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Compulsorily Queer: Coercion as a Political Tool in Queer Manga

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Introduction

Students in Canada claim that the diverse types of queerness found in manga — an attribute they associate with manga’s Japanese origins — constitute one of the medium’s most appealing characteristics. Gender-queer, sex-queer, sexuality-queer, and ontologically queer characters appear in manga of all genres, marketed toward a variety of audiences. While the plasticity of imagery and of normative social boundaries in many manga stories seems to have contributed to the medium’s popularity outside of Japan, an aspect of queer manga rarely noticed by my North American students is the coercion or compulsion at the heart of many queer stories. This has been a subject of some scholarly discussion with regard to the prevalence of “non-con” (non-consensual) sex in boys’ love (BL) and yaoi manga, but coercion is also a fundamental narrative device in exploring queer genders, sexes, and ontologies as well. Here we explore the following questions: what is the effect of using coercion or external compulsion as a primary tool for exploring diversity in non-BL or yaoi manga? How does this contrast with political discourses of voluntary experimentation or intrinsic, in-born identities? How are stories that use coercion as a narrative tool read by North American students who have been intensively educated in the politics of consent? How do stories of coercion and non-consensuality contribute to the global mass media image of Japanese popular culture as perverse? But the main question that motivates my on-going exploration of this topic is: *what kind of work do these coercively queer manga do, and for whom?*

Students in Canada Reading Queer Manga

Every year I teach a large-enrollment (typically 130-160 students) course on manga and anime at the University of British Columbia. When sur-

veyed, my students mention various reasons for liking Japanese popular culture, but one motivation that gets a significant number of mentions every time is the playful way manga and anime engage gender, sex, and sexuality, with many different types of queer characters in stories aimed at a variety of audiences. Because the students in this course come from a wide range of departments and disciplines from all over the university, many have little or no knowledge of Japan. Moreover, reflecting the demographic make-up of Western Canada, the students come from a wide range of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. While the course is taught under the auspices of an area studies department (Asian Studies), in which my job is to teach Japan, simply by virtue of the extremely diverse students in it the class has escaped the boundaries of a Japanese studies paradigm. Most of the students are not in my class to learn about Japan; they are there because they like manga and anime, in whatever cultural contexts, in whatever languages, on whatever media platforms they have experienced them.¹ My goal is not to teach about Japan through manga, nor am I trying to set up manga as some representative of quintessential Japanese storytelling. But one important pedagogical goal for the course is to challenge or deconstruct some of the stereotypes about Japan that the students may have absorbed from the mass media, whether in North America or in the home countries of the international students and recent immigrants.

To give structure to the course I divide the material into three thematic sections: 1) robots, cyborgs, and the posthuman; 2) sex, gender, and sexuality; and 3) animality, monstrosity, and abjection. For each thematic section we read or watch a variety of manga and anime texts, aimed at various target audiences (*shōjo* [girls], *shōnen* [boys], *seinen* [mainly male youths], *josei* [women]) and in a variety of genres: horror, high school, SF, comedy, BL, adventure, and so on. Issues of queerness arise in each of the three thematic sections, but particularly when we are focusing on sex, gender, and sexuality. Because the class engages issues of queerness, one of the stereotypes that appears most often in student papers, in-class comments, blog posts, or discussion site posts is Japan as Land of Obscenity, Misogyny, and Pedophilia. It is undeniable that both in real life and in

¹ The course fulfills the university-wide literature requirement, so a few students in the class every year have no knowledge of Japan and no previous interest in manga and anime. They choose this class to fulfill the requirement because they are curious about these media they have heard of but never experienced, or simply because they think it will be more interesting than a traditional literature course.

cultural products obscenity, misogyny, and pedophilia do exist in Japan, just as everywhere else in the world, not to mention homophobia, transphobia and many other social problems, just as everywhere else in the world. But for many people around the globe Japan has the reputation of being more accepting and even celebratory about obscene narrative and visual content than most other developed countries, and this is an image that I take pains to challenge.

