go astray, though not with any permanent injury. Dessoir has called attention to the normality of the enthusiastic friendships formed by boys and girls with their own sex” [Freud 2018, p. 78]. Thus, such works are primarily aimed to attract attention of the relevant youth audience.

One of the reasons why the “Forty-Niners” turned to the subject of same-sex relationships is the fact that, at Masuyama Norie’s initiative, Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko learned about “Barazoku” (“Rose tribe”) – the first Japanese gay magazine, which also attracted some women who considered relationships between men intriguing [Thorn 2005, pp. 138–175]. But one should point out that the first issue of the “Barazoku” magazine was released only in 1971, one year after Takemiya Keiko published her manga “In the Sunroom” (1970) – the first *shōnen-ai* work.

There is a separate comics genre with a romantic title “*bara*” (薔薇, “rose”) in Japan, describing male same-sex relationships. The symbolism of the rose was first borrowed by the “Barazoku” editor Itō Bungaku, and later his idea gave the name to the whole genre, although we are not quite sure where this name came from. Unlike “boys’ love” manga (BL) aimed at the female audience, the *bara* genre is designated as “men’s love” (ML) and is intended for men with a non-traditional sexual desire. In addition, there is an area called Shinjuku Nichōme in Tokyo with bars and clubs for sexual minorities, where it is also possible to buy comics of the *dōsei-ai* (homosexual manga) genre, but not *shōnen-ai* manga. Fans of “boys’ love” manga gather in a completely different place – an area in the Ikebukuro district on the street called Otome-rōdo (“girl’s alley”), where one can find a huge amount of goods for female anime and manga fans.

It is considered that the *bara* genre dates back to the 1960s, namely to the erotic photo session called “Barakei” (“Killed by roses”), featuring a famous Japanese writer Mishima Yukio as the model and created by photographer Hosoe Eikō in 1961. The series of photos, soaked with homoeroticism, was first shown at the exhibition at the Matsuya Ginza Department store and later was released as a photobook in 1963.

Mishima Yukio, who, after a trip to Greece, became interested in body-building, shows his muscular body and is often depicted with a rose flower in these photos. In one of the photos, he represents the figure of St. Sebastian, which is considered a symbol of homoeroticism. It is known that the image of St. Sebastian in Mishima’s work can be traced back to the

pages of his provocative novel “Confessions of a Mask” (1949), where the main character feels his first sexual excitement when looking at a reproduction of the picture by Guido Reni. The characteristic pose of the Christian martyr with crossing hands and arrows plunged into the flesh awakens homosexual and sado-masochistic tendencies inside the main character: “Ever since becoming obsessed with the picture of St. Sebastian, I had acquired the unconscious habit of crossing my hands over my head whenever I happened to be undressed. Mine was a frail body, without so much as a pale shadow of Sebastian’s abundant beauty. But now once more I spontaneously fell into the pose. As I did so my eyes went to my armpits. And a mysterious sexual desire boiled up within me” [Mishima 2016, p. 47].

The symbolism of the rose and various comparisons with this flower can also be seen in Jean Genet’s novel “Miracle of the Rose” (Miracle de la Rose), published in 1946. This autobiographical work tells about the years of imprisonment which Genet spent in Mettray Penal Colony and Fontevault prison and his homosexual love feelings for other prisoners. In the description of one of the prisoners named Arcamon, who was sentenced to death, Genet idealizes his image and transforms the chains on the prisoner’s arms into a garland of white roses. The novel “Miracle of the Rose” was first translated into Japanese in 1956 by Horiguchi Daigaku from the “Shintyōsha” publishing house. Thus, similar parallels with rose flowers can be detected in works by both Japanese and European authors with homosexual orientation.

Using the *bara* genre with its flower symbolism as an analogy, Japanese women of homosexual orientation began to use the term “*yuri*”, which in Japanese means “lily”. The appearance of this term is also associated with the activities of editor Itō Bungaku, who decided to create a column titled “Lily tribe’s room” (Yurizoku no heya) on the pages of the 46th issue of the “Barazoku” magazine in 1976 [Welker 2011, p. 219]. Subsequently, manga telling about the relationships between female characters became known as the *yuri* genre. In this connection, the “Forty-Niners” were also known as the “Year 24 Flower Group” (Hana no nijūyonen gumi). The origin of such floral attributes associated with the term “hana” (“flower”) is that, according to Zeami Motokiyo’s “The Transmission of the Flower Through the Forms” (Fūshikaden) treatise, it means “skill”. With regard to the “Forty-Niners”, this indicates their outstanding abilities and a revolution made in female comics, so they are also often called the “Magnificent Forty-Niners”.

