MA THESIS

“DISSOLVING HETERONORMATIVITY THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF SLASH FICTION AND BOYS’ LOVE MANGA”

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: 1
Chapter One: 6
Justification of Comparison 8
New Romance and BL Manga 17
Slash and BL Manga as a subcategory of the Romance Genre 19
Chapter Two 23
Equality 23
Psychoanalysis 27
Chapter Three 31
Close Readings 31
Seven Days & Dirty Laundry 31
Love Stage!! & Lock All the Doors Behind You 42
Chapter Four 57
Introspection 57
Conclusion 63
Attachment 1 67
Attachment 2 68
Bibliography 69
Primary Sources 69
Secondary Sources 69

INTRODUCTION:

This thesis aims to examine Slash Fiction and Boys' Love (BL) Manga, homing in especially on why women find these narratives appealing in an attempt to destabilize the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The thesis will attempt this by discussing a wide variety of explanations put forward by academics as to why women consume these narratives in conjunction with queer theory informed close readings of the following four texts: *Seven Days, Love Stage!!, Dirty Laundry,* and *Lock All the Doors Behind You.* The first two are examples of BL manga, the latter two are slash fiction. The first chapter will argue for a justification of comparison between slash fiction and BL manga. Such a justification is relevant because, as this thesis will argue, BL manga and slash fiction are effectively a sub-genre of the romance genre, which has as a potential consequence that the sex of the protagonists being paired is subordinate to the conventions of the romance genre, a genre that is enjoyed by countless people all over the world. The second chapter will look chiefly at the idea advanced by certain academics that women enjoy slash and BL manga because these stories portray an egalitarian relationship, a relationship between two men, rather than a relationship between a man and a woman – which is seen as inherently unequal by a number of these academics. Chapter three will put some of the ideas discussed in chapter one and two to the test by conducting a number of queer theory informed close readings, while also advancing some other potential motivations for as to why some women read male same-sex narratives. Finally, the thesis will conclude with an introspection and a conclusion. Before doing any of this, however, the thesis will give a short overview of the origins of BL manga and slash fiction. In addition, I will also put into words my own motivations for choosing this particular topic for my MA thesis.

Slash fiction and BL manga originated contemporaneously with one another somewhere in the 1970s, “a time marked by global question of gender and sex” (Levi loc. 55). Catherine Salmon and Don Symons succinctly summarise slash fiction as “a kind of romance fiction, usually but not always very sexually graphic, in which both lovers are male” (94). They further add that for slash fiction to be considered ‘true slash’ “the lovers must be an expropriated media pairing” (94). The name slash “arose from the convention of using the slash punctuation mark to unite the lovers’ names or initials” (94): for example, slash stories containing Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock – where the two romantically involved – are referred to as K/S. Slash fiction is, however, not limited to just media pairings; copious amounts of slash fiction has been produced about characters from novels, video games, comic books, and so on. Initially, slash fiction was disseminated through fan magazines, “sold by mail order or at fan conventions” (Salmon & Symons 94). Nowadays slash is primarily accessed through means of the World Wide Web.

BL Manga is a genre within the much larger and immensely popular Japanese manga scene. BL manga portrays the blossoming (often sexual) relationship between two male protagonists. “Boys’ love runs the gamut from complex graphic novels dealing with serious issues to light-hearted, erotic short pieces in which neither plot nor theme play significant roles” (Levi loc. 28). In this sense, BL manga is very similar to slash – which also spans a similar continuum. This thesis, however, will concern itself primarily with the more plot-driven stories within these two genres.

I chose this thesis topic for a reason, obviously. My motivation for writing about slash and BL manga is borne out of the fact that I am, first and foremost, a fan of the genres that I am dissecting, if that is what you can call it. Anne Kustritz talks about the

difficulty of being a fan and an academic in her article *Home and the Digital Field: Reflections on Fan Identity and Identification*, remaking that "I feared making a claim to fan identity that some fans might deem inauthentic, wished to escape the negative social judgments associated with being a fan, and worried about the consequences for my academic credibility should I openly identify with the object of my study" (96). While I do not consider myself an academic – even though I probably should – I did (do) worry about 'coming out' as a fan. I fear it might discredit my arguments as something that is tainted as a result of personal investment. Throughout the thesis, with the exception of the few sections where I am explicitly voicing my own opinion, I have tried to remove myself from the equation in an attempt to produce a text that is not coloured by my own biases, although I have arguably not always succeeded in doing so.

I started reading slash fiction in my teens and was both shocked and pleasantly surprised that texts like slash existed. Growing up in a rural area, one can find oneself rather cut off from progressive thinking and notions of sexuality that go against the grain. While I was certainly no stranger to such influences – I was a child that was deeply invested in online (gaming) communities – slash was still a revelation in its own special way. As time went by, I continued to read more and more slash fiction and eventually branched out into BL territory. Initially I watched only the BL manga stories that were adapted into anime, and I distinctly remember that the first one blew me away. In my mind, narratives about male same-sex content were now no longer something that was created in some dark room by rebellious individuals but something crafted by teams of people. Surely that meant it was a pretty well accepted thing? Of course it was. I knew it was. I grew up in The Netherlands. Homophobia was not as rampant as I knew it to be in many other parts of the world. Despite my engagement in male same-sex fantasia, I did not actually self-identify as gay until I reached

the age of twenty-two. It was then that I first felt attracted to someone of the same sex, a fellow classmate. Fearless as I am (I am not fearless. I am, like many people, plagued with and by insecurities and irrational fears), I immediately told the guy. He told me he wasn't into men, but that he was nonetheless flattered. I am not going to claim that this was a watershed moment in my life, a moment in which I experienced an epiphany that would forever change the course of my life and eventually led to me writing this thesis. Rather, it made me aware that I knew less about myself than I thought I did. Shortly afterwards, I also realised that I was pursuing a degree I hated, so a year later I dropped from my university course and started to pursue a degree in English literature and language in the UK. It was during my time in the UK that I got the impression that many considered popular culture and the literature it produces to not really be worthy of study. Shakespeare, Milton, nameless Beowulf author(s), T.S. Elliot, Wordsworth, etc. were all worthy of praise and study, but popular culture was not. My first year had one course on popular culture – which was somewhat willing to embrace the idea that it held some value – although the 'chick lit', the 'trash' written by the likes of Helen Fielding, was beyond redemption. During that time, I stopped reading slash fiction and BL manga. Not because of my university's influence, but because I did not really have the time. I struggled to get through all these great works of literature. Each felt like a bigger struggle than the next. *Ulysses*? *The Waste Land*? Really? Why do such novels and poems occupy a loftier place in cultural capital than, say, *Dirty Laundry* or *Love Stage!!*? But I digress, albeit only slightly. When I started my Literary Studies MA in Leiden, I started reading a book by Katharina Bauer in which she wrote that slash fiction and BL manga are produced primarily for a female – predominantly heterosexual – audience. Surely this should have been old news for an avid reader of slash and BL manga? Well, it wasn't. Beyond reading them, I never actually bothered to investigate the two

genres. I felt almost as guilty as my old professors should feel for belittling popular literature. How could it have escaped me? How could I not have known? How could I have thought it was directly mainly at a homosexual audience? How is it possible that people think it is mainly directed towards a heterosexual, female audience? Well, turns out it is; and I felt compelled to write about it.

CHAPTER ONE:

One argument this thesis will now try and advance is that slash and BL manga are, essentially, a sub-genre of the traditional mainstream romance genre. This is important because it can have far-reaching consequences for how to view not only the readership of slash and BL manga but also sexuality and the importance of sexual categorisation. One major difference between mainstream romance narratives and the genres discussed in this thesis is the following: namely, the average mainstream romance novel marketed towards a female audience does not cover a story revolving around two men falling in love. Mainstream romance novels usually strictly adhere to the heteronormativity that is pervasive in our society, and whenever they do deviate from this model, so does the supposed target audience. Same-sex romance novels are thus marketed to those who self-identify as, for instance, gay or lesbian, not to heterosexual women. Slash and BL manga differ in that regard from these mainstream romance narratives. Although they explicitly and unambiguously deal with a male-male pairing, they are definitely still marketed towards a(n often young) female, heterosexual audience (Blair loc. 1940-45). It is this peculiarity that has sparked many debates and one this thesis cares to examine more closely. What is the reason that certain women all over the world find narratives about two men falling in love so appealing? Moreover, most of the authors and mangakas producing slash and BL manga respectively are female. What do they 'get' out of producing such fiction? And in how far is the sex and perceived sexuality of the protagonists important? Academics have proposed several possible explanations for this phenomenon, and throughout this thesis I will try and articulate the positions academics have taken, starting with a justification of comparison and an exploration of the romance genre – which can help elucidate the popularity of slash

fiction and BL manga. Both of the two genres are closely aligned with the romance genre in the sense that they adhere to some of its most fundamental plot devices: for example, a developing love between two protagonists and a love that conquers all obstacles in its path. It is with this in mind that I want to advance the already existing line of thought that slash and BL manga are, essentially, sub-genres of the romance genre. Such a line of inquiry might explain the popularity of slash and BL manga among female readers, readers who are known to also enjoy reading romance narratives. However, in order to argue that both BL manga and slash are part of the romance genre, it is necessary to first pen a rationale that would allow a comparison between slash and BL manga, because both genres have points of convergence as well as divergence.

JUSTIFICATION OF COMPARISON

> *From the rationale of a worldwide media community to the contextual considerations of history and economics to the potential for a shared psychic resonance, there is an ample rationale for the consideration of yaoi and slash as variant threads of the same genre (Mark John Isola loc. 1510).*

The introductory quote is, more or less, the conclusion to all that I am going to argue and explore in the next section: namely, that in spite of all the differences that exist between slash fiction and BL manga, they are similar enough to warrant comparison. They differ in accounts such as the cultural soil from which they have sprouted, their financial clout, the way in which the story is narrated, etc., but they also have things in common. The psychic resonance that Mark John Isola is talking about is of paramount importance; both genres deal with a similar theme and resonate with a similar audience. I will argue that this psychic resonance is not at all surprising given the fact that slash and BL manga are, indeed, variant threads of the same genre, the romance genre. I will now discuss some of the main points of convergence and divergence and whether or not they impact the romantic plot structure.

One difference is that there is a marked discrepancy between the production and dissemination of the two genres discussed in this thesis: slash fiction is chiefly produced by amateurs/fans and accessed through the internet; whereas BL manga is, more often than not, created by professional mangakas and their assistants, published by reputable publishing house, and an accepted "part of the popular culture landscape in Japan" (Levi loc. 62). "In 1978, *Comic Jun* became one of the first monthly manga to specialize in boys' love stories, selling, at its peak, 150,000 copies a month" (Levi loc. 48). "By the late 1990s,

researches in Japan speculated that the core readership for yaoi [BL Manga] material had grown to about half a million," and that in "1998, the yaoi genre included 9 literary magazines, 12 comic magazines, and approximately 30 paperbacks being published each month, with estimated total sales of 1,275,000 volumes" (Yoo & McLelland 97). Levi further remarks that "[t]oday yaoi and boys' love manga are widely read genres in Japan; commercial boys' love manga are displayed on the main floors of mainstream bookstores in large cities as well as sold in small-town convenience stores" (Levi loc. 55). It is estimated that at the 2008 Tokyo's comic con market (Komiket), the sales of boys' love manga and yaoi amounted to almost $200 million U.S. dollars (Levi loc. 55). Such sales figures and wide integration into popular culture is not something the slash genre can quite claim, but, although it is a clear difference, it does not affect the fact that the two genres produce similar content and are read by a similar audience. It can, however, say something about the different (historical) cultural attitude towards male same-sex relationships and pornographic material in the west and the east. As Levi rightly remarks, "[m]ale same-sex romances and erotica intended for a wider, often at least partially female, audience, have a long tradition in Japan" (loc. 28)[1]. In the West, religious influences have not allowed for a similar acceptance. More on this in a later section.