In recent years, it has become more difficult to challenge negative stereotypes about Japanese popular culture because of university officials' intensive attempts to educate North American students about what kinds of sexual interactions are appropriate in real life. These attempts at education revolve around issues of consent and agency, or, to look at it from the other side, around coercion or compulsion (whether verbal or physical). While it is no doubt beneficial for universities to address the question of appropriate real-life sexual behavior for young adults living away from home for the first time, the rhetoric of consent and agency derives from and addresses a primarily heterosexual and Anglo-European context.

In university efforts to educate students about consent, questions like these are raised: Who has the right to determine how/when/with whom a person performs a sexual act? What is the exact nature of consent? How many times does she have to say no, or yes? If she is drunk, can she rightfully consent? How drunk does she have to be before her ability to consent her agency to choose to have sex is fundamentally compromised? These are the issues that are currently being legislated on North American university campuses, and therefore, in my classroom they lead to this question: How does all this discourse of consent/agency work (or not work) when some students in my class attempt to apply it to the Japanese queer manga texts that I assign?

Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in Manga

What do I mean by "queer"? In this context I am not using it as a code word for gay or lesbian; rather it refers to situations, relationships, combinations, or images that challenge the binary structures that are normatively assumed to configure sex, gender, and sexuality. Binary structures are either/or — either gay or straight, either male or female, either feminine or masculine — but queer structures are both/neither: neither gay nor straight, neither male nor female, neither feminine or masculine. Or, to use anthropologist Patrick Galbraith's wonderful phrasing, queer is a way of "encompass[ing] the unencompassable fluidity that exists out-

side normative paradigms.” (2011, 216).

Here I focus on coercion in stories about gender-fluid, trans*, or gender non-conforming characters,² so it is important also to define what I mean by “gender.” Gender is the set of social/cultural constructs or beliefs about how men and women should be. Gender is comprised of at least three major components:

gender norms: socially accepted gender positions (specific to a time and place)

gender identity: what a person feels their position within the society’s gender structure to be

gender performance: how a person enacts the gender possibilities of their society through clothes, mannerisms, speech, hairstyle, etc.

And we should also add the related issue of legally or socially-determined sex/gender roles, which legislate, for example, that women cannot be truck drivers, or priests, or cannot ascend the throne.

How does this all work in relation to manga? In the first place, manga is an interesting narrative medium because, unless our favorite manga characters are obliging enough to show them to us, we really have no idea what sort of genitalia they have, so we cannot come to any conclusions about their sex based on that sort of visual clue. And given the ambiguous iconography in some genres of manga, notably *shōjo*, in which characters intended to be male and characters intended to be female are drawn almost identically, we often cannot tell for sure what a character’s sex is unless they do take their clothes off so we can see their naked body. For example, in *shōjo* manga characters are rarely drawn with such detail as to show us secondary sex characteristics, such as an Adam’s apple or facial hair for men. Therefore, when confronted with an image of a typical manga *bishōnen* (beautiful young man), an inexperienced reader has no way of determining the likely sex of the character. Instead readers have to infer a character’s sex from other information: how other characters treat them, which pronouns they use (and other aspects of gendered language in Japanese — of course, this all disappears in English), and so on. In some manga, readers are led to infer from information of

² Now, just by my using those terms, we see already some of the problems that arise when teaching queer manga texts translated into English to English speaking students. These reflect the latest terminology in North America for categorizing gender-queerness, but they do not map easily onto current gender terminology in Japanese.

this sort that a particular character has, for example, a female body, only to discover later that that is not the case.

