Non-Western Sexuality Comes to the U.S.: A Crash Course in Manga and Anime for Sexologists

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In the late 1990s, our sexologist colleague Bob Francoeur dropped some Japanese comics (“manga”) on our kitchen table. His daughter had married a comics shop owner, and Bob asked us what we thought of *Oh My Goddess!* and *Ogenki Clinic*. And thereby hangs quite a tale (Perper & Cornog, 2002, 2004).

Manga seem similar to American comics but are rooted in Japanese art and history. Aesthetic, sexual, and gender-ideological premises differ markedly from what Americans may think is natural or universal — or even Japanese. Much manga deals openly with sexuality in romantic comedy through serious drama, and although manga for children exist, manga are not perceived in Japan as “kiddie cartoons.”

Indeed, manga comprise about 35-40 percent of Japan’s total print output and are drawn and widely read by men and women of all ages (Gravett, 2004, ch. 1). Translations began migrating into this country throughout the 1990s, but the U.S. market soared in the past five years, with consumers approaching 50 percent female (Reid, 2004). This startlingly rapid rise in American sales has prompted favorable articles in *Time* and the *New York Times* (Arnold, 2004; Walker, 2004). But simultaneously manga and its animated counterpart (“anime”) have been attacked for reputed misogyny and violence (Allison, 1996; Kristoff, 1995). So Bob’s question is of considerable interest.

Haruka, also known as Sailor Uranus, is dual gendered. From Naoko Takeuchi’s *Sailor Moon*, vol. 8, p. 73, (c) 2000 Mixx Entertainment. Reprinted courtesy of TOKYOPOP, www.tokyopop.com.

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From the outset, our media-derived expectations of mayhem and misogyny were confounded. *Oh My Goddess!* turned out to be a warmly funny love comedy about three beautiful, powerful goddesses and a young man who loves one of them, whereas *Ogenki Clinic* is an explicit and wildly funny send-up of sex therapy. Criticisms of manga seemed misplaced, leaving a serious gap in our professional knowledge of this medium. Fascinated, we bought more titles and now own over 400 series comprising some 150,000 pages.

An especially famous success in America has been *Sailor Moon*, a worldwide cultural icon for young women grounded in a manga and anime series from artist Naoko Takeuchi. *Sailor Moon* is a high school girl who discovers, initially to her dismay and later to her gleeful enjoyment, that she is a superpowered heroine destined to save the universe — assisted by her Sailor Scout girlfriends and boyfriend Darien. When Takeuchi created *Sailor Moon* in 1992, she did not expect it to become so popular, but the series won millions of fans for its portrayal of a young superheroine team. What stood out was *Sailor Moon*'s strongly plotted action, with fight sequences, rescues, an emphasis on feelings and relationships, some sexy romance, all woven around Sailor Moon's growing awareness of her life's mission. Moreover, the graphics are vivid, colorful, and lush.

At first, *Sailor Moon*'s world seems recognizably heteronormative. She has a distinctly male boyfriend, and there are some cute guys in the story. Yet nearly all the heroes and villains are female. The plot includes several lesbian relationships, characters who convert between female and male (see illustration, page 1), crossdressing, and (in the anime) female nudity. None of the episodes are explicitly sexual, and neither nipples nor pubic hair ever appear. But by volume 18 of the manga, when Sailor Moon is about 20 years old, she and Darien are explicitly lovers — and when she marries him at the end, she is pregnant.

So manga and anime are hardly irrelevant to us as sexuality professionals. Young Americans are seeing portrayals of sex and gender that are quite different from what their parents probably saw. Indeed, the appeal of manga and anime, sexual and nonsexual, lies to a large extent in their "otherness." Here are the major departures from U.S.—largely Christian — sexual traditions.
There are also forms of sex you probably haven't imagined: quasi-mystical virtual union in cyberspace, sex with dragons (see illustration, previous page) or prematurely ejaculating demons, sex with mermaids, sex with dragons (see illustration, previous page) or imagined: quasi-mystical virtual union in cyberspace, the loving caresses of two octopi. "The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife," Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) painted a woman enraptured by the loving caresses of two octopi.

2. Likewise, much gender-bending occurs in manga and anime. Both may feature shii meru: biological women with penises, not pre-operative male-to-female transsexuals (Ogenki Clinic, "Sex Party" in Hot Tails #2, Stainless Night). In another plot device, a male unexpectedly falls under a magic spell that turns him into a female (Cheeky Angel, Futaba-kun Change!, "Miss Keiichi" in Oh My Goddess!, Ramma 1/2, Your and My Secret). Sometimes female characters can convert into males (Sailor Moon anime) or pass as males as part of the plot (Basara, Girl Got Game, Sailor Moon manga). Men and women may both crossdress (Cardcaptor Sakura, You're Under Arrest!). These gender variations are deeply embedded in Japanese traditions (Robertson, 1998).