BL manga has, by nature of it is being a manga, a much greater visual element to it than slash, which had led to some people classifying BL manga as more closely aligned to pornography than slash (Levi et al. loc. 1256). That being said, what BL manga achieves through means of imagery, slash achieves through the use of very visceral language. However, a comparison between BL manga and pornography does not take into account that mainstream pornography in the West is often male centered, and is, generally speaking,

[1] Take, for example, Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*.

devoid of any form of plot structure, rendering the comparison between traditional pornographic material and BL manga and slash fiction problematic, at least as far as male pornography is concerned. In stark contrast to mainstream pornography, the sexual scenes in both slash and BL manga serve to "deepen or problematize a relationship that already exists between the characters" (Pagliassotti loc. 1284). In other words, the sex scenes serve to advance the plot and are not the ultimate goal within the story.

While slash fiction narratives frequently feature drawings made by or for the author, these drawings are very rarely as graphic as what can be observed in BL manga. In addition, as Salmon and Symons accurately mention, the artwork is "unabashedly romantic, very much in the vein of romance novel cover art. It may depict nudity, but is almost never depicts penetration" (98). The artwork for slash stories is ordinarily produced by fans and disseminated in the same way as the slash fiction itself: online. Because slash stories are, by and large, released periodically, the author has a chance to engage with his or her audience in between the released chapters. Such interaction often results in the author posting some of the fan-produced artwork (if any exists) in the preambles that describe the latest chapter. While the fan-produced art cannot be compared to the art created for BL manga in terms of style and both quality as well as quantity, it certainly adds a visual element to the narrative for those wishing to engage in it. The visual element is, however, not an inherent part of the slash narrative, whereas it is for the manga. So, again, even though BL manga relies more heavily on visual elements for conveying its plot than slash, the core structure of the plot across the two genres – which I will talk about in greater detail later on – remains very similar. Still, the art produced by slash fans must certainly not be overlooked. It is often expansive and further blurs the boundaries between slash and BL manga.

Slash is, by definition, bound to draw on pre-existing characters for its narratives, and no matter how drastically slash authors may alter these characters, their surroundings, or their stories, the official canon has the potential to impact a reader's perception of that character: for example, the firmly held belief by some fans that the characters are not actually homosexual. Instead, they are temporarily dabbling in the world of same-sex relationships for the duration of the narrative, but revert back to their 'heterosexual-until-proven-otherwise' state outside of the slash narrative. Moreover, some fans of a TV-show have taken issue with the fact that certain characters are being uprooted and transplanted into a narrative that has them lead an ostensibly homosexual lifestyle.

BL manga, on the other hand, is not limited by any such restriction in the slightest. Such a distinction may seem little impactful, but it does make a rather large difference. Perhaps slash's more heterosexual assumptions stem from the very fact that the protagonists are taken from an original storyline where they were often considered to be straight; "characters are straight unless proven otherwise" (Kee loc. 2399). Such assumptions can make it more troublesome for slash authors to queer the original characters. In contrast, because the characters featured in BL manga do not come with any pre-existing baggage, it can pave the way to a less 'unnatural' portrayal of these characters as they engage in same-sex relationships. On the other hand, such a premise does not take into account that slash could be "an actualization of a latent property of the text itself, meaning that queering is already situated in the text itself" (Jones in Kee. Loc. 2385). While certainly possible, the following argument seems to be more convincing: "that fan fiction is produced out of the interaction between canon as made legible by dominant cultural knowledges and formulas for reading, and canon as reoriented by the demands and desires brought to it by the subjectivity of the fan/reader and her knowledge of the world" (Willis 153). As one tweet

from the Fanlore Wiki states: “[s]ometimes we just want to see our wishes come true. Is that so bad?” The argument can thus be made that BL manga has one less layer of heterosexual assumptions to shed than slash fiction.

However, the distinction I just made does not always hold. While BL manga, as a rule, uses original characters that are specifically created for the purpose of that manga, there is also a branch of BL manga fandom called dojinshi – which is the Japanese word for self-published BL manga “which may include characters borrowed from other authors’ manga, anime, video games, and other products” (Levi loc. 27). Do we call a self-published manga that is made by an amateur author and deals with poached characters that are caught up in a homosexual romance a ‘slashed’ story, even though it is manga, or is it BL manga? The boundaries blur in many ways.

BL manga, and in particular its more sexuality explicit yaoi incarnation, often features non-consensual sex – which is not a very frequently explored theme within the slash genre. This is one distinction that comes with no caveats attached to it. The non-consensual sex scenes range from minor sexual harassment to unadulterated rape. It does raise the question why women, who fall prey much more frequently to the horrors of rape than men, enjoy consuming narratives that feature such violent depictions of sexual intercourse.

As I mentioned earlier, the sales record and wide integration into popular culture are striking differences between BL manga and slash. In this next section, I want to argue that this difference can, to a degree, be attributed to the historically different treatment of homosexuality and homosexual content in the east and the west. It does need to be stressed, however, that while such differences might be culturally induced, it is important to

not overstress them and keep in mind exactly what the impact of these cultural differences are on the structure of the plot.

"In the nineteenth century, the west brought homophobia to Japan, but it never completely eclipsed the older traditions" (Levi loc. 35). Some of these older traditions that Antonia Levi is alluding to here are the Kabuki theatre, the practice among Samurais to become sexually involved with their younger apprentice, and the same practice in Buddhist monasteries. The latter practice has a "long tradition of boy love which in popular imagination went back to the eight-century monk Kukai who was supposed to have introduced the practice from China. The pattern here was for a young boy serving as an acolyte to be the beloved of a senior monk or abbot" (McLelland 19). Among the Samurai in Edo-period Japan (1603 – 1868) "same-sex relationships were represented in terms of an elite discourse which valorized the love of men over the love of women" (McLelland 20). Mark McLelland points out that "sexual relations between masters and servants (young apprentices) were common and widely accepted" (McLelland 19). The same-sex relations discussed were most definitely not restricted to the confines of the monastery or the Samurai tradition; they were a ubiquitous part of Japanese society during that era. In other words, the absence of a discourse that vilified same-sex relationships made these relationships a natural part of Edo-period Japan.

Finally, the kabuki theatre, which was home to "a stylized mixture of dance and music, mime and vocal performance [and] a major form of moralizing entertainment in Japan since the mid-17th century" (The World Encyclopedia), was from its inception tied up with prostitution – "often the pleasure quarters were directly adjacent to the theaters themselves" (Hawkins 152). This becomes relevant to the discussion when one imagines that

at this point in time the female roles, like the male ones, were acted out by male actors, and that most – if not all – of the patrons to these theatres were other men. Hawkins goes on to mention that "the prostitution of young boys, for all intents and purposes, was a part of Japanese urban life in the Tokugawa period [also referred to as the Edo period]" (Hawkins 152). These older practices reveal that the treatment of same-sex relations in Japan differed markedly from the treatment of same-sex relationships in the West, which heavily stigmatised such interactions and considered them to be utterly inappropriate. However, it must be noted, as pointed out by Katherina Bauer, that "there is a homoerotic Western tradition as well, which goes back to Zeus' love affairs in Greek mythology (93). The treatment of sexuality is thus historically contingent, a deduction that cannot be overstated.

Traces of this historically different treatment of same-sex relationships can, to a degree, be observed in both slash and BL manga. The former "tends to be far more explicitly heterosexual in its assumptions and in the world it portrays" (Levi loc. 63) than the latter. BL manga often devotes very little or no attention to the supposed 'unnaturalness' of the homosexual relations it portrays; it does not try to make excuses for itself[2]. Tan Bee Kee remarks that "some fans enjoy yaoi for political reasons because yaoi etches out a space where homo-sexuality is accepted and happy endings abound" (loc. 2399). Slash, while often utopian in its treatment of male same-sex relationships when compared to the actual world in which we live, often clings to western divisions of sexuality: homosexual, bi-sexual, lesbian, etc. BL manga is thus, arguably, less bound up with heteronormativity than slash fiction. Slash draws on paradigms such as the homosexual and heterosexual, whereas BL manga simply lets its protagonists fall in love without making any reference as to their sexuality. Yet in both genres the main characters fall in love after having conquered all

[2] Not always the case as a later textual analysis will reveal.

obstacles in their path. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that this difference is not evident in every slash or BL manga narrative – it is an average based on my experiences with the two genres. So, if one assumes that there are cultural differences at play, then how does one justify the comparison of slash and BL manga? Dennis Altman's observations may help bridge this seemingly unbridgeable divide between east and west.

Altman observes the following in both his article "Rapture and Continuity" and his book *Global Sex*: "[t]he more I see, the more skeptical I am of sharp divides between Western and non-Western experience of sexuality, and the surer I become that we cannot discuss sex/gender structures independent of larger sociopolitical ones" (Hawley 36). Altman argues that the ever increasing levels of globalization are also affecting global notions of sexuality. "Globalization has helped create an international gay/lesbian identity, which is by no means confined to the western world" (Altman 86). And although "[t]here are large numbers of men and fewer women in non-western countries who will describe themselves as 'gay' or 'lesbian' in certain circumstances," they also claim that "sometimes these labels are inappropriate to their situation" (Altman 95). As a result, some people have sought refuge in "their own historical traditions" (Altman 95). In this sense, imported notions of sexuality live side-by-side local ones, but the imported notions do exist and exert their influence on people.

Altman's remarks are of importance precisely because he is arguing for a more 'transnational' approach to sexuality, and slash and BL manga clearly show that the phenomenon that is women reading same-sex stories is not regionally exclusive. In fact, as Mark McHarry asserts, "yaoi is remarkable. That fiction in different media cultures as diverse as Japan and the United States, Latin America, and Europe resonated similarly in so many

people may reflect something deep in our imaginations" (Yaoi: Redrawing Male Love). McHarry points to the rapid proliferation of BL manga in the west and thus concludes that it could say something about our sexual desires. McHarry does seem to stress that the rapid proliferation of BL manga in the west is remarkable precisely because it is not a western product. This does, however, not take into account that BL manga has — at least in part – been influenced by Western mainstream romance stories, which may account for its popularity in the west. Although such an analysis only displaces the 'remarkability' from yaoi to western romance stories – which would be both unfair and inaccurate. After all, Japan has its own rich history of romance writing that has undoubtedly influenced BL manga in its own ways. What McHarry's assertion does highlight is that BL manga is hugely popular among a certain demographic across social and regional boundaries, which, in turn, strengthens Dennis Altman's notion that there is perhaps not such a great divide between east and west as has often been proposed – at least as far as sexuality is concerned.

New Romance and BL Manga

Thus far, I have summarised some of the differences and similarities between slash fiction and BL manga, revealing that, while there are differences, the boundaries between the two genres are not always as stable as they may seem: for example, how important is the fan-produced art to slash fiction? Is some of the self-produced manga featuring poached characters an example of BL manga or slash fiction? And just how sustainable are the differences in attitudes to sexuality between east and west? This next section functions as a transition section between penning a rationale for comparing slash and BL manga to the more impactful argument that the two genres are part of the overarching romance genre.

As mentioned earlier, slash and BL manga originated contemporaneously with one another, which, given their very specific content, is quite remarkable indeed. Antonia Levi mentions that, even though it is understood that BL manga and slash have developed independently from one another (Levi loc. 83), "Western literature has had a strong presence in Japan since the nineteenth century, when it was imported during the Meiji era in the hope of speeding Japan's entrance into modernity" (loc. 1149). Furthermore, "early boys' love creators in Japan such a Hagio Moto or Takemiya Keiko admit to being influenced by Western works (Levi loc. 90). Another critic, Cheiko Irie Mulhern, points to the sheer popularity of these western romances in Japan when she mentions that the Harlequin romance series[3] "spawned a fanciful brand of fiction in Japan" that she calls 'New Romance'. "Harlequin landed in Japan in 1979 … [and b]y 1985 nearly two thousand Western romances had been translated into Japanese" (Mulhern 51). Mulhern advanced her point by claiming that this popularity testifies "to the significance of romance reading as a complex interactive

[3] Harlequin is a Canadian publishing company that produces a vast variety of romance novels.

social process, for these stories amply prove that Japanese women too have been able to identify the textual elements constituting the core of the Western romance narrative" (54). It also ties in neatly with both Altman – who argues for a transnational approach to sexuality – and Salmon and Symons – who both argue that romance stories are a kind of 'pornography' for women (Salmon & Symons 95).