This ambiguity regarding the sexed body is common in shōjo manga, but in shōnen and seinen genres (for straight boys and men), sex dimorphism is far more common, sometimes to a wildly exaggerated degree: secondary sex characteristics such as breasts and round buttocks for women, or broad shoulders and strong facial features for men are provided to clearly differentiate the sexes. Even in shōnen and seinen manga, however, we sometimes find examples of the queering of sex, such as in *Ranma ½* (Takahashi Rumiko, serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Sunday*, 1987-1996), which featured a protagonist whose body switched back and forth from male to female. A more recent example is Izana from the science fiction manga *Knights of Sidonia* (*Shidonia no kishi*, Nihei Tsutomu, serialized in *Afternoon*, 2009-2015), whose body is, in the beginning of the story, neither female nor male, and visually occupies a position somewhere between the clearly sexed male and female bodies in the manga. When Izana wants to mate, their body automatically becomes the “opposite” sex from their partner. Izana is therefore sometimes female, sometimes male, and sometimes in a physically neutral state. It should be noted that although Izana is sex-queer, they are heterosexual. (The frequent occurrence of same-sex romance and eroticism in Japanese popular culture products aimed at a presumed female audience [shōjo] is extremely rare in products aimed at a presumed straight male audience.)

The well-known queer theorist Judith Butler has argued that “Sex is a forcible materialization of a ‘regulatory ideal’ [heterosexuality]: to materialize the body’s sex is ‘to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.’” (1993, 2). To put this simply, in the context of manga the reason readers are so anxious to know a character’s sex is because we want to know who they can “legitimately” have sex with. The heteronormativity of our world makes it imperative to know whether the couplings we see are hetero- or homosexual. But, as we have seen, many manga do not materialize sex difference, they constantly obscure it. What then becomes of the heterosexual imperative?

Similarly, unless they are obliging enough to tell us explicitly, we have no idea what our characters’ gender *identity* is. When theater studies scholar Natsu Onoda Power tells us that manga characters have no sex, but have gender in abundance, she is right, but only in the sense that they have gender *performance* in abundance, from which readers infer a character’s deep-seated gender *identity* (Onoda [Power] 2002, 132). We see a

manga character who dresses in a feminine way and has a feminine hairstyle, so we tend to assume that the character has a feminine gender identity. Sometimes we are right, and sometimes the story shows us later that our assumption was wrong.

Queer Manga in Postwar Japan

When talking about queer manga, the example everyone starts with, for good reason, is Tezuka Osamu's *Princess Knight* (*Ribon no kishi*), serialized in *Shōjo Club* from 1953-56, and then again in a slightly revised version 1963-66 in *Nakayoshi*.³ *Princess Knight* queered gender by introducing a scenario in which a soon-to-be-born baby up in heaven is accidentally given two hearts (one red, one blue) — that is, two gender identities, two gender propensities — so that despite the fact that when the child is born her body is identified as female, she is capable of being both fully feminine and fully masculine. Because she is born into a royal family in which only males are eligible to inherit the throne, the girl Sapphire must dress as a boy in public. If she is discovered she will be executed. This narrative set-up allowed Tezuka to play extensively with stereotypes of gender, as well as the arbitrary but deadly serious nature of socially determined sex roles.

One form of gender queering that Tezuka explores in *Princess Knight* is cross-dressing. Besides cross-dressing habitually in public as a boy, Sapphire also cross-dresses as a girl to attend a ball in the neighboring kingdom. The first fits the typical definition of cross-dressing as Sapphire's masculine attire is in conflict with her female sex, but the second is more complex: dressing in a feminine way fits Sapphire's sex and half of her gender identity, but it is in conflict with the other, completely genuine, masculine half of her gender identity. Similarly, in the later version of *Princess Knight* (1963-66), Tezuka plays with a multitude of interesting romantic relationships for Sapphire: with a man when she is in her masculine mode (heterosexual but homogender relationship), and with a woman in her masculine mode (homosexual but hetero-gender), and so on. In fact, the woman in the second example, Friebe, is what we would now call gender fluid. Most of the time she presents as a very masculine young woman, dressed as a boy and brilliant with a sword, but after falling in love with Sapphire (whom Friebe thinks is male), Friebe offers to perform normative femininity if it will help

³ Because in this essay I am discussing the reading responses of my Canadian students I will refer to the English translation they read for class (2006).