If the symbolism of the rose has obvious parallels with works of writers with homosexual orientation, the works of the “Year 24 Flower

Group” members do not have such a link and go a slightly different way. Boys’ love manga about same-sex relationships is rather fantasy than stories about homosexuality in the literal sense of the word.

Moreover, if we take a look at Gilbert Cocteau – the main character of “The Song of Wind and Trees”, we will see that his boy appearance is ambiguous and feminized. According to Takemiya Keiko, the character is dual in his nature, having both male and female qualities, and the *shōnen-ai* genre reflects this idea pretty well [Toku 2003]. In other words, the manga represents the idea of an androgyne – a person who combines masculine and feminine characteristics. We can find a similar idea in the Japanese novel “The Tale of Genji”, where the main character has both male and female features. In “The Song of Wind and Trees” we also meet a character whose description is similar to the description of Paulo from the novel “The Lovers’ Forest” and represents a *homme fatal* prototype: “Gilbert, there is a devil that lives inside you. A devil that wants more than anything to be held. At first you resisted him, but you can’t defeat him. You gave your body to the devil...” [Takemiya 1977, vol. 1, p. 55, trans. by Yu. M.].

It is interesting to observe the process of “gender conversion” in Hagio Moto’s sci-fi manga “They Were Eleven” (“Jūichinin Iru!”, 1975), where one of the characters has indeterminate gender. Frol Frolbericheri considers himself a man, though his appearance, physique, and emotions are more like those of a woman. He came from the planet Vienna, and he is one of the so-called *menīru* (メニール) nation, the members of which possess the characteristics of both sexes in their bodies. They can determine by themselves whether they would be a man or a woman during their period of secondary maturation. Frol, who has successfully passed the team test on the spaceship, decides to become a woman, although at first he wanted to be a man.

Thus, male characters of *shōnen-ai* manga could easily be associated with female characters. But what makes the special charm of the manga is that characters occupy an ambivalent position and cannot be confidently attributed to either of the two sexes. The readers decide for themselves what characters appear before them. Are they boys? Or is it just a game of “boys’ love”? It is one thing when it is depicted, and another when it is implied. In addition, such characters allow the readers not only to identify with them, but also to distance themselves from them, to be a kind of an outside observer if something is not to their liking. Finally, such manga allows one to enjoy the beauty of a male *bishōnen* character.

Japanese literature of the Heian period and gender questions

Long before a group of talented Japanese women in the 1970s created the manga we discussed above, there were court ladies of the Heian period (794–1192) who, through the development of the Japanese syllabary called *hiragana*, had created the world of Japanese literature. They left behind outstanding *monogatari* novels, *nikki* diaries, *zuihitsu* (“follow the brush”) essays. This phenomenon, called “women’s literature” (*joryū bungaku*), is unique and has no analogues in the world. Just like the female manga authors of the 1970s, who created a special language and atmosphere in their comics, the women of the Heian period developed themes and raised issues the female audience was interested in.

The most famous writer of the Heian period was Murasaki Shikibu, who wrote a masterpiece of Japanese literature, “The Tale of Genji” (“Genji monogatari”, 10th-11th centuries). The main character of this novel, Prince Genji, is a son of the Emperor, but he has been deprived of the Prince of the Blood status. He is portrayed as an extremely handsome man with various talents. Murasaki Shikibu often provides a “feminized” image of male beauty in her work. For example, in a scene of a conversation of young men about women’s advantages and disadvantages, she compares Prince Genji to a female: “He was wearing several soft white singlets with an informal court robe thrown loosely over them. As he sat in the lamplight leaning against an armrest, his companions almost wished that he were a woman. Even the “highest of the high” might seem an inadequate match for him” [Murasaki 2002, p. 36]. As researcher Polina Boyarinova notes: “Studying the literature of the Heian period, it can be noted that visual differences in gender display were not so big, and the same attributes of appearance were appreciated in men and women” [Boyarinova 2015, p. 109].