The overall similarity between the mainstream Romance genre and slash fiction has also been articulated by Salmon and Symons – which, too, will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs. This is not to say that Western Romance stories and slash were the sole inspiration for the creation of BL manga, but it does reveal that the two genres did not develop wholly in isolation. After all, slash readers were well aware of the existence of BL manga "before it became commercially available in the West" (Levi 90), making it at the very least probable that some themes and tropes from BL manga found their way into the writing of some slash authors. Mark Isola mentions that "it seems reasonable to compare BL manga to Western romances, as BL's mangakas were likely influenced by decades of storylines from Western or Western-influenced romantic novels" (loc. 1155).

Slash and BL Manga as a subcategory of the Romance Genre

While the previous sections have argued that BL manga and slash fiction are similar enough to warrant comparison, the next section will advance a line of thought that aims to prove that it is reasonable to classify both slash and BL manga as a sub-category of the romance genre in order to further develop the hypothesis that the conventions of the romance genre – and all of its trappings – is what draws women to these narratives, and that the sex of the lead characters is irrelevant, perhaps even subordinate, to the plot and its structure. After all, this thesis strives to find an answer to the question as to why certain women enjoy narratives revolving around two male protagonists falling in love with one another, and it is my belief that the romance genre can shed some light on this phenomenon.

While slash as well as BL manga have a tendency to be more graphic than mainstream romance novels, they often retain a focus on the emotional aspect of the relationship between the protagonists that is completely lacking in, for example, pornographic content marketed towards a male audience. In addition, "romance novels have been called, with some justification, 'women's pornography'" (Salmon & Symons 95). Salmon and Symons go on to clarify their statement by saying that they "believe that genres romances are analogous to male-oriented porn in the sense that they are wish-fulfilling fantasies" (96). They also mention that mainstream "[r]omances vary dramatically in how much explicit sex is portrayed – from none at all to a lot" (Salmon & Symons 97). The same goes for both slash and BL manga. While the content is often sexually explicit, this need not always be the case. After all, there are numerous slash and BL narratives that feature no explicit sex scenes at all. With this in mind, the argument could easily be made that, given

the similarities in plot and target audience, slash and BL manga are, on average, simply more sexually explicit forms of the romance genre, but nonetheless part of that very genre.

Furthermore, same-sex romance stories seem to strike a chord with the same kind of audience that enjoys reading heterosexual romances. Salmon and Symons conducted a small scale survey in which they invited a number women – "members of a Canadian romance readers club, none of which had previously read a male-male romance" – to read two male-male romances. According to their results, seventy-eight percent of women enjoyed reading the male-male romance stories at least as much as they did the more traditional female-male romance stories (Salmon & Symons 97-8). Dru Pagliassotti mentions that in her survey of readers of BL manga, "the largest group of respondents reported that the single most important element of BL manga was the 'slowly but consistently developing love between the couple'" (Pagliassotti loc. 965). Such a description fits quite well with the most defining characteristic of romance novels as formulated by John Cawelti: namely,

> love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties. Though the usual outcome is a permanently happy marriage, more sophisticated types of love story sometimes end in the death of one or both of the lovers, but always in such a way as to suggest that the love relation has been of lasting and permanent impact (41-2).

In addition, in a quick summary of one section of her survey, Pagliassotti mentions the following: "a majority of BL manga readers enjoy reading other forms of romance fiction as well" (Pagliassotti loc. 983). She also very usefully remarks that while "[s]lash and BL manga are not identical," they together "work to extend and broaden the romantic formula" (Pagliassotti loc. 983), further legitimating the claim that the two genres are closely aligned to each other as well as the romance genre. Salmon and Symons echo this by remarking that "in a rush to show that slash, and by extension its fans, are 'different', academic theorists

have seriously underestimated the similarities between slash and mainstream romances" (4). Dru Pagliassotti is more forceful and, after having quoted Salmon and Symons, states that "the use of 'similarities' is an understatement – slash is, essentially, a subgenre of Western popular romance" (Pagliassotti loc. 983). Slash and BL manga share many core features commonly found in mainstream romances, and just as romance stories can differ markedly in terms of sexual content, storyline, and portrayal of the romance between the protagonists, they are all considered part of the romance genre precisely because they share these themes in which they differ. Finally, Levi remarks that it is important "not to overstate the differences between boys' love and slash" (loc 88).

The grouping of slash and BL manga into the romance genre is, I would argue, an argument one could convincingly make. Many scholars agree and echo this very sentiment, but few academic works discuss the implications. One possible implication is that our western divisions of sexuality are preventing an accurate analysis of why women (and also men) enjoy slash fiction and BL manga because they promote categories such as lesbianism, homosexuality, bi-sexuality, and heterosexuality and subsequently views these categories as a rigid part of one's personality. These categories may be useful for certain groups of people, but they obscure the convincing argument put forward by many queer theorist that sexuality is much more fluid than that. If one were to completely ignore these identity markers for a minute, then why would it be 'strange' or 'anomalous' for straight women to enjoy narratives about two men falling in love, especially when one takes into account that these narratives share a plot structure with mainstream romance novels revolving around female-male relationships, novels that are enjoyed by women in large parts of the world? One possible explanation might be that the protagonist's sexuality could very well be subordinate

to the plot, or rather, the enjoyment derived from the romance plot structure and all of its trappings is of greater importance than the sexuality of the protagonists.

Salmon and Symons employ a theory championed by Pinker who conjectures that human beings engage in literature (art) because "many of the arts are best understood as evolutionary novel technologies that effectively 'pick the locks' of our brain's pleasure circuits" (95). Romance narratives may thus simply pick at the locks of the brains of certain individuals – which is precisely what Salmon and Symons try and argue. Although such an explanation does leave one rather important question unanswered: namely, if the romance genre is indeed responsible for why certain women engage with slash and BL manga, then why did these sub-genres emerge in the first place? If the gender of the protagonists is, indeed, subordinate to plot structure, then why did a whole new brand of narratives dealing with same-sex romances materialise somewhere in 1970's? This is the question the next section will try and get to the bottom of. So, rather than heralding the romance genre as the one answer to the question why women enjoy reading male same-sex stories, completely ignoring the importance of gender in so doing, I want to argue that the genre is only capable of explaining why slash and BL manga became popular.

CHAPTER TWO

EQUALITY

An additional reason as to why women might enjoy narratives revolving around male same-sex relationships is the following: it has been suggested by a range of scholars that women turn to same-sex romances because it would allow them to "visualize and vicariously experience a truly equal relationship" (Blair loc. 1958-60), one that would not be possible between a man and a woman because of the inequality that exists between them as a result of the patriarchal society in which we live[4]. Another critic echoes this when she writes that "[s]lash fan fiction is attractive to women who feel oppressed by patriarchy because it provides a glimpse into the attainment and preservation of a relationship based upon mutual trust and egalitarian values" (Kustritz 380). Christine Scodari also echoes this when she quotes Cicioni, saying that "[s]lash is basically a fantasy of authentic love which can exist only between equals […] who are strong and share adventures as well as emotions" (114). It has also been argued that popular culture does not have many male-female partnerships where this very partnership is one of mutual understanding and respect (Scodari 113-15), further legitimising the claim that an equal relationship can only exist when it concerns a same-sex relationship. Although Scodari is taking issue with this claim, she nonetheless reveals – by giving an impressive list of academic references – that there are a large number of critics who do hold this very position. So, why is the bulk of slash fiction dedicated to describing male-male and not female-female relationships? One slash fiction author sums it

[4] The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines patriarchy as "[t]he predominance of men in positions of power and influence in society, with cultural values and norms favouring men" (patriarchy, n).

up nicely: "[w]ho wants to be role playing between two underdogs in the slave pit. I mean, let's be equal at the top of the head" (Bacon-Smith 242).

Another critic, Kristy Valenti, takes a slightly different standpoint. She claims that reading slash "it is a way for them [women] to be entertained by sex in a non-threatening way, without the anxieties and problems associated with being female, such as pregnancy and misogyny" (Valenti). The latter ties in neatly with the idea of desiring a relationship between equals, but the sexuality element is, however, more problematic, especially considering the fact that BL manga quite frequently deals with non-consensual intercourse.

Scodari, who was mentioned earlier, articulates another potential reason as to why some women enjoy reading slash fiction: "removal of the competition and the desire to frame both attractive characters of the opposite sex as performing for and serving only the individual indulging in the fantasy" (114). Such a position "raises the possibility of interpreting many instances of 'traditional' slash activity as having a motivation comparable to that associated with male-targeted pornography featuring lesbian encounters" (Scodari 114). Scodari is, however, hesitant to embrace this possibility herself, even if it could – from a certain point of view – be seen as a "'turning of the tables'" of the "typically voyeuristic male gaze" (Scodari 114). She thus immediately adds the following caveat to her analysis:

> because competition among women over men is such a pervasive and potentially disempowering cliché in mainstream culture, to celebrate a motivation in which even a fictional woman is perceived as the rival of a female fan whose chief aim is to fantasize about being the sole devotional object of two similarly fictional men can be rather dismaying (115).

Nonetheless, the removal of competition argument has been made for both slash and BL manga alike. Blair mentions in his article titled "'She Should Just Die in a Ditch' Fan Reactions to Female Characters in Boys' Love Manga" that "[c]omments about the female characters in

manga are frequently very negative and occasionally virulently, even violently, misogynistic" (loc. 1940), and that "even the smallest of female roles can evoke a disgusted reaction from readers" (loc. 1940). However, Blair goes on to explain that what incites these comments is not a desire on the part of the reader to engage in a narrative in which there is no 'competition' in the form of another female lead, but something else entirely. Blair's readings of several BL mangas and his subsequent analysis of comments posted by fans on online websites reveals that rather than a hatred for female characters as a whole "what happens is that characters that are portrayed in a negative way by the mangaka […] are hated because they are seemingly designed to be hated," whereas female characters that have more depth to them, "that are portrayed as strong and likeable […] are almost universally adored by female readers" (Blair loc. 2192). Blair's findings fit well with the notion that women enjoy BL manga and slash because they desire a relationship between equals. Badly developed, flat female characters that lack strength and a voice of her own are rebuked, perhaps because they further widen a gap between male and female, but a strong and well-balanced female lead is celebrated.

Blair's findings do, however, raise a rather vexing question that threatens to totally overthrow the whole argument that women write and read slash fiction and BL manga because they are yearning for an egalitarian romance: if strong female characters are, indeed, celebrated, if they can perhaps fill the role of a male character, then why do slash authors and BL mangakas still write about male-male relationships? This is exactly what Scodari is trying to get to the bottom of when she talks about the *X-Files* in her article: "which two characters in the *X-Files* best fit the profile of the egalitarian duo who have shared astounding experiences and 'trust no one' but each other? Mulder and Scully were the only two leads and (more or less) equal partner for more than 7 seasons, yet slash

authors still seek out supporting male characters to 'pair bond' with their idol" (116). Scodari goes on to discuss several other strong female characters in a host of sci-fi shows, indicating that, at least in our current day and age, there seems to be no lack of material for slash authors to work with should they want to write about an egalitarian relationship between a man and a woman, or two women. Notwithstanding the criticism directed at the hypothesis that women are drawn to slash and BL manga because of their desire to experience an egalitarian relationship, there is still one very potent argument that cannot simply be waved away, one that perhaps reveals the pernicious nature of patriarchy. Scodari also mentions it in her conclusion when she quotes a response from a slash fan in Bacon-Smith. The latter writes that, and I am going to give the whole quotation here,

> at a discussion among thirty of more community members at More Eastly Con in 1985, a fan again brought up the question that preys on the minds of many fans: "But why aren't we writing love between equals between men and women?" Many women in the room responded with the reason they prefer homoerotic fiction:
>
> Speaker 1: Because you don't have to worry about who's going to be on top.
>
> Speaker 2: Because we were raised in this culture and we don't believe women are equal.