Sapphire to love her.

Suddenly, instead of her normal masculine fighting attire, we see her in a dress. She says to Sapphire, “See, I’m a proper girl.” (Vol. 2, 297) Friebe is under the impression that Sapphire is male, and wants to marry “him,” forcing Sapphire to reveal her biological sex by showing Friebe her breasts just before the wedding. Friebe laughs hysterically when she realizes that Sapphire is female, and she breaks off the marriage. Even though Friebe is happily *gender-fluid*, she is *hetero-sexual*, and so she does not want to marry the female Sapphire.

In both versions of *Princess Knight*, Tezuka does a remarkable job of exploring all the aspects of socially determined gender: personal identity, the question of whether gender is inborn or learned, social expectations and roles, gender stereotypes, legal issues, and the way gender intersects with sexuality, among others. The ending is disappointing for many readers looking for a queer narrative, as Sapphire’s masculine heart is returned to heaven, and she agrees happily to a heterosexual marriage with the prince from the neighboring kingdom. Although it is quite hetero-normative, in terms of gender it is really a much more queer story than most people give it credit for, especially considering that it was written more than fifty years ago!

Another of the next texts that is usually mentioned in a genealogy of queer manga is Ikeda Riyoko’s 1972-73 *The Rose of Versailles* (*Berusaïyu no bara*, serialized in *Margaret*), in which a biological woman, Oscar, is raised as if male and almost always dresses as a man in order to serve in the palace guard of Marie Antoinette. Just as in *Princess Knight*, it is the restrictive nature of socially determined sex roles that necessitates the cross-dressing. In Oscar’s case, however, there is no fantasy element like the two hearts that caused Sapphire to be ambi-gendered. But after living for most of her life in masculine clothing and having been trained in masculine behavior, Oscar, too, seems to be closer to trans* than to a simple cross-dresser. Again like Sapphire, Oscar has romantic partners who are female and romantic partners who are male, and, like Sapphire occasionally “cross-dresses” as female in public — she is not cross-dressed in terms of her sex, but is so in terms of her normal gender presentation. Wonderfully queer.

Another similarity between *Princess Knight* and *The Rose of Versailles* is that, as manga critic Fujimoto Yukari has pointed out, for both Sapphire and Oscar, the question of their “real” sex or gender is unimportant and can remain fluid or ambiguous ... until a sexual relationship is in sight, at which point they have to decide to be one thing or the other

(1998, 80). And since they cannot become biologically male, they must become women. But, until then, they are free to be both/neither, which is queer. In works such as these we see how sex and gender can be queered and mixed in all kinds of interesting and at times ambiguous ways, but when sexuality — and the heterosexual imperative, heteronormativity — comes into the mix, our protagonists stop being “queer” and go back to “either/or.”

In the decades following *Princess Knight* there were a large number of queer manga works and even new specialized queer genres and readerships. A list might include the early male-male romances of Takemiya Keiko and Hagio Moto in the 1970s, which led eventually to the very popular Boys Love (BL) and *yaoi* genres (male-male eroticism or explicit sex written primarily by and primarily for women); the aforementioned *shōnen* manga *Ranma ½* in the 1980s, which queered biological sex; the birth of a queer readership, *fujoshi* (rotten girls), who avidly consume BL and *yaoi* works; lesbian-themed manga such as *Shōjo kakumei Utena* (Revolutionary Girl Utena) in the mid-1990s, which led to the development of the *yuri* genre (female-female romance or explicit sex); the emergence of another queer readership, *fudanshi* (rotten boys), in the 2000s (avid consumers of male-male romance works aimed at women), and so on. And this is not to mention all the *ontological* queering in science fiction and fantasy manga, where characters may be neither human nor machine, or both human and animal, and so on.