In the film “Genji: A Thousand-Year Love” (“Sennen no koi – Hikaru Genji monogatari”, 2001) the role of the Prince is played by Amami Yūki – a Japanese actress famous for male roles in the Takarazuka Revue. Apparently, in order to realize the fully “feminine” ideal of male beauty of the Heian era, the film director casted a woman as Prince Genji. This curious approach helps to take a fresh look at the literature of the Heian period.

There were also themes related to gender issues in the literature of the late Heian period. For example, the Japanese novel “The Changelings“, or “Torikaebaya Monogatari”, written by an unknown author, tells about a high-ranking courtier who has two similar-looking children from different wives. But his son named Wakagimi is more like a girl, and his daughter named Himegimi resembles a young man, so parents decided to educate Wakagimi as a girl and Himegimi as a boy. Next, we see how the brother and

sister are brought up in accordance with their chosen gender, and Wakagimi becomes the sheltered princess's confidante in the Palace, while Himegimi becomes a mid-ranking courtier Chūnagon. And only Himegimi's pregnancy restores the situation. When Himegimi becomes pregnant, she hides away from the court in the distant Uji province. At that moment, Wakagimi, overcoming his inherent shyness, recalls his male duties and goes to seek his sister. As a result of this, the gender confusion is safely resolved. Wakagimi returns to the male role and Himegimi – to the female role. Despite the fact that there is no condemnation of gender deviation in "Torikaebaya Monogatari", strict correspondence between biological sex and gender still remains the acceptable model of behavior within the patriarchal culture.

After the Heian period, the Japanese culture was no longer in a situation wherein a large number of literary works were created by female authors and conveyed their feelings and experiences. It was only in the 20th century when art created by women gained popularity again. Thanks to the example provided by Murasaki Shikibu, "other women began to write, and feminine sensibilities found expression in their own literature. Just as these authors had refined the written word, so their modern counterparts would eventually enrich manga, Japan's popular literature, with a similarly heightened sensitivity" [Gravett 2004, p. 76].

As a result, since the early 1980s, the members of the "Year 24 Group" and other female manga authors began to pay attention to the myths and ancient literary works of Japan. For example, Yamagishi Ryōko created an 11-volume manga "Emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun" ("Hi Izuru Tokoro no Tenshi", 1980–1984) about Prince Shōtoku (ca. 574–622), a great reformer and preacher of Buddhism in Japanese history. However, in the manga, Prince Shōtoku was transformed into a cross-dressing character, who hopelessly fell in love with statesman Soga no Emishi. In 1998 Kihara Toshie, also a member of the "Year 24 Group", produced a single-volume manga "Torikaebaya Ibun", based on the novel "Torikaebaya Monogatari". Even earlier, in 1986, Yamauchi Naomi, in collaboration with scriptwriter Himuro Saeko, created a 4-volume manga "The Change!", and in the 2000s, Saitō Chiho began to publish a manga "Torikae Baya" (2012–2018), which has 13 volumes.

The novel "The Tale of Genji" is also reflected in comics by various authors, but the highest recognition has been received by Yamato Waki's manga "Asaki Yume Mishi" (1980–1993, 13 volumes). The author worked on it for thirteen years, in order to accurately recreate the historical details of the Heian period. Thus, after a period of "Westernization", Japanese female manga

authors became interested in the cultural heritage of their own country, which they successfully transform into the language of female comics.

Conclusion

During its historical development, the genre of women's manga at some point rejected the "girl dressed as boy" character in favor of feminized boys. Here we see the situation where a female character is no more required to hide under the guise of a man, so it is easier to be a feminine boy, or *bishōnen*.

The emergence of *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga genres gives all girls a chance to try a male style of behavior which means greater freedom in action and allows one to take an active position where one chooses instead of being chosen. This explains the fact that some female fans of *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* talk about themselves in a male manner or do cosplay of male characters. For girls, the *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga has become a demonstration of their independence and helps them to find "their own people".

Such manga is a place of freedom, where girls and young women can run away from the stereotypical roles of a housewife or a mother with a baby, and just enjoy the sensual side of the story. As mentioned by Nakata Kaori, "women readers find an outlet for their frustrated hopes in the pages of Mori Mari's novels and in the pages of *shōjo* manga" [Nakata 2004, p. 48]. From the psychoanalytical perspective, girls who represent themselves as a man realize their hidden desires in this way. The *shōnen-ai* and *yaoi* manga genres become a self-treatment letting girls to console themselves and escape from the harsh reality and loneliness.