Granted, three decades have passed since 1985, but inequality between men and women is still part of our contemporary society. So no matter how equal a male-female relationship may appear in a TV-show, no matter how strong the female character may be, the belief that a woman can be a man's equal is simply not something that culture instills in its (female) subjects. No amount of reasoning or theoretical knowledge can discredit the feelings of real people inhabiting a particular culture and their struggle to live with its inequalities and how it affects them on a daily basis.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

One other possible explanation for the phenomenon that is women reading and writing male same-sex narratives is put forward by academics adopting a psychoanalytical stance. "Some psychoanalytic theorists, in particular, have read these texts [slash fiction and BL manga] as attempting to compensate for feminine 'lack '" (Stanley loc. 1744, Blair loc. 1960). The "lack" Stanley and Blair are referring to is the lack of a phallus. Freud articulates this lack, that he calls 'penis envy', in order to advance the notion that at one stage "the little girl becomes aware of lacking a penis upon noticing the genital anatomy of the two sexes. She feels inferior, 'lesser in so important a respect', and wants to have a penis" (Salman 205). Freud theorizes that the girl believed to have possessed a penis at some point in her life, but that she has, as part of punishment, been castrated. Furthermore, the girl's longing to possess a penis is "never fully given up" (Salmon 205). Freud's concept of penis envy has been subjected to some substantial criticism: for example, "the entire concept of 'penis envy' and Freud's use of the expression 'superior organ' for the penis represented the phallocentricism of a narrative written by and for men;" and that the notion that female development was defined in terms of "disappointed masculinity was not only theoretically biased and implicitly pejorative, but empirically untenable in the light of child-observational studies" (Salmon 205-6).

Despite such criticism, some critics have adopted this Freudian stance. In "Little Girls were Little Boys," Midori Matsui argues that the boys portrayed in BL manga "were the little girls' displaced selves." In other words, "they signify the possession of the phallus as opposed to the feminine lack" (178) Matsui is not alone in drawing such a conclusion (Nagaike & Suganuma 1). One critic goes on to give the following advice to those adopting a

psychoanalytical approach: “rather than being overzealous in the application of psychoanalytic theory, […] it may be useful to take the word of many of their [slash and BL manga] creators and see these texts as more about pleasure and fun than compensation or lack” (Stanley loc. 1744) – which is a sentiment this thesis agrees with and will try to advance, if only in part. The discussion ought to be more about pleasure, but that does not mean that this pleasure cannot come from a lack that is being compensated. Joanna Russ, writer and academic, articulates a similar thought as the one expressed by Stanley when she talks about slash fiction: that “people who do not get it, who are not turned on by it, are not the right people to criticise it because they’re missing some crucial elements” (Francis and Piepmeier “Journal of Popular Romance Studies”). Russ’ comment, while insightful, is not as nuanced as it could be. Firstly, people should always have the right to criticise as they see fit; secondly, sometimes being an outsider can actually be beneficial; thirdly, who is to say that the academics adopting a Freudian point of view, although not the people Russ is referring to, are not insiders in the sense that they read and can get turned on by slash fiction?

Another counter to the application of Freudian theory is articulated by Donald Hall. He mentions that “Freudian theory suggests a certain type of diachronic analysis, of heterosexuality as a state achieved and maintained (albeit precariously) after a long developmental process” (Hall 101). Such a view takes the presupposition that heterosexuality – defined by the *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* as “a psychosocial constellation in which ‘gender identity’ consonant with the given biological sex and the choice of love object involves the opposite sex” (129) – is the “stable” end state of any healthy, mentally sound individual. But just how stable is such a gender identity? The well-known research conducted by A. C. Kinsey questions the notion of a stable heterosexual identity as we have come to accept it in much of the Western world. Instead, as his research

shows, sexuality is much more fluid. According to Kinsey's survey, a substantial percentage of people have actually engaged in and explored same- and opposite-sex encounters. Hall further argues that "while 'experimentation' during adolescence may be theorized as a sorting out by trial and error, of what one 'truly' (for whatever reason) desires, desires do not necessarily *remain* true" (101). Hall's comment opens the door to viewing everybody as "bisexual," but doing so would be simply be a vast oversimplification. By using terminology such as "bisexual" one is perpetuating binaries such as homosexual/heterosexual and male/female in ways "that do not capture the complexity of most human lives" (Hall 101). Deleuze and Guattari views echo this when they remark in a *Thousand Plateaus* that

> sexuality is badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes, and just as badly by a bisexual organization within each sex. Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; […] Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings (278).

Such views are extremely useful when examining the phenomenon that is (heterosexual) women reading sexually tinted narratives about male-male romances because they tear at the very fabric of the homosexual/heterosexual binary. If sexuality is not defined along the lines of gender, if sexuality, as proposed by Deleuze and Guatteri, can be seen as flowing freely through a myriad potential objects of desire, then the whole binary falls apart; heteronormativity becomes unsustainable. Apart from the by heteronormativity proposed standard pairing, there are men who love men; women who love women; women who love men and women; and men who love women and men. The list is not exhausted by any means. Furthermore, often gender is not even a determining factor, and sometimes a sexual preference does not even involve another person. And to complicate matters even further, there is no saying that any of it is fixed for any length of time. Sexual desires have the potential to be both capricious and steadfast. Women reading male same-sex narratives is

perhaps but a single manifestation of an almost limitless amount of activities that can – but do not necessarily need to – define/help shape one's sexuality.

Chapter Three

Close Readings

Seven Days & Dirty Laundry

This section will contain an analysis of two narratives, one categorised as slash fiction – titled *Dirty Laundry* – and the other as BL manga – titled *Seven Days*. It will use some of the concepts articulated in each of the texts, or the lack of articulation of a particular concept, to advance the ideas put forward by queer theory: namely, that sexuality is a much more fluid concept than any heterosexual/homosexual binary leads to suggest. The main two arguments the thesis wishes to advance in this section, through the means of a close reading, is a): the belief that the discussed texts show clear similarities with mainstream romance narratives in terms of plot structure, making it not at all surprising that they are popular among a female audience; and b): that sexuality is a fluid concept, not static.

Firstly, slash fiction can be seen as the very embodiment of one of queer theories' main premises: "to examine the ways in which, in fact, the categories of desire by which we regulate our social and sexual worlds are not as fixed and immutable, not as 'natural' and self-evident, as we might like to think" (Bennett & Royle 221). "Slash is a reaction against the normative construction of male sexuality […] and against predetermined stereotypes of gender and sexuality; it really embraces the possibilities of 'a fluidity of erotic identification'" (Dhaenens, Bauwel, & Biltereyst 337). Whereas in academia some scholars use queer theory as a means of exposing this homosexual undercurrent, fans of a novels, TV-shows, or films can take this very undercurrent and turn it into an explicit display of homosexual desire in the texts they create. The slash fiction that will be examined in this section is titled *Dirty*

Laundry and its protagonists, Keith Gyeong and Lance Sanchez, are taken from the *Netflix* series *Voltron: Legendary Defender*[5]. The BL manga – which will be discussed first – is titled *Seven Days* and the main characters are called Shino Yuzuru and Seryou Touji. As mentioned before, one of the defining themes of the romance genre is a love that is victorious, capable of overcoming all obstacles in its path (Cawelti 41-2). This definition of love is precisely the driving force that fuels the plot in *Seven Days*, as we will see in the analysis.

The opening of *Seven Days* immediately starts with an, for Queer theory, interesting thought to dismantle: "If you're **male**, liking someone would imply looking at **her** face first, followed by **her** legs, and then **her** chest, I guess. What else is there to love?" [emphasis not in original] (7). These two sentences are but a part of a larger internal monologue, one in which Shino is reflecting on the impact of first impressions, placing importance on them, but also revealing just how deceptive and facile they actually are. Nonetheless, in the opening lines he mentions that for a man there is nothing to love apart from a woman's outside appearance, he is not even considering the possibility of a man gazing at another man in a desirous manner. Seryou – who always agrees to date with the first person who asks him out on a Monday only to cut all ties with that person on Sunday, starting the seven day date cycle anew – appears to represent the other side of the coin, accepting that looks (or one's sex) are not all that important. These two contrasting views do, however, not impact the story in any way. It is not used as a potential psychological barrier for the development of a same-sex relationship – which is, as will be shown later on, a significance difference between *Seven Days* and *Dirty Laundry*. For example, Seryou keeps on dating new people every week in the hope that he finds someone for whom he develops feelings. When he finally does find

[5] I should really say 'a *Netflix* readaptation of an existing show that aired between 1984 and 1985 that was, in turn, a mixed adaptation of a Japanese anime titled *Beast King GoLion* and *Armored Fleet Dairugger XV'.*

someone he likes in the form of Shino Yuzuru, it is acting on the feelings that liking someone invokes that is proving difficult for Seryou, not the fact that he likes a boy: “why do I just feel like going up to the boy in front of me and just holding him in a tight embrace?” “Why must it be so difficult? Liking someone is really… just too complicated.” The use of ‘someone’ in favour of, say, ‘a boy’ is indicative that, at least for Seryou, the sex of the object of desire is of no importance.

The story starts when Shino suggests to Seryou on a random Monday morning that they should start dating for the week. Although Shino meant it more in jest than anything else, they do end up dating one another and eventually fall in love. At the end of the seven day date cycle, Seryou does not cut ties with Shino and they end up a couple. Throughout the story, the hurdles that had to be overcome before the protagonists can be together are jealousy and insecurity regarding the seven day date cycle, not homophobia. In fact, there isn’t a single mention of the fact that it could be considered weird, unnatural, or deviant for two men to be dating one another, in spite of the opening lines. Everything revolves around the developing plot between the two characters, exactly as it would in a mainstream romance novel. The fact that it features two men falling in love does not affect the format of the plot in the slightest.

Having read a large number of reviews across two different sites, one of the comments that kept on repeating was that the storyline of *Seven Days* was uncommonly captivating. The following review by AlexanderRP is one of many in the same spirit: “[t]rue love happens in any situation, regardless of any factors going against it. You cannot fake true love, or a true love story. Seven days is a story of true love.” Story appears to be the chief

reason why people rated *Seven Days* as highly as they did[6], which only strengthens the argument that the romance element in BL manga is what draws in the readers. However, the following must be kept in mind: *Seven Days* is classified as a shounen-ai, not a yaoi, meaning its emphasis is more on portraying 'beautiful youth/men' rather than overt sex scenes. Readers may very well be aware of this and perhaps gravitate to such a story precisely because it has a greater emphasis on plot and character development. The manga only contains four kissing scenes throughout, and kissing is the most explicit display of affection present in story. Another recurring comment was how *Seven Days* offered a nice break from the explicit sexual content that is the trademark of many yaoi (and also BL) stories, and that such an approach made *Seven Days* more realistic. Take the following reviews: "[u]nlike others, it's simplistic and realistic,[7]" and "[n]ow, my reason for giving the story a 10 is because not only is it original in its own case, but it has this sense of real-ness.[8]" The claim of it being realistic, which is remarked upon a substantial number of times, is very interesting. *Seven Days* is utopian in the way it depicts a same-sex relationship and it makes sexuality out to be a much more fluid concept than it is often thought to be in the western world. Neither of the protagonists questions the capability of the other character to fall in love with him as a result of a kind of immutable sexual orientation. In addition, both characters still receive attention from girls, and both display a degree of jealousy whenever that happens, revealing that they still view girls as a potential threat to the fragile relationship. Such reactions, or a lack thereof, rules out the notion that the protagonists view each other as strictly homosexual/heterosexual. Those responsible for posting reviews about the level of realism

[6] 8.44 out of ten on one fan site (15.614 votes. https://myanimelist.net/manga/9296/Seven_Days) and 4.89 out of 5 on another (1360 votes. http://mangafox.me/manga/seven_days/).