Queer manga in the 2000s

Before turning to the examination of a more recent queer manga, let us return for a moment to the issue of consent/agency. According to current North American guidelines, compelling a person to perform some act without their explicit consent — consent that is freely given, and given at each stage of the act — is to deny them agency, which in the case of a sexual act, is taken to be equivalent to rape. When it comes to other kinds of sexualized or gendered acts, therefore — forcing a woman to cross-dress as a man or vice-versa — coercion is seen as equally serious, just as much a violation of the person's agency, and therefore a kind of metaphorical rape. Consequently, when we are reading manga such as *Princess Knight* or *Rose of Versailles*, students often feel happily and confidently indignant at the social norms that coerce females into dressing as males in order to fill certain roles, such as ruler of the kingdom or palace guard. But the students feel much more confused and ambivalent about manga such as *Ouran High School Host Club* (*Ouran kōkō hosuto kurabu*,

serialized in *LaLa*, 2002-2010) by Hatori Bisco, in which female Haruhi is forced to dress as a boy and work in a host club in order to pay off a debt, or Tsuda Mikiyo's *Princess Princess* (*Purinsesu Purinsesu*, serialized in *Wings*, 2002-2007), in which male students in an all-boys high school are coerced into acting as "princesses," dressing as girls to give the rest of the boys a way to relieve some of their sexual tension without resorting to actual homosexuality.

Many, probably most, of the students in my classes enjoy the playful, humorous storylines, and the way gender norms are highlighted and brought into question in these texts. Especially in the last few years, however, as more and more of the students are "woke" — extremely aware of and sensitive to issues of consent and agency (thanks in part to the #metoo movement) — some of them are responding with dismay and even hostility to these texts. (This is even more the case with so-called "non-con" BL stories in which rape is not metaphorical but quite real.) In this climate, I have found it helpful to have my class do close readings of these "problematic" texts to determine exactly which social norms get queered, how they get queered, and then speculating about what kind of "work" that queering does for the readers of these very popular stories. I am not trying to teach students the social, cultural, historical, or philosophical reasons why Japan might do gender differently from the way it is done in 2018 Canada, but rather I am trying help them analyze and deconstruct the assumptions behind *their own* responses, so that they can see *what* Japanese manga may be doing differently (but not make simplistic assumptions about *why*).

Another contemporary North American discourse that comes into play when thinking about queer manga within a Canadian context is the idea of identity — such as gay or straight, cis or trans* — as being inborn and therefore unquestionable. Borrowing from Lady Gaga, I call this the "born this way" discourse.⁴ It is undeniable that this argument — that sexuality or gender identity is innate, even explicitly God-given — has been a powerful tool in convincing North Americans that being gay or being trans* is not a lifestyle choice that people play with because it is fashionable, but is inherent and utterly fundamental to a person's identity. Obviously, therefore, there is a lot at stake in the "born this way" claim

⁴ One section of the lyrics reads, "No matter gay, straight, or bi/ Lesbian, transgendered life/ I'm on the right track baby/ I was born to survive . . . I'm beautiful in my way/ 'Cause God makes no mistakes/ I'm on the right track baby/ I was born this way." (2011).

— so what happens if Japanese manga seem to be depicting a different way of thinking about sexual or gender identity?

Princess Princess

To discover how the discourses of coercion, consent, and agency play out in the interpretation of a queer manga, let us examine Tsuda Mikiyo's *Princess Princess*. The set-up of *Princess Princess* finds the protagonist, Kōno Tōru, transferring to a new school a few weeks into the school year. It is Tōru's first time at an all-boys school and at first he is shocked at the unbroken scene of masculinity everywhere he looks. Soon he is taken to the student council room and is told that because of his good looks and slender build he has been chosen to be one of that year's three "princesses" — pretty boys who on special occasions dress as girls to act as lightning rods for all the repressed desire of the boys in the high school.

