

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love: Incest Narratives in Shōjo Anime

Elizabeth Birmingham

Describing to Westerners the Japanese phenomenon of mainstream, indeed popular, comics (manga) and animated television (anime) love stories designed for 'tween' and teen girls, featuring a central incestuous sibling relationship, draws horrified gasps and occasional uncomfortable laughter. For adult Western audiences, such media depictions are nearly unthinkable; for Japanese audiences, they are simply a recurring theme in comics and cartoon adaptations for girls. As Cornog suggests, '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'(2005: 1). She continues, listing a range of sexually explicit topics in manga and anime for young people, 'Sexual depictions may concern just about any activity you might imagine: garden-variety intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, male-male sex, woman-woman sex, sex parties, adultery, incest, bestiality, and personified penises' (4).

Church describes topically related media that 'acquire a select but devoted group of fans that engage in repeated screenings, ritual behaviours, and specific reading strategies' as 'cult' media (2011: 3). While Church specifically explores issues of the relationship between cult film, the disabled body, and transgression, his argument solidifies the relationship between cult media and 'socially deviant otherness' (3). Although Lunning (2012) claims that fans of anime and manga in Japan are 'othered' through what she calls an 'abject status', that she identifies as 'not only Kristevian abjection but in the very everyday and poignant sense of the word', for Western audiences as Winge notes, that 'otherness' has been embraced by fans, and has earned a cult-like following, including elaborate cosplay and live action enactments (Winge 2006: 65-66). Indeed as Cornog argues for 'Young Americans . . . the appeal of manga and anime, sexual and nonsexual, lies to a large extent in their "otherness"' (2005: 4).

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

To frame these stories of sibling incest, and perhaps girls' anime more broadly as a cult phenomenon relies upon more than the powerful 'otherness' of Japanese animation, and the potential deviance of incest as plot point in comics and cartoons. The gendered nature of the schoolgirl audience, and the ways in which shōjo (girls') anime structures viewing, are both decidedly feminine. Lunning describes the shōjo aesthetic as 'a cloying miasma . . . overcoding the narrative with an effusion of emotion and signification' (2011: 5). Although Hollows argues that the notion of cult media – socially transgressive, culturally resistant, and above all masculine – exists in a binary opposition to the mainstream and popular, which are consistently characterized as feminine (2003: 39), Luckett further suggests that 'femininity emerges as arguably *the* structuring force in cult films' (2003: 154). Despite noting the fact that 'shōjo culture is dominated by a feminine presence', Lunning points out that it is also 'somehow twinkling with something else, something weirdly historical, something a bit subversive' (2011: 5). Shōjo's hyper-femininity combined with this 'something else' helps create a space for viewing its multiple versions of feminine desire as both conservative and transgressive.

Shōjo manga both predates and is more prevalent than shōjo anime. Takahashi (2008: 114-136) offers a history of the genre as well as a useful discussion of the historical context of the shōjo herself, an important conversation this paper will not address because it has been so well discussed elsewhere (Kinsella 1995: 243-244; Orbaugh 2003: 203-207; Takahashi 2008: 115-116; Prough 2011: 8-11; Shamoon 2012: 10-13). Takahashi's history of the genre claims that shōjo manga maintains many of the characteristics of its conservative predecessors, suggesting that girl's magazines not only shared narratives and images of femininity, beauty, and appropriate behaviour but reading them was meant to keep girls appropriately occupied, indoors, away from sun and physical activity (2008:116). Suter reiterates Takahashi's claim of conservatism, suggesting that in girls' manga 'the stories generally focus on the socialization of the individual and on how to come to terms with imposed paradigms on a personal level, rather than looking at the formation of

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

the system as a whole . . . Thus they function as an instrument of containment of the same dissent they produce' (2009: 254).

Shōjo's transgressive possibilities though developed in part because the comics, like the shōjo herself, were discredited and dismissed as unimportant (Takahashi 2008: 114) and, because of this dismissal were in many ways left to develop outside patriarchal authority, since 'male authorities do not exactly frown on these forms, surely because they remain under the rubric of shōjo manga' (Katoni 2006: 167). Because they were designed for girls, Katoni argues, men did not much bother with them. Lunning suggests that the same values are true in anime fandom, where if anime and its fans are already abjected in the culture, the shōjo product and its fans (gendered female) are doubly so, and it is more regularly dismissed as of little cultural or scholarly value; 'Paradoxically, shōjo is a phenomenon that goes largely unacknowledged. Or, when acknowledged, it is usually disregarded as childish, creepy, or trivial by the standards of mainstream culture' (2011: 3). Thus, ignored or reviled for their hyper-femininity by the broader culture, shōjo manga and anime have depicted sometimes uncomfortable stories of female desire: 'a range of different narratives and representations of sexuality, some of which take great risks and generate scandals' (Katoni 2006: 167).