[7] Posted by user Vicious-Nancy.

[8] Posted by user JMC0124.

in *Seven Days* are most likely referring to its more believable storyline when compared to some yaoi narratives, which only incorporate a minimal degree of plot in order to drive the protagonists to a point where they can have sexual intercourse, not the fact that it is realistic because it portrays sexuality as highly fluid concept. Notwithstanding, the argument could be made that if they did not consider such a view on sexuality to be accurate, they would not claim the story to be realistic. However, the very fact that it is a BL manga means that those reading it will be aware that the story deals with same-sex desire well before they ever engage with its content. It is an aspect of the genre, one that its readers expect. But, this does not detract from the fact that the story itself portrays desire as fluid, capable of moving effortlessly between people, irrespective of their gender. It could just as easily have set the characters sexualities in stone, but it chooses to go down a wholly different path.

That being said, the narrative as a whole seems to take heteronormativity as the status quo. Take the opening lines. Shino monologue unambiguously indicates that the default pairing is male/female. Furthermore, after Shino is offered a pair of cinema tickets by one of his friends, the friend asks the following: "[d]o you have a girlfriend now?" Shino's friend is curious because Shino gave him the impression that he "already [had] someone in mind to invite." The possibility that Shino is going to ask out a boy is never discussed, indicating that someone is straight until there is evidence to the contrary. Also, neither Shino nor Seryou are ever approached by another boy asking them out, only girls. Nonetheless, these examples do not reduce the narrative's portrayal of sexuality as fluid. In fact, I would argue that it only highlights it, highlighting that although characters are assumed to adhere to heteronormativity, same-sex relationships are a viable option too, and that switching between the two does not necessarily cause any complications, either psychological or societal. The manga shows that while heteronormativity may govern the character's

thinking, the actual events in the story do not always adhere to this ideology. After all, two guys clearly can fall in love and pursue a relationship; it is the main focus of the story. Following this line of thought through, one could argue that asking the question why ostensibly heterosexual women enjoy sexually tinted, male same-sex narratives is a question borne out of the dominant heteronormative ideology that simply struggles to account for it. The actual event that is women reading about male same-sex relationships is well attested; it is the main focus of this thesis. In other words, the fact that heteronormativity struggles to account for it has little impact on the actual event. It should, therefore, at least be considered that heteronormativity may be the problem here.

Seven Days thus refrains from putting labels on its characters based on their sexual/romantic desires, nor does it allow the concept of immutable sexual identities to become a barrier. The very concept of sexual identities is not even present in the minds of the protagonists or any of the other characters that are featured in the story. If one were to project this utopian view on the main question this thesis tries to answer: namely, why do (heterosexual/bisexual/lesbian) women enjoy reading/watching stories dealing with male same-sex content, sexually explicit or otherwise, then the answer could be as simple as 'because they enjoy doing so'. No further questions asked. It is the heteronormativity, the rigid belief that the male-female pairing is the default (for some preferred) paradigm, that makes us wonder why a woman can find a narrative dealing with male same-sex romance appealing. Why should they not find it enjoyable? There is no strictly homosexual or heterosexual desire. Instead, as *Seven Days* seems to suggest, desire flows through and between people and it can take any form that a person wants it to take.

Dirty Laundry, on the other hand, takes a more essentialist standpoint, clearly delineating and expressing conventional western notions of sexuality. The story's foundation is built on the concepts of western sexuality, they form the scaffolding that keeps the story afloat and it provides ample avenues for the writer to explore. Keith, from whose point-of-view the largest part of the story is narrated, is put in the homosexual bracket; Lance, the second protagonist, is labeled as bisexual. The story commences as Lance tries to find a fake boyfriend to take home to his family for Christmas. He wants to confront his grandmother with his bisexuality and thinks that taking a boyfriend back home is the way forward. Keith reluctantly agrees to play the role of Lance's fake boyfriend but only if Lance does Keith's laundry for two months after their Christmas break. It is not hard to see that the author takes preconceived notions of sexuality (the idea that sexuality is an immutable part of one's character; it cannot be changed, only repressed) and turns them into an important plot element. Nonetheless, like *Seven Days*, it is the developing love between the two characters that is the true driving force behind the story. *Dirty Laundry* is more explicit in its description of sexual content than *Seven Days*, but it is hardly overpowering. In fact, it is not at all a big part of the story. Far more attention is given and words spent on the different personalities of the characters. As mentioned before, the erotic scenes serve to complicate the plot or to highlight the love the protagonists have for one another, they are not the foci of the narrative. In *Dirty Laundry* this becomes evident whenever the protagonists kiss one another but are unsure about whether or not it was a genuine display of affection or simply part of the act that needs to be maintained in order for the fake relationship to be believable to any outside observers. The following quote introduces the possibilities of the two protagonists kissing early on in the narrative while at the same time laying down the emotional boundaries that serve to complicate the plot later on: "I'll kiss you, I guess. But only in front

of your family, you got it? This is specifically to keep up the act for your parents." The clear delineation of what kissing means to both boys is then turned into a complication that is gradually ramped up as the narrative progresses and Keith starts to develop feelings for Lance. Does Keith kissing Lance means that Keith is using Lance? Does the fact that Lance seems to ostensibly enjoy the kissing mean that he, too, has feelings for his fake boyfriend, or is Lance simply a good actor? It isn't until the final lines of the penultimate chapter that this complication is removed: "[e]ach kiss would be appreciated, savored, loved. It wasn't a lie anymore. These kisses were real." The kissing and groping is thus not the endpoint, it serves to complicate the plot and ultimately reveals that both characters are, indeed, in love with each other, just as it would in most mainstream romance stories.

During the course of the story, Keith becomes more and more aware that what he considered to be an impossibility is turning into reality: he is falling (has fallen) for Lance. When Keith tries to comfort Lance after Lance's father expresses his difficulties in coming to terms with his son's bisexuality, it allows the author to feed, through Keith, the following ideas into the narrative: "[y]ou're bisexual. And that's the reality. It's a part of who you are, just like all those other things. Those things you can't change, they're written into your DNA. So never, never say you want to change." Queer theory may take issue with such a description of sexuality: one that proposes that one's sexuality is immutable, that it is in one's DNA. However, the comment also reveals something incredibly important, something that is echoed later on in the narrative when Lance states the following to his father:

> 'Being bisexual may be a part of me, but it isn't my whole, and it isn't the only thing that defines me.' Lance swallowed, thinking back to what Keith had said, about how he'd helped Lance realize his own worth. 'There are other things I'm defined by. I'm of Mexican heritage. I'm a Sanchez. I'm the son of Jaime and Rosa. But also? I am a bisexual, and that's just a fraction of my whole self'.

Sexuality, in other words, is not all encompassing. It is but a single facet of a multifaceted identity. A person is not just homosexual/bisexual/heterosexual. A person, according to this passage, is a conglomerate that consists of numerous elements. One can be a bisexual, Latin music loving, anime watching, Mexican geek; in which each element is just as important as the next as far as identity-formation is concerned. As Donald Hall remarks when he talks about one of the central themes in queer theory, "we are not all 'really' one thing […] 'heterosexual and 'homosexual' are terms that do not capture the complexity of most human lives when viewed diachronically for past behaviours and always inherent future potentials" (101). Both Lance's father and his grandmother (from his father's side) reject the idea that Lance's sexuality is an inherent part of him that he cannot shed. For example, "I tolerated Lance's *lifestyle choice*, but enough is enough." The italics are part of the original layout, indicating that the author wanted to draw special attention to it. Lance's grandmother is responsible for this particular utterance. The story as a whole portrays the woman as a stern bigot. She is later asked to leave the house and not come back until she has readjusted her views with regards to Lance's bisexuality by Rosa, Lance's mother. The idea that bisexuality is a lifestyle choice is juxtaposed with the belief that it is an innate part of someone's personality. The latter is voiced by characters that are portrayed favourably; whereas the former position is held by those characters that are seen as backwards in their way of thinking. Sexuality as a lifestyle choice, as something that one has an active part in shaping is thus not advocated. In this sense, *Dirty Laundry* seems to have an explicit agenda in terms of what it means to be gay or bisexual and its potential ramifications. Yet they are not the main theme of the story, they are the hurdles that need to be taken before the home stretch. Ultimately, *Dirty Laundry* is about love being triumphant in spite of social barriers – which is a defining theme within the romance genre. Anne Kustrutz mentions that

“slash is not about being gay (or being straight). It is about being in love” (379). And “despite anatomically correct sex scenes between characters of the same gender, slash remains gender-neutral by making gender basically unimportant – or just as important as hair length and finger thickness – in the choice of a desired partner” (Kustrutz 379). *Dirty Laundry* does inhabit a space that advocates exactly this.

The two stories discussed may deal with same-sex desire in radically different ways, but they do share an important common theme: the development of a love story between two individuals and the barriers that have to be shattered before they end up together. The romance genre is an immensely popular genre among women, and it is perhaps not at all surprising that stories that share such similarities with that very genre appeal to women, irrespective of the gender of the protagonists that are being paired. From the texts, one can elicit some productive ways of viewing sexuality, ways that can attest to the fluidity of sexuality and the eclectic nature of identity construction.

However, while the similarities between the two genres discussed in this thesis and the romance genre may account, in part, for why it is popular among its implied audience, it does not explain everything. Symons and Salmon remind readers in their article that academics have underestimated the similarities “in a rush to show that slash, and by extension its fans, are ‘different’” (4), but they do not adequately explain one thing: namely, if the popularity of slash and BL manga can be attributed to their likeness to mainstream romances, then why do slash and BL manga even exist? After all, there is such a proliferation of popular, mainstream romance stories that the readers interested in such narratives could have quite comfortably spend their lives digesting material about two (heterosexual) lovers falling in love and engaging in sexual acts without the need to have a sub-genre that deals

specifically with same-sex love stories. Yet a substantial number of women who self-identify as heterosexual gravitate towards slash fiction and BL manga.

The emergence of slash can, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, be seen as a bringing to the fore of latent homosexual desire that is implicit in many male pairings in popular series, films, or novels, pairings that are portrayed as homosocial rather than homosexual in the main canon. It could very well be that this is why the slash genre emerged, but such an argument cannot be used to explain away BL manga, which takes non-existing characters for its stories. Furthermore, another possibility is that slash fiction is borne out of the writer's desire to pair two characters together in a way the canon did not, notwithstanding whether or not there is a sign of a potential homosexual undercurrent. In the original *Voltron* series, the homosocial bond between Keith and Shiro is much more evident than any bond that exists between Keith and Lance. Nevertheless, the slash story covered in this section clearly deals with the latter of the two pairings, further legitimising the claim that slash has more to do with the fulfilling of a wish that, for example, Keith and Lance end up together rather than an unveiling of a sanitised homosocial bond as homosexual desire. Slash and BL manga thus appear to satisfy a demand for a particular audience that mainstream romance is incapable of doing. But, the romance format, with its much greater emphasis on plot than, say, pornography, can help explain why slash and BL manga became successful among women.