The president of the student body explains the situation to Tōru, and introduces him to the other two princesses for that year: Shihōdani Yūjirō and Mikoto Yutaka. Whereas Shihōdani, with long hair and a beautiful face, has accepted his role as princess, Mikoto is still fighting it, saying "I don't even want this stupid role!! I never wanted to in the first place, and they forced me into it! I'd never take part, if only I could find a way out!!!" (34). Tōru asks Mikoto why he does not simply refuse and Mikoto explains that the school will punish the boys by ruining their academic records if they refuse to be princesses. Here, therefore, we have the coercion factor very clearly set out for us. Mikoto does not want to queer his gender performance by cross-dressing for the entertainment and sexual easing of the rest of the boys, but is coerced into it.

Before his princess status has been officially ratified by the student council, Tōru tries to come to terms with the possibility that this strange idea will become a reality. He is frightened, disoriented, and worried about what he will be coerced into doing (36-39). When he finally goes in front of the student president and is officially offered the position, he is about to refuse when it is revealed that there are also benefits, perks associated with the job. As a princess, Tōru will not have to pay for meals, his uniform, or school supplies. Because of his tight financial circumstances, Tōru is tempted by this offer, and then decides to take the plunge — in fact, he seems quite happy about it. He and Shihōdani discuss it in *chibi* form (tiny cartoony versions of the characters), with extradiegetic daisy-like flowers behind them indicating their cheery mood (66). Clearly, for Tōru the benefits of being compelled to be queer outweigh the weirdness of it. But Mikoto remains stubbornly against the

idea. He says, “How could you give in to their temptations so easily? . . . Don’t you have any dignity? Shouldn’t you have some pride as a man?!” (67).

Mikoto is representing the “born this way” discourse, though here it is presented in a cis-gender heterosexual context. Throughout the first volume of the manga he refers to his natural feelings of identity — his male masculine cis identity — when complaining about being forced to be a princess. In contrast, Shihōdani seems to have taken to being a princess very naturally, and Tōru is in the middle — recognizing that his own inclination would not lead him to queer his gender presentation, but being willing to do a queer gender performance if the benefits are sufficient. The manga’s author, Tsuda Mikiyo, has laid out for the reader a nice range of responses to this compulsory queerness, which she goes on to explore through the rest of volume one.

Soon the reader discovers a new complication. As Shihōdani and Tōru try to convince Mikoto that masculinity is not the rigid construct he believes it to be — “they even have male beauty salons these days” (69) — it is revealed that Mikoto has a girlfriend, and part of his anxious masculinity is related to the heterosexual imperative. In other words, just as we saw with the paradigm pointed out by Fujimoto Yukari vis-à-vis the female protagonists in *Princess Knight* and *The Rose of Versailles*, the male protagonists here are free to be queer, fluid, both/neither . . . *until* a romantic relationship enters the picture, and then they must choose to be one thing or the other.

The three princesses do not choose their own feminine clothing; it is designed for them by an enthusiastic member of the school’s sewing club. And what is significant here is that the costume choices fit existing feminine *performances* in Japan during the first two decades of this century, such as Goth-Lolita, and later “maid-outfit-with-a-touch-of-nurse.” For Mikoto, the ultra-feminine nature of these costumes makes them all the more objectionable, but for Shihōdani and Tōru, the clearly performative, fantasy nature of the costumes makes it *easier* to slip into their roles. These gender roles are thus presented as being like *kata* in other Japanese performance traditions: a set way of portraying a set role to evoke a set response. This is a fascinating way of portraying gender, and certainly challenges the commonly held idea that gender performance proceeds naturally out of the sexed body.