A fascinating example of gender-bending is the phenomenon variously termed "yaoi," "bishonen," and "shonen-ai" (McHarry, 2003; Solomon, 2004). These are stories of male-male love and (sometimes explicit) sex, written by women for women readers — yaoi is not written by gay men for other gay men. A nontrivial market in Japan, yaoi has crossed into the U.S. (see www.yaoiicon.com). The closest U.S. equivalent is non-commercial "slash" fiction written by female fans about homosexual romances between known characters, like Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson (Salmon & Symons, 2004). However, yaoi exists in both fan and commercial forms (Fake, Gravitation).

Manga and anime about female-female love drawn by women for women are termed "yuri." The most famous is probably Chiho Saito and Kunihiko Ikuhara's anime film Revolutionary Girl Utena but others include Stainless Night and Miyuki-chan in Wonderland (see www.shoujo-ai.com).

Are these stories similar to American pornography, cheaply made and exploitative? Herein lies a striking feature of manga and anime. At their best, manga portrayals of sexuality are powerful, vivid, and deeply emotional. The sine qua non of pornography — which we take as depersonalization of the individual and reduction of personhood to genitalia — is strikingly absent in much manga, especially translated manga. Some romantic/erotic stories are drawn with great skill and beauty, earning them a high place in the world's erotic art (works by Hiroyuki Utatane, Toshiki Yui, Iruka Banto, and Senno Knife). Throughout nearly all the manga we have seen, sexuality is contextualized by inventive narrative, strong characterization, and emotion. Manga are thus connected to Japanese aesthetic traditions that accept sexuality as normal, and are not connected to Western ideas of pornography.

3. What of rape and sexual assault against women? Some commentators on manga have claimed that manga glorifies and condones rape, but in our collection, the opposite is true. Rape and assault are nearly always followed by terrible revenge on the rapists (Akira, Drakun, Twin Spark Girls, Lone Wolf and Cub). When we counted depictions of rape in our collection in 2001 (then 110 titles and 53,000 pages), we found that 92 percent featured violent resistance and/or revenge against the rapists (Perper & Comog, 2002). These stories model an unfrightened woman's power to fight back, but are not for the faint-hearted and certainly not for children. Revenge can range from the woman literally ripping the rapist's head off ("Dead Angela" in Verotik 2) to stabbing him in the eye with a knife (Mehyo). Genuine hatred for rape motivates these stories.

4. Sex makes babies. A truism, of course, but offspring rarely appear in Western erotic or romance plots. However, romantic and erotic manga and anime can end with pregnancy and children (Maison Ikkoku, Outlanders, Drakun, Sailor Moon, Wicked City, Itazura na Kanajo).

5. Sex can be funny. American stereotypes of Japan may feature humorless geeky office workers ("salarymen") and equally humorless servile women, but manga paints a far more interesting picture. For an explicit vision of sex therapy run satirically amok, Ogenki Clinic cannot be surpassed. Romantic comedies like Oh My Goddess!, Lum*Urses! Yatsura, Love Hina, and even the more serious Maison Ikkoku abound in appealingly silly, far-fetched situations — for example, Misty's total disgust with the prematurely ejaculating demon she summoned

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one dark night (Misty Girl Extreme #4). Even in talking animal manga, sex can be funny and just a bit out of control: when Michael the cat goes to a feline hostess bar, he is swindled out of all his money (What’s Michael).

What’s the bottom line? First, anime and manga represent living evidence of what nonwestern, erotophilic, and female-positive sexuality can look like. We sexologists can learn from manga and anime to broaden our awareness and challenge our assumptions.

Second, manga and anime provide ways to connect with young people and initiate conversations about sexuality. In class, assigned readings for younger students could include selections from Cardcaptor Sakura, Saint Tail, and Sailor Moon. For older students (18+), consider Dance Till Tomorrow, Happy Mania, Paradise Kiss, Peach Girl, and Futaba-kun Change! especially the episode where Futaba — now a boy in girl form — learns that “she” is menstruating. Stories that will appeal to young adults include the bittersweet and more realistic tales of Erica Sakurazawa and of Reiko Momochi (Confidential Confessions), the picaresque battle romances of Johji Manabe, and the Jane-Austen-esque romantic drama Maison Ikkoku. For sexology graduate students, manga could make up a SAR between covers., beginning with nonsexual crossdressing in Cardcaptor Sakura, consensual intercourse in Sexcapades, through the gritty realism of The Sex-Philes, and ending with fairy/insect sex in Bondage Fairies.

Finally, manga and anime are not boring! By getting acquainted with them, you will broaden your own perspective and ensure that you and your students sample good stories — sometimes even great art! — while enhancing their sexuality education.

Where to Find Manga and Anime


References