LOVE STAGE!! & LOCK ALL THE DOORS BEHIND YOU

Starting with *Love Stage!!*, I will discuss the following two ideas: the idea that women enjoy this kind of work because they associate with one of the two protagonists, i.e. that they identify with them, and the notion of sexual fluidity. Janice Radway observed that "what they [a sample group of romance readers] enjoy most about romance reading is the opportunity to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine" (60). As has been argued in detail at an earlier stage, BL and slash fiction are closely related to the romance genre, and many readers of BL and slash also enjoy reading romance fiction (Levi loc. 987). Radway's observation highlights that readers take delight in projecting themselves into the story in order to assume the role of the heroine, not the hero. This becomes problematic with regards to BL manga and slash fiction – which features a male-male relationship. Although, according to a survey conducted by Thurston in 1985 among romance readers, "seventy percent wanted the hero's point of view included" (Levi loc. 1189) – which indicates that women do enjoy reading from the male's perspective. The close reading in this section will also use Laura Mulvey's ideas of identification in cinematography, revealing how one of the protagonists, Izumi, is being visually objectified in the manner usually reserved for women, thus perhaps inviting women to identify with Izumi over other characters present in the narrative. The second story that will be covered is titled *Lock All the Doors Behind You* and will be used to test the notion that women enjoy slash fiction and BL manga because they crave a relationship between equals.

Love Stage!! is chiefly narrated from the point of view of its most androgynous character, Sena Izumi. I want to pause here for a brief moment in order to clarify what I mean by androgyny as the term is employed in this essay:

> 'Androgyny,' as I employ the term here, refers not to a physiological condition (that is, an intersexed body) but to a 'surface politics of the body.' Androgyny involves the scrambling of gender markers-clothes, gestures, speech patterns, and so on-in a way that both undermines the stability of a sex-gender system premised on a male-female dichotomy and retains that dichotomy by either juxtaposing or blending its elements (Robertson 419).

BL manga characters are, in general, drawn as highly androgynous. While the seme character is often bestowed with more masculine features in terms of outward appearance, he is still not "manly" in the traditional sense[9]. The uke, on the other hand, is often drawn as very feminine[10]. The pictures provided will, hopefully, illustrate this in more detail. A large part of the plot in *Love Stage!!* partly revolves around the uke's ability to cross the border between the masculine and feminine world, exploiting his androgyny. Sena Izumi, the uke in this particular BL manga, is the progeny of a showbiz family. His mother is a model turned actress, his father a musical star and producer, and his brother – Shougo – is the lead vocalist of an immensely popular rock band. The story starts at the set of a wedding commercial. Izumi's mother plays the role of the bride in the advertisement and Izumi and his father are there to watch. Apart from filming a fake wedding, part of the script dictates that two young children are part of catching the traditional bouquet, insinuating that they might later get married, too. The girl cast for the role does, however, not show up. This prompts Izumi's mother to suggest that her son could play the role of the girl – which is exactly what ends up happening. Izumi transforms into a girl after a brief make-over and putting on the appropriate dress. Not only does the narrative signal the performative nature of gender, it

[9] See Attachment 1, image 1.
[10] See Attachment 1, image 2.

will, as will become clearer later on, reveal how fluid desire and sex are. The recording of the commercial proceeds without difficulty and the story fast-forwards ten years.

Izumi is now eighteen and has turned into an "otaku". Otakus, "[a]ccording to the *Kojien* Japanese dictionary, […] are people who are interested in a particular genre of object, are extraordinarily knowledgeable about it, but are lacking in social common sense" (Galbraith 205). The term is often applied to those who have an "'abnormal' interest in manga, anime, and electronic games featuring *bishojo*, or 'cute girl' characters" (Galbraith 205). The otaku has become a subject of study in Japan. Patrick Galbraith, in his exploration of this very topic, explains that "both fictional and real characters can become objects of desire. Erotic material has not been as compartmentalised in Japan as it has in some other countries, and sexual situations and depictions are common in manga" (206). The otaku is thus attracted to the fictional in the extreme, replacing real humans as potential objects of desire with fictional characters. "In this way, otaku men [and women] are imagining other ways of loving and living in a more-than-human world" (Galbraith 215). Galbraith's exploration highlights that attraction to fiction is the norm for some individuals. Izumi is thus portrayed as an otaku, although it becomes clear that the manga is referring to Izumi's obsessive interest in bishojo manga rather than making any claims about his sexuality. It means to turn Izumi into the western equivalent of a comic book geek and all the stereotypical baggage that comes with it.

Love Stage!! truly kicks off when Izumi's family is contacted and asked to partake in an anniversary commercial that is supposed to celebrate the 'happy wedding company's' tenth year in the business – the company for which they made the other wedding commercial. In the ten years that have passed, the boy actor who co-starred with Izumi in

the original commercial, Ryouma, has carved out his own space in the showbiz industry and is now one of the most successful actors. He, too, agrees to take part in the new commercial on the condition that the cast remains unchanged. Izumi initially refuses to partake in the commercial, but is eventually coaxed into agreeing by his brother. After Izumi has gone through the same make-over routine, his brother says "I see nothing but a woman! Like this, you'd make a great **wife** in the future [emphasis not in original]." The comment is meant to inject some humour into the narrative, but it nonetheless highlights just how easily Izumi is able to transform into a girl without anyone being any wiser as to his biological sex, and even indicates that Izumi might just as easily 'play' the part of a wife in any potential relationship. Izumi's highly androgynous appearance, which is commented upon throughout the story, and his role as the uke pave the way to view Izumi as the female within the all male relationship. That being said, if sexuality is a highly fluid concept, as the narrative seems to suggest, then does it truly matter if Izumi is male or female? Textual evidence suggests that it does not matter.

However, BL manga as a genre does most definitely not always succeed in escaping "the ideology of gendered relations because it often depicts characters in a seme/uke relationship, in which the uke bears many stereotypically feminine signifiers" (Levi loc. 1225). Crucially, the seme/uke dynamics very rarely undergo a change: the uke remains the uke and vice versa. That being said, *Love Stage!!* is one of the few BL manga stories that I know of that does play around with this convention. Shougo and his lover, Rei, do both play the role of uke and seme at one point in the story. Izumi and Ryouma almost follow suit on several occasions, but the roles revert back to their standard configuration at the last minute. At one stage in the narrative – after Ryouma has tragically lost parts of his memory as a result of being hypnotised, forgetting all about his relationship with Izumi – Izumi states

the following: “I’m going to become a super seme that will rock the very foundation of the BL world.” The comment is interesting for several reasons: first, it is self-reflexive – not a quality that is commonly found in BL manga; secondly, Izumi is highly androgynous, even more so than the average uke in a BL manga, and he effortlessly switches between male and female identities. For Izumi to turn into the seme, the more masculine of the pairing, it would indeed ‘rock the world of BL manga’. Another character in the manga, Rei, comments on Izumi’s plan by saying “I must inform you that becoming any sort of ‘super seme-sama’ is **impossible** for you! You’d need impressive height and smarts and a giant ****. Your specs are completely different [emphasis in the original].” Ultimately, there is no reversal of roles and the seme/uke conventions remain firmly in place. *Love Stage!!* is at the very least aware of the conventions that make up the genre and plays around with them, allowing the characters in the secondary story arc to switch roles. The ultimate role reversal, however, proved to be one step too far.

At one point in the story, the readers learn that Ryouma agreed to take part in the commercial because he wanted to once again meet Izumi, or rather, the girl he believes is Izumi, because he has had a crush on her (him) for the past ten years. After discovering that Izumi is, indeed, a boy, Ryouma initially throws a tantrum. Ryouma’s behaviour makes Izumi conclude that his co-star is childish and has a bad character – which seems to indicate that it is not worth getting upset over the sex of the object of one’s desire. In spite of his initial fit of rage, sparked by indignation over the fact that he felt deceived by Izumi, Ryouma turns out to be unable to dispel his feelings for Izumi. In true manga style, by concocting a plan that is both outlandish and doomed to fail, Ryouma decides that if sees Izumi’s genitals he will be able to finally rid himself of the feelings he has for Izumi. The plan, of course, fails. In fact, upon seeing Izumi naked the readers are given the following insight into Ryouma’s

thought process: “[s]eeing Izumi’s naked body, rather than feeling disillusioned… Instead, I felt only… Desire.” Only a few scenes later, Ryouma comes to the conclusion that he has “got to accept it! Boy or girl, it doesn’t matter… I love Izumi.” Despite a short internal struggle, Ryouma emerges as freed from any preconceived notions of sexuality that he may have held previously. The ease with which this happens, and the cursory treatment it receives in the narrative as a whole is striking. Extrapolating such a view to the non-fictional world would render the question whether women enjoy this kind of fiction because they can identify with the more feminine, sexually passive character irrelevant. Sexuality and desire are not so fixed as to totally discount the possibility that women might not just as easily identify with the sexually active, masculine character in any given narrative.

Because of the inherent visual element in BL manga, a way of analysing gaze might be a productive endeavour in determining the process of identification. Laura Mulvey argues that the pleasure of gazing at cinematographic material is twofold: “the first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight; the second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen” (10). The viewer thus identifies with what s/he sees on screen and receives subsequent gratification as a result of being privy to it. Manga is clearly not a motion picture, but Mulvey’s description of how the cinematic material is consumed lends itself well to manga: namely, “the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation” (9). Pivotal to the analysis is Mulvey’s assumption that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 11). The main gaze is thus male orientated, i.e. it caters to the male

audience and objectifies the female body: "[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 11). In *Love Stage!!,* it is Izumi's body that is being objectified. Izumi is thus not only the most androgynous, gender-bending character in the narrative but his body is also being shown to the readers in ways that invites the reader to gaze at him. Whenever there is a sexually tinted scene, the reader (with one exception) never gets to see it from Izumi's point-of-view. Instead, the readers see it from the perspective of the seme, the more masculine character – which invites the reader to gaze at Izumi in the way they would normally, according to Mulvey, be invited to look at the woman. Does this mean that women are invited to identify more closely with Izumi than with, say, Ryouma because the former is being portrayed in the way women usually are? The images in Attachment 2 give an indication of how Izumi is portrayed during the erotic scenes, which most definitely connotes a certain 'looked-at-ness' that Laura Mulvey is referring to. The only time Ryouma is ever portrayed in a similar fashion (the exception I just mentioned) is during the brief moments in the narrative when the seme/uke convention is threatened to be overthrown during the period of Ryouma's memory loss. It indicates that the seme/uke convention adheres to Mulvey's idea that the female role is one of exhibitionism.

In the scene that I am about to discuss, *Love Stage!!* provides its readers with the almost perfect example of sexuality as something that is not at all bound up with the sex of the object of desire. Near the end of the narrative, Izumi runs into a construction site in order to escape from a stampeding horde of people who have recognised him as a celebrity. Here Izumi witnesses the mugging of a businessman by the hands of three thugs. The three men quickly switch their attention from the businessman to Izumi as one of them recognises

Izumi as Shougo's little brother, making him a potentially far more lucrative target. This prompts the following response from one of the other thugs: "[b]ut – a little brother? Sure you don't mean sister?" They decide to test whether or not Izumi is a boy or girl by forcefully removing parts of his clothes. Upon seeing Izumi half-naked, one of them exclaims the following: "y-you know… I'm starting to think that I might be fine with guys, too." The other two agree and they attempt to force themselves onto Izumi. The scene highlights just how the narrative as whole sees sexual desire as something that is not concerned with a heterosexual/homosexual divide. Instead, it moves effortlessly between these two opposing binaries.