In addition, according to the information provided above, the development of women's comics in Japan coincided with another cycle of borrowings from European art, French art in particular. Thus, this shows the hybrid character of manga, as Japanese culture is often based on the principles of borrowing and adaptation of foreign culture to the national tradition. This explains the reason for the amazing popularity of manga, which combines various elements, familiar to both European and Japanese readers.

As a result, the women's literature of the Heian period, the works by Mori Mari, and the manga of the "Year 24 Group" members all touch upon gender issues. While searching for an art language that would be close and understandable, first of all, to female audience, the authors try to go beyond the boundaries of the patriarchal culture in their original way. In the 1990s, the *yaoi* and *shōnen-ai* genres were labeled under the common title of "boys' love" and became a commercially successful product that deliberately borrowed both the elements of homoeroticism and the features of female sensibility.

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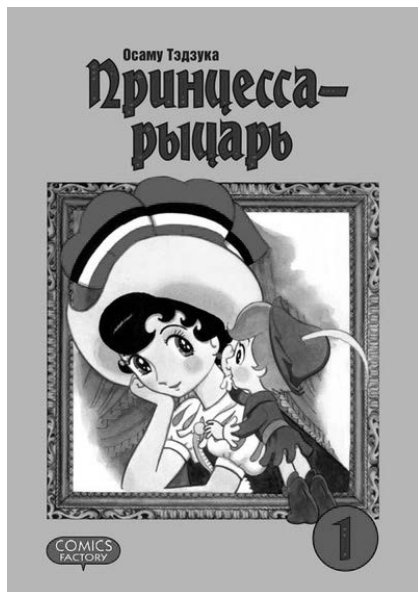
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Pict. 1. Princess Sapphire and angel Tink on the cover of the Russian edition of the manga “Princess Knight” (vol. 1) by Tezuka Osamu, Comics Factory, 2011



Pict. 2. “Daphnis and Chloe” by Jean-François Millet, 19th century



Pict. 3. Georges de Sarre and Alexandre Motier on the film poster
“This Special Friendship”, 1964



Pict. 4. “In the Sunroom” (“Sunrūmu nite”) by Takemiya Keiko –
the first work in the shōnen-ai manga genre, 1976 reprint



Pict. 5. Students play football – a screenshot from the film “This Special Friendship” (1964) and a manga page from “The Heart of Thomas” (vol. 1) Shōgakukan bunko 1995, p. 55



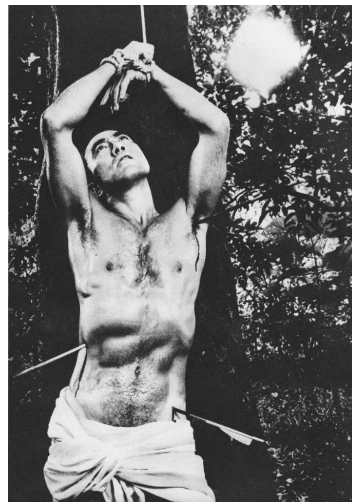
Pict. 6. Greenhouse as a place for secret meetings – a screenshot from the film “This Special Friendship” (1964), and a manga page from “The Song of Wind and Trees” (vol. 1) Shōgakukan 1977, p. 52



Pict. 7. The first issue of the “June” magazine, 1978



Pict. 8. On the left: “Saint Sebastian” by Guido Reni, ca. 1615.
On the right: Mishima Yukio in the photo session “Barakei”
 (“Killed by roses”) by Hosoe Eikō, 1963



Pict. 9. Feminized image of Gilbert Cocteau on the cover of “The Song of Wind and Trees” manga (vol. 2) 1977



Pict. 10. “Feminized” image of male beauty, performed by actress Amami Yūki – screenshot from the film “Genji: A Thousand-Year Love”, 2001



Pict. 11. On the left: Yamauchi Naomi and Himuro Saeko's "The Change!" (vol. 1) 1986. On the right: Saitō Chiho's "Torikae Baya" (vol. 1) 2012



Pict. 12. On the left: young Prince Shōtoku looks like a girl on the cover of Yamagishi Ryōko's manga "Emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun" (vol. 2) 1981. On the right: Prince Genji on the cover of Yamato Waki's manga "Asaki Yume Mishi" (vol. 8) 1987



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