In this scene, the audience sees another way that socially constructed gender practices are maintained over time, as we discover that the current student president was also a princess in his first year, and is deter-

mined to make others deal with the suffering and triumphs that he himself experienced (77-79). As Mikoto continues to resist his princess role, Tōru and Shihōdani explain to him that if he would just go along with it and play the role as fully as possible, it would actually work to his benefit. Soon the reader sees scenes of Tōru, seemingly with no effort, giving the high school boys the sweet, feminine treatment they desire (often enhanced by extra-diegetic sparkles and flowers), which leaves them speechless with ecstasy (91). Because Mikoto cannot master that powerful femininity, he is chased and tormented by the non-princess boys. Mikoto accuses Shihōdani of “laying on the fan service” — in other words, acting in what Mikoto sees as a humiliatingly fake feminine way — but Shihōdani replies that it is not humiliating or self-demeaning; on the contrary, it puts him in control of the other boys’ reaction (94). Tōru and Shihōdani work at teaching Mikoto how to perform his femininity powerfully, not in a way that will lead to victimization. Although Mikoto does get much better at this, he still protests the princess role at every turn. In other words, even someone who does not enjoy a particular gender performance can still master it.

Conclusion

What is the appropriate response to Canadian students who are made uncomfortable by the compulsory nature of the queerness in a manga such as this one? When they identify with Mikoto and feel that the princesses are being assaulted by being forced to act against their own identities and inclinations, what should I say? What is the right response to students who want to support the “born this way” idea, not, in this case, to affirm the reality of gayness or trans* identity, but to say that Mikoto is right, and that gender is inborn, flowing naturally from a person’s male or female body? First, I remind them of the clever way Tsuda has structured the narrative, with three main characters each of whom takes a different position vis-à-vis the issue of coercion and the issue of born-this-way naturalness. She invites us to see the pros and cons of espousing each of those positions within the context of particular power dynamics. Secondly, I remind them that this is a constructed narrative, it is fiction. I argue, drawing on the work of cognitive linguist Mark Johnson, that fiction has an important role to play in real life: “Narrative imagining — story — is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally.” (1996, 4-5). Therefore, a manga

narrative can be a very useful way to speculate, to explain, to explore the nature of a phenomenon like gender, without being tied to consequences in real life.

Tsuda constantly reminds us that this story is fiction, by breaking the fourth wall and having characters comment on the fact that they are in a manga. This is a common trope in queer shōjo manga from around this time period (the early-mid 2000s) and functions to constantly remind the reader that they are in a safe, because fictional, space that has no necessary ties to real life.

When literary scholars Janice Radway (in *Reading the Romance*, 1984) and Tania Modleski (in *Loving with a Vengeance*, 1982) analyzed what readers did with English language romance novels, many of which feature scenes of coercive sexual encounters, they emphasized that, in Radway's words, "by picturing the heroine in relative positions of weakness, romances are not necessarily endorsing her situation, but examining an all-too-common state of affairs in order to display possible strategies for coping with it." (1984, 75). This is clearly what Tsuda is doing in this manga.

Radway also stresses that romance novels "work" for their readers because they are written in simple language and strictly follow genre conventions. Readers do not have to strain to understand them, and again this creates a safe space where readers know what to expect and can therefore confidently witness what appear to be sexual assaults without having to consider fully what those would feel like in real life. Similarly, Tsuda follows genre conventions to the letter, both visually and in terms of plot development — there is nothing experimental or cutting-edge in *Princess Princess*. It is pure shōjo, including the shōjo trope of calling attention to its own genre conventions. Tsuda's manga includes several such "winks" to her readers, reminding them that this is just play. I would argue that it is this combination of narrative features that makes manga such as *Princess Princess* work for its readers. It is not necessary to understand much about Japan to accept the queer possibilities that manga like this one have to offer. To gain the benefits of trying out a variety of response to coercion in a safe space it is only necessary to acknowledge these works as fiction, and a particular form of fiction — shōjo manga — with its own genre conventions and storytelling mechanisms.

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