Thus far, this chapter has selected some sections from the narrative that reveal or construct sexuality as a highly fluid concept. It has, however, not addressed Izumi's reluctance to accept his same-sex desire – which is part of the narrative, too. Rather than arguing that Izumi's refusal to immediately embrace his newfound desires is a counter argument to what has been said so far, I want to propose the opposite. Izumi may be reluctant to embrace the fact that he is attracted to someone of the same sex, but this is not the result of a conflict with his desires. Instead, his inability to accept this part of him is caused by preconceived notions of sexuality that are culturally conditioned. Izumi is not struggling to conjure up feelings for Ryouma, those feelings are already there. Izumi is, however, struggling to come to terms with his desires because they seemingly clash with what is expected of people in society, but these expectations clash spectacularly with what happens in practice. When the celebrity news in *Love Stage!!* starts to probe into the private life of Ryouma, conjecturing that the 'girl' from the wedding commercial is actually Ryouma's fiancée, Izumi and his family decide to reveal Izumi's true nature, leveling all claims that there is anything going on between him and Ryouma. When they make the

announcement Ryouma states the following: “I’m really sorry to have gotten your hopes [hopes of the press] up… …but you see, we can’t possibly have a romantic relationship or get married… because he… is a boy.” The comment reveals more about the inner workings of the society which they inhabit than their actual feelings for one another. They most certainly can have a romantic relationship, as the narrative unambiguously shows. Interestingly, when Izumi enters the press room he is wearing the same wedding dress that he wore during the commercial, but as soon as Ryouma makes the announcement, he removes the dress and wig, revealing a more masculine set of clothing and haircut. This unveiling is enough for people to immediately be convinced that they are now dealing with a boy instead of a girl, pointing to the performative markers that make up gender such as clothes and hair.

At one stage in the narrative, Izumi is trying to come to terms with his same-sex desires. Initially saying that “[t]here’s no way that I could fall for another guy” and “I just can’t accept that I have feelings for Ryouma as easily as that… I mean… I’m a guy…!” The former comment could be read as a verification of sexuality as fixed, but the latter thought already shows that he has feelings for someone of the same-sex. All that is holding him back is his own firmly held belief that two men falling in love is somehow not normal. So, in light of this latter comment and the direction the whole narrative takes, it is obvious that sexuality is not at all fixed. It is directed towards a single individual. The sex of that individual is, however, of limited importance. It serves only a temporary blockade in the developing romance between the two protagonists, a narrative device used to create some suspension until the crisis is resolved.

Donald Hall remarks that “’queer theories’ are themselves positioned abrasively toward notions of the normal – and specifically tendentious categories of ‘normal sexuality’

– a ‘queer text’, as I am defining it here, would provide evidence of the limitations, exclusions, and biases inherent within the process of delimiting sexual normality” (149). *Love Stage!!* does exactly this: it calls into question established beliefs about human sexuality and goes on to defy these very beliefs. One of the protagonists undergoes a short process of rejecting his sexual desire, but this does not last. Ultimately, desire arises as the victor. Cultural beliefs – ‘the notions of the normal’, as mentioned by Donald Hall – are used to keep Izumi and Ryouma’s high-profile relationship out of the media, but by calling attention to these beliefs the narrative reveals just how ridiculously they actually are; they are simply not accurate. Izumi and Ryouma end up becoming romantically involved, despite the announcement claiming that this would not be possible because they are both male. Furthermore, the readers learn that Shougo and Rei (the manager of Izumi’s family) are sexually involved with one another, too. Izumi and Ryouma can, therefore, not be seen as some exception to an otherwise functional rule.

While Izumi is most definitely highly androgynous, this does not mean that women should, or in fact do, identify with him and not Ryouma. Eva Cheng talks about this very phenomenon when she says “[i]n offering and guiding the reader’s fantasy pleasure, the romance reader may take on a variety of positions in multiple identifications with the heroine, the hero, or the process of loving, and therefore experience pleasure through each position”(Foster 518). Similarly, Mitchell remarks that “readers [of slash fiction] don’t feel like they are supposed to identify exclusively with either hero and both heroes have the kinds of freedom that traditional romance heroes have” (Foster 518-19). These arguments are, to me, far more compelling than the ones advocating the argument that women identify with the feminine character in the BL narrative. Such thinking is enforced and legitimised by heteronormativity, but the text, like others of its kind, plays with the idea of a perceived

heteronormativity. For example, the moment Izumi reveals to the public he is male, Ryouma announces that any rumours regarding their relationship are hereby debunked because two guys couldn't possibly be romantically involved, despite the narrative providing evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, after the announcement the narrative shows the readers that the people have bought into Ryouma's explanation. It uses heteronormativity, or rather, the way of thinking enforced by it, and by so doing it reveals that it is a fallacy.

The slash fiction that will be discussed in this section will seek to explore the idea that women find slash and BL manga appealing because it features an equal relationship, a relationship between two men, rather than a relationship between a man and a woman – which some critics see as inherently unequal. In the piece of fiction that will be discussed, it will become clear that it is not always as clear cut as this. The narrative is based on the TV-show titled *Teen Wolf* and it ranked among the top five of the most popular slash stories on the database I collected my material from. The story, *Lock All the Doors Behind You*, features a developing relationship between the character of Stiles Stillinski and Derek Hale. Derek, being a werewolf in the series, is found after days of being absent. When he finally resurfaces, he is, however, not quite himself. Derek has turned into a slightly obsessive, over-protective, dog that has lost not only his mind but also most of his humanity. Crucially, Derek's transformation is one of character, not physique. He is thus acting like a dog while having a human shape. In addition, he has developed a mysterious liking for Stiles, the only person that he allows near him. During the story, Stiles manages to, more or less, domesticate Derek. He bathes him (as you would a dog), reads to him in an attempt to re-learn him some language (as you would a child), tries to clothe him, and lets Derek lick him. The power dynamics are far, far from equal in this story. Yet they are not exactly explained easily either. Derek, being the werewolf, does pose some inherent threat that can never be

completely dispelled, but despite this it is clear that Stiles, who is just human, is in control. Derek has, for all intents and purposes, become his pet. Now, if women are attracted to slash fiction narratives because they portray a relationship between equals, then why is this story so popular? The power dynamics are skewed highly in favour of one of the protagonists, the other can hardly even be considered human in intellect. Furthermore, Derek is locked up in the house in which the largest part of his family burnt to death. The severe confinement and being considered mentally unable to take care of oneself is not exactly a great start to a relationship based on egalitarian values.

While Derek exhibits dog-like behaviour, he is still a human being in form, rendering the scenes where Derek licks, lies on, and attempts to 'mount' Stiles as erotic. Critics have argued that the slash fiction's appeal comes from titillation, which can still occur even if the power dynamics in a relationship are unbalanced. Conversely, if the pleasure is derived from experiencing an equal power relationship, then this story would not at all appeal to readers desiring an egalitarian romance. Taking into account the high level of praise and popular votes the story has received, it would appear that it is a popular story among a number slash fiction fans, thus begging the question how important the portrayal of an equal power relationship is. Notwithstanding, one could argue that there is an equal relationship between the two protagonists because the story written by the author is but a small selection of a much larger story: namely, the TV-show from which these characters have been poached. *Lock All the Doors Behind You* does frequently refer to events and things that one can only know if one watched the original TV-show. The story may not depict a relationship between two equals, but the imbalance between them is caused because Derek is not himself. Were he to be himself, then the relationship would certainly have been much more balanced. Furhermore, his reduced state is one that is of a transitory nature. At the very end, Derek

does return to his normal state, and when he and Stiles meet in this set-up the relationship is, I would argue, equal.

So, could this mean that, in spite of the skewed power relations present in the story, the relationship is considered to be generally equal by its readers because of the ending and everything that has happened before it in the TV-show? I think this could very well be the case. Nonetheless, *Lock All the Doors Behind You* does resist the idea that the pleasure in reading comes purely the fact that the story itself portrays the male/male relationship as egalitarian. A commonly recurring theme in slash fiction is the event where one of the protagonists gets hurt and the other is required to patch his companion back up, nurse him back to health. Anne Kustritz remarks that there is a whole set of narratives devoted to this particular theme labeled hurt/comfort stories that are also called "smarm" (Kustritz 371). They differ from slash in the sense that they portray the relationship between the two male protagonists as non-sexual. In fact, Kustritz traces the origin of slash fiction to these hurt/comfort stories when she writes that "[s]lash came about when authors began to use the hurt/comfort narrative to make Kirk and Spock's relationship sexual" (Kustritz 372). While the overall relationship may presented as equal, in those moments of vulnerability there is a clear distinction between who is taking care of whom. It is indicative that being nursed is not a form of weakness or a sign of an unequal relationship when it involves two males; whereas many readers are aware that the heroic warrior coming to the rescue of the damsel in distress is a common and well exploited trope in many stories – one that is seen as an indication that the woman is unable to fend for herself and needs a man to come to her rescue. Yet when it involves two men – which it always does in male centered slash fiction – it is not seen as such, despite the fact that it is a popular theme in those stories, too.

Laura Mulvey offers one possible explanation for this phenomenon when she talks about the role of the female in films. She quotes Buddi Boetticher, saying that

> what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance (Mulvey 11).

If one subscribes to this argument, then it means the female role in films (or narratives) is only to help justify the actions of the male lead. Slash fiction, on the other hand, transplants two male characters from a TV-show into a homosexual narrative. The roles they play in the original show are not forgotten by its readers and perhaps indicate that no matter how unequal the relationship gets, no matter how skewed the power dynamics are during any stage of the slash story, they remain equals because the original narrative depicts them as such. It would go some way to explaining why the nursing scenes, despite being a common theme, are not tipping the power dynamics in favour of one of the two male protagonists. One other explanation, one this thesis finds more convincing, is that the male-female inequality is instilled in the minds of the readers long before they ever watch a film or read a novel. The slash fiction fan quoted earlier echoes this, as does the following quote: "[a]ll women – asexual, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered – are born into and raised in the dominant patriarchal culture. The extent to which they are forced to read from that perspective is a complex one" (Foster 512). So, no matter how independent or strong the female lead may be, the belief that she can ever reach the exalted status of a man's equal is simply not something a lot of women believe. As such, the desire to immerse oneself in a truly equal relationship can only be fulfilled when it concerns a relationship between two people of the same sex. Such an explanation also goes some way in explaining, as Scodari points out, that there is a distinct lack of slash authors writing about female

characters, even though there are plenty of strong female characters in TV-shows. Finally, it has been observed that some readers of mainstream romances, romances that (on average) do not deal with same-sex relationships, consider “strong, fiery heroines who are capable of defying the hero” (Radway 54) as the single most important trait when selecting ‘good’ romances, further legitimising the claim that the desire to read about a relationship between equals is of crucial importance. In other words, the woman might not be equal (in the minds of some readers), but if the writer does not at least try and make her equal in one way or another to the male lead, then the narrative loses much of its appeal.

Chapter Four

Introspection

During my time in as a student, I have learnt that nothing is as dangerous and detrimental to your essays as voicing your own opinion, making your own persuasions explicit. It has always baffled me in more ways than one – but that is not the point. The amount of times I have heard: do not write "I think," "I feel," or "I am of the opinion that," because the teacher (and I quote) "simply does not care what you think or feel" is beyond counting. Yes, my professors wanted me to engage with theory in an attempt to filter the nonsense that comes firing out of my synapses; they wanted me to create a well-balanced argument that can withstand rigorous criticism. Well, I am going to breach this convention and shun all political correctness in this next section by shamelessly voicing my own opinion and personal experiences. Why? Because I think it may genuinely be useful. I am definitely not doing it because I think it will be well-received or that it will boost my grade. The opposite is the most likely end result.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I choose this thesis topic because I am a fan of the genres about which I am writing. I also stated that I attempted to refrain from colouring my thesis with my own opinion. Such a stance has resulted in a narrative that has, up until now, given an account of what it is my superiors have said about slash fiction and BL manga and the possible reasons for why women read these narratives without letting my own bias becomes too overpowering. But because I have come to the conclusion that giving my own opinion might actually be helpful, I am now shedding this stance. By allowing myself to explain why I, a long-time fan, read slash fiction and BL manga, I might actually come to a

conclusion that is unfiltered[11]. Such an account might be useful because it is an opinion that is, hopefully, articulated in a direct, unmodulated manner. It most definitely will not explain why people read these narratives, but if my conclusion is going to be that there are myriad motives for reading slash and BL manga, then my opinion is simply one of many valid ones.