To suggest that these 'risks and scandals' only manifest as incest stories would be incorrect. As Cornog suggested, a wide range of materials for non-mainstream sexual interests exist for young girls, offering love stories that include BDSM, to yaoi and shōnen ai (boy's love) depicting boy-boy relationships, to intergenerational incest, to bestiality. In all of these stories, what becomes most clear, according to Lunning, is 'that the subjects of these manga are girls, both lesbian and straight, or at the very least feminized males. The "guy's guy," so dominant in patriarchal cultures, is a strange and rare occurrence in shōjo' (2011: 6). And yet, the ubiquity of sibling incest narratives in anime and manga for girls, and the lack of English language scholarship on the phenomenon (as opposed to the rich and varied scholarship on yaoi and boys' love, see especially Levi et al. 2010) sparked the inquiry that led to this paper.

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

For the purpose of this article, however, I tease apart the entwined issues of conservatism and resistance raised by previous scholars; that is, how can these 'hyperfeminized images of girls in a hyperfeminized society . . . evade [if only partially] the imposition of patriarchal categories' (Katoni 2006: 167) and in what ways is shōjo's 'antirealistic and self-reflexive style [... an] effective tool for social criticism' (Suter 2009: 253)? By exploring a specific kind of shōjo text – the incest-themed love story – I ask how these stories endorse meanings about sibling incest that are less about sexual desires alone than about girls' desires for mutuality in relationships and meaningful social roles beyond traditional marriage and motherhood.

'Desire,' writes Cowie, 'is most truly itself when it is most "other" to social norms' (1992: 141). There is perhaps nothing more 'other' to social norms than incest; incest is often described as one of the few nearly universal taboos. It is so universally reviled that biologists and social scientists have for nearly a century designed empirical research with the goal of discovering a biological (presumably natural selection), sociological, or psychological explanation for incest avoidance across cultures. Finnish sociologist Edvard Westermarck first noted that children raised together, regardless of their genetic relationship, rarely form sexual feelings for each other. The Westermarck effect, as it is called, describes this reverse sexual imprinting, suggesting sibling incest is rare because it defies both biological and socialized aversion. Although sibling incest is perhaps not as rare as we might wish to think based upon the powerful taboo against it, in cases where it does exist, it is only very rarely mutual or consensual, and instead usually associated with power, control, and coercion resulting from dysfunctional family dynamics (Leder 1993).

The dysfunction and taboo associated with incest would seem to make its depiction unlikely in light romance created for 'tweens' and teens. However unlikely, incest in general, and sibling incest in particular, appears so commonly in anime designed for both boys (shōnen) and girls (shōjo) that it becomes a narrative feature, a plot device, or a trope – a cliché, perhaps, but one that bears textual meaning beyond the literal. Although incest love stories have rarely even been discussed as sharing a

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

theme, they are so ubiquitous, and so regularly translated, that we may wonder why they are so little discussed beyond fan sites. Thompson (2010), one of the few critics to write in English about incest anime writes, ‘Incest, although it doesn’t have whole magazines devoted to it like yaoi [depictions of male/male sex and romance, usually written by and for straight women] and lolicon [“lolita-complex”], is a significant kink element in Japanese pornography and even all-ages romantic comedies’ (2010: online).

The incest storyline in romantic media for girls did not appear from nowhere, but is a common subject of Japanese pornography for adult women, where it occurs commonly in BDSM texts (Jones 2005: 101) and is related to the woman’s debasement. Moreover, varied genres feature incest, packaging stories for various audiences from *rediisu komikku* (ladies’ comics) (cf. Shamoon 2004: 78; Jones 2005: 98-99), to *hentai* pornographic anime for men (such as *Cream Lemon*), and light novels and short story erotica for women (cf. Allison 1996; Thompson 2010). *Hentai* incest titles like *Super Taboo* suggest that the taboo aspect is a large part of the interest in this particular kink, but that at least in ero-manga (erotic comics predominantly written by and for men) it is closely related to the ubiquitous submission/dominance themes. This fantasy interest shouldn’t suggest that real incest is any more common or accepted in Japan than it is in the west; in fact, in Japan as in the west, real incest involves dysfunctional families and unequal, usually gendered, power relations and the cultural response is one of serious concern, as Allison argues in her discussion of popular press stories of mother-son incest that became prevalent in the 1980s (1996: 123-145).