Granted, this thesis is aiming to explore why women read slash and BL manga, not why (homosexual) men read them. However, being a firm believer that it is culture that creates a male/female divide, I soon reached the conclusion that it does not matter whether it is marketed to females or males, at least as far as I am concerned. In many ways my personality consists of many markers that are our contemporary society considers feminine in nature. I am attracted to other men, I love reading slash fiction – the kind that is not very sexually explicit, and as I child I was frequently mistaken for a girl because of my long hair and feminine features (the testosterone seemed to have kicked in later than usual). Does any of this make me a female? No, I am male, biologically and anatomically speaking, that is. So, why do I like reading such narratives? I figured that finding an answer to that question may prove useful, ignoring the fact that I am 'male'.

Much like the knowledge that slash fiction and BL manga were chiefly read by women completed escaped me until recently, I also never bothered to investigate my own reading habits. I am positive that I can never be one hundred percent certain that I have accurately pinned down my reasons for reading slash fiction or BL manga, but I do think I now have a firm handle on it. It did mean admitting something, embracing a part of my life which I detest. I read slash because it gives me something that I do not have in my own life: namely, what it is like to be in a loving relationship. Granted, a lot of slash and BL manga portray an

[11] For as far as that is even possible.

idealised version of a relationship, but perhaps that is precisely why I enjoy them as much as I do. I have enough self-awareness to know that I am naïve enough to yearn for such a perfect relationship. And, while I may never get to experience it in my own life, slash and BL manga allow me to experience it voraciously. Through slash fiction and BL manga I get to revel, albeit temporarily, in a world that I wish I inhabited in what is commonly phrased as 'real life'. Of course this blissful feeling is fleeting, it only lasts as long as there are words on the page, meaning I have to keep on reading new stories – or revisit old ones – in order to quench my desire for love. Janice Radway observed this is exactly what happens with readers of mainstream romance fiction: they are voracious readers who devour novel after novel. The reading of romance narratives has almost become an addiction (Radway 114-115). Just like some alcoholics drink to make the throbbing ache behind their eyes go away, so do I read in order to try and fill the emptiness that I carry inside me. I compensate. I have a lack that I compensate. Does this mean that my activity is any less pleasant because it is compensatory? No. No, it is not. Pleasure is exactly why I read. As Bennet and Royle remark, "[w]hether in a seminar or at the pub, often the first thing that gets asked about a book is: Did you enjoy it?" (289). They go on to state that it is "not just a way of making conversation, but also suggests the fundamental importance of pleasure when it comes to reading" (289). In the words of Sir Philip Sidney "the purpose of poetry is to teach and delight." Furthermore, in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, "William Wordsworth uses the word 'pleasure' (and its cognates) more than 50 times, proposing that the 'end of poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an over abundance of pleasure'" (Bennet & Royle 289). Literature is inextricably linked with pleasure, the gratification one gets from reading. It is with this in mind that I think that slash fiction and BL manga are read because they adhere to a plot structure that is proven to be found pleasurable by hordes of women (and also men)

while at the same time satisfying a demand – perhaps in the form of a lack – that generates even more pleasure when met. As one avid fan of romance novel remarks: "I think my body is in the room but the rest of me is not (when I am reading)" (Radway 87). Reading allows me to escape, to move into a world where my desires are met, even if only in my mind—which makes it, for me, no less real than if I were to experience it in person.

My demand is not the desire to experience an egalitarian romance, but to experience romance. So why do I mainly read slash and BL manga and not mainstream romances? For me the most relatable kind of romance is a romance between two men – which might explain my preference. However, does this mean that I do not enjoy reading romance stories between a male and a female or between two females? No, it does not. I enjoy them, too. It is not so much a question of gender, it is a matter of romance. Is it possible that some women read slash and BL manga because they want to read about a relationship among equals? Certainly! Is it possible that some woman read it to compensate for a lack of a phallus? Of course it is! Is it possible that some women read slash because it turns them on? Again, definitely a valid and plausible possibility. The reasons for reading slash and BL manga are perhaps as numerous as there are readers of the genres. I wish I could claim credit for that last line, but, alas, I cannot. It was uttered by a critic called M. M. Blair in the collection of essays titled *Boys' Love Manga* (Loc. 1970)[12]. I do, however, believe Blair is right.

In my opinion, there is no one set reason that can explain why people consume slash or BL manga narratives. The perplexity some academics are wrestling with as to why so many ostensibly heterosexual women enjoy these stories is borne out of a heternormative ideology, one that advocats a heterosexual/homosexual divide. It struggles to explain the

[12] "I suspect, however, that there may be almost as many reasons for liking the genre as there are readers of it."

phenomenon that is women reading and writing BL manga and slash fiction, and in order to try and account for it people conjure up elaborate theories and reasons; some exceptionally useful, others less so. The problems thus lies, I think, in applying a dysfunctional binary onto sometimes as complex as human sexuality. It may work up to a certain level, but it falls horribly short when one tries to account for the plethora of different sexualities that are a legitimate part of our world, and should thus given space and room to breathe. Analogy time: Einstein's theory of gravity[13] works incredibly well on earth, but when we begin applying them to the universe, it falls short. There isn't enough mass (as far as we can tell) to explain the speed at which galaxies revolve around one another. Many theories have been drafted to try and account for the missing mass (the existence of dark matter is one possible explanation). These theories, however, cling to the theories of gravity as we know them and try and make them fit in any way possible. But what if the theory of gravity is, in fact, wrong? It almost feels like human nature to want to cling desperately to something that is flawed, but works at least in part, rather than to let go entirely and explore the unknown. Luckily, some scientists dare to walk this path – one of them being the Dutch scientist Erik Verlinde, who has recently come up with a new theory of gravity. He may be wrong. The missing mass in the form of dark matter may yet be found, proving that Einstein's theory of gravity was correct all along, but we need to explore *all* possible avenues in the mean time. Sexuality may at times be dwarfed in terms of importance when compared to debates about gravity and the origins of life, but culturally defined theories and ideas about sexuality affect, I would argue, far more lives – on an emotional level(!) – than the potential existence of dark matter, or the lack of its existence for that matter. Also, there is probably an actual solution

[13] Laws of gravity were first published by Isaac Newton "on 5 July 1687 in his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica,*" but it was Einstein, who "developed a more precise theory of gravity, General Relativity, in 1915" (Cox & Forshaw 14). So, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, I am just going to refer to Einstein's theory of gravity.

to the gravity problem, one that is unbiased and won't leave people feeling excluded. With sexuality, it is up to the dominant culture to shape it. Popular fiction is important in that sense. It can help highlight what is going on, if one only wishes to look for it.

My thesis may not give a satisfactory answer to the question why women enjoy reading slash fiction and BL manga in the traditional sense, but it, hopefully, succeeded in complicating the topic by highlighting that we might never find a satisfactory answer if we continue to hold on to the prevailing divisions of sexuality that are so pervasive in our western society. Queer theory is useful. It is an abrasive that constantly seeks to question existing notions of sexuality without ever wanting to pin it down. Unfortunately, I doubt we humans will ever stop attempting to 'pin things down', it is simply part of our nature, and as such we will most likely go through an innumerable amount of incarnations of what sexuality is and what it means. After all, these divisions are historically contingent. Hopefully the next system will be more inclusive.

CONCLUSION

The introspection has already revealed the answer this thesis proposes to the question why women enjoy reading slash and BL manga: namely, there is no single answer that will do the job. It is a question that has many possible answers, potentially as many as there are readers of the genres. Has this entire thesis been in vain, then? No, I do not think so. For I do belief there are certain underlying themes that add to the general appeal of slash fiction and BL manga. Slash and BL manga are unabashedly romantic, they follow the conventions of the romance genre in that they almost exclusively deal with a love that is victorious in the face of often overwhelming odds. The developing relationship between two protagonists is of paramount importance to both slash and BL manga. Any sexually tinted imagery or descriptions serve to complicate the plot or strengthen the bond between the two main characters – it is almost never the central theme around which the narrative revolves. Even if a short piece of slash fiction does deal solely with sexual content, then one still cannot take away that its appeal probably stems from the fact that it contains characters with an already existing friendship, rivalry, or relationship that is present in the original narrative. Rather than authors drawing on the romance genre whenever they write a story, they write stories that they find enjoyable – and that they hope will be enjoyed by others. The fact that these narratives adhere to the conventions of the romance genre reveals that there is something in these conventions that can evince something about how a story should unfold in order for it to be considered enjoyable – which in turn can say something about ourselves. They pick, like Pinker suggests, at the certain pleasure circuits in our brain. From these conventions, we can thus elicit a possible reason for why BL manga and slash fiction are popular.

Furthermore, it shows that the readers of BL manga are not at all different from readers of mainstream romance novels.

However, as has also been mentioned, it doesn't explain why tales featuring male same-sex relationships are found enjoyable by women. After all, there are plenty of non-homosexual narratives that can quench the need for romance stories. The desire to read about an egalitarian romance is one possible answer for this phenomenon. I spent a large portion of my word count detailing this reason because I find it a plausible one. If certain women view a relationship between a woman and a man as inherently unequal, then it can explain why these women turn to narratives portraying same-sex relationships. It could even be that many readers are not even consciously aware of this inherent disjointedness that is felt in male female partnerships and the narratives that describe them. Perhaps some women feel there is something amiss with the heteronormative pairing, something that is lacking, when compared to a male same-sex relationship.

That being said, the desire to immerse oneself into a narrative that deals with male same-sex relationships does not necessarily have to be motivated by the want to experience a relationship between equals. The reasons can be – and probably are – many, just as there are many theories trying to account for the phenomenon that is women reading slash fiction and BL manga. The question and any possible answer we can come up with reveals more about the time and culture in which we live than it possibly could about its readership. We live in a time where many people organise their own sexuality and the sexuality of others along certain lines. Moreover, sexuality is seen as an important part of who we are, not in a small part because some elements of our lives are circumscribed by our sexual preferences and gender identity. Governments dictate whether or not you can marry the person you

love, if you can donate blood, or adopt a child; organised religions such as Christianity do not allow those who practice homosexually (consensually) to become priests; what box do you tick in a registration form enquiring about your sex? Throughout our daily lives we are often confronted with how we classify our sexuality and are expected to conjure up a suitable answer. Even job applications now ask people about their sexual orientation, although you always have the option not to go into any detail. Nonetheless, our western way of life appears to give off the impression that sexuality and gender identity are important. Heteronormativity, "[t]he property or quality of being heteronormative; the privileging of biologically determined gender roles and heterosexuality," (OED) is what makes it seems in any way peculiar that women find narratives about male same-sex enjoyable. Without an emphasis on biological sex or the belief that people are straight until proven otherwise – and that this is a stable, unwavering aspect of one's personality – the question would probably not be asked.

The queer theory informed close readings in this thesis suggest that those who produce slash fiction and BL manga advocate a position where sexual orientation and gender identify are not as fixed as is often suggested by mainstream culture – which is not at all surprising given the content with which the genres deal. Perhaps such a position is also part of the appeal of slash and BL manga. They are often are welcoming narratives where acceptance and tolerance abound. Whenever it doesn't, those who are unwilling to accept sexuality and gender identity as fluid and encompassing more than the female-male pairing are portrayed as the antagonists. All in all, I believe it is impossible to single out any one reason as to why women produce and consume slash fiction and BL manga. It is the underlying cause that made me ask the question in the first place that is far more revealing

and interesting to me, one I would not have been so acutely aware of had it not been for my interest in popular culture.[14]

[14] Word Count (excluding, Title Page, Table of Contents, Footnotes, and Bibliography): 20.618

ATTACHMENT 1

Image 1: Ryouma

Image 2: Izumi

Image 1: http://mangafox.me/manga/love_stage/v01/c001/37.html

Image 2: http://mangafox.me/manga/love_stage/v01/c001/12.html

ATTACHMENT 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

Image 3: http://mangafox.me/manga/love_stage/v01/c004/31.html

Image 4: http://mangafox.me/manga/love_stage/v03/c014/5.html

Image 5: http://mangafox.me/manga/love_stage/v03/c015/18.html

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