Although the prevalence of sibling incest in adult pornography is no doubt related to its appearance in anime and manga for adolescent girls, the sheer number of examples of these incest stories in love-themed media for girls suggests that the incestuous sibling relationship acts as a trope in these texts; it stands in for and represents something beyond its literal definition. Literally, incest is a powerful taboo; there is little reason to interpret real sibling incest as romantic and it is unlikely that something as culturally distasteful as sibling incest would reflect girls’ ‘desires and

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

expectations' for love and relationships, as Toku (2007: 20) suggests is a regular feature of shōjo anime. But like a mirror, shōjo anime distorts as it reflects back girls' desires for equitable relationships with true peers.

Although this paper considers a small number of sibling incest romances for girls, a surprisingly large number of all-age animated television series include at least one incestuous couple, and in many of these programmes, incest is a reoccurring and even comedic motif. A recent fan request for information on a discussion board generated nearly one hundred anime titles that included some instance of incest; of these nearly forty included instances of sibling incest, either as a central feature or part of one or more subplots (Baka-Updates Manga 2010). All of the anime and manga I discuss in this paper are translated into English, meaning that a distributor felt there would be enough western interest to translate and print in English, or hire English speaking voice actors to dub the anime. So although I focus on the trope in Japanese texts, originally written for Japanese girls, these media are exceptionally popular in the West: US, Canada, Australia, Great Britain and Western Europe.

This paper explores incest as a trope in shōjo anime, a trope whose meanings shift, but one that, when it manifests in main story lines does so in one of two ways: first, as representing deep, serious dysfunction and even moral decay in the family, or second, and wholly positively, as a challenging obstacle to true love that the characters must overcome through their bravery and shared willingness to defy convention. A third, and perhaps most common way this trope presents itself in these stories is in secondary characters or villains, where it simply represents mental illness or sociopathic tendencies. While this common anime manifestation of the incestuous sibling couple is not central to this paper, its difference from those manifestations the paper does explore is important.

The sociopathic sibling pair is a common type in anime for boys (shōnen). In shōnen anime, the central narrative is driven by a male protagonist's quest for manhood, usually through defeating various foes with each with a different, unusual strength or special ability. In shōnen media, the incestuous pair appears as an opponent of the

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

hero. Although the hero of these series typically battles a single enemy at one time, he is often forced to fight the incestuous pair together. In these cases, the trope of sibling incest is simply a reflection and amplification of the amoral, asocial character of the pair. These villains often use their uncomfortable relationship to confuse or horrify the (usually innocent) hero (*Black Lagoon*; *Bleach*; *Shakugan no Shana* – though Shana is a female protagonist; *Twilight of the Dark Master*; *Spiral* – although the characters do not remain antagonists, they do remain incestuous; and *Full Mental Panic* among many others). The siblings may be of any gender combination, and often are twins, as incest between twins is so commonly fetishized in anime and manga that fans have given the particular kink its own name, ‘twincest’, and it is actively parodied in some comedic media, such as the shōjo manga and anime, *Ouran High School Host Club*.

In short, the incest trope, in shōnen anime or manga usually marks deviance; in fact, I cannot find examples in which shōnen heroes are placed in mutual, loving romantic relationships with a sibling, perhaps in part because most shōnen anime avoid placing the hero in any kind of love relationships. However, the consistent way that incestuous sibling relationships manifest in shōnen media is related to both the masculine content and viewer ‘reading strategies’ – those ways in which boys in particular interpret these media. In shōnen anime, the trope marks deviance from the norm, associating it with characters who are unpleasant and sinister, assuring the trope will not be read as a positive or potentially emancipatory cultural resistance.

Although incestuous couples are negatively marked in shōnen anime, girl fans regularly ‘queer’ these anime with their responses: in fan fiction, fan art, and anime music videos (AMVs). Fan interest in developing artwork and stories around popular characters leads to a variety of responses, but especially incestuous brother pairs, combining interest in yaoi and incest themes. Romantically pairing the Elric brothers in *Full Metal Alchemist*, and Itachi and Sasuke Uchia in *Naruto* are among the most popular fan responses to shōnen anime, with girl fans appropriating boys’ stories of battle to create love stories. Similarly, Sam and Dean Winchester in both the live

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

action and animated series *Supernatural* are so commonly paired that there is an easily searchable term for fan products about their love/sibling relationship, Wincest.

Shōjo and Incest Anime

If shōnen anime concerns boys' adventures, usually stories of achieving dominance over foes (sometimes with the aid of a cadre of friends), in contrast shōjo anime is often about both a shōjo heroine and her quest for love – the narrative focuses on revealing her true love or soul mate, usually among several possible boys. In contrast to shōnen heroes who are exceptional – chosen ones – the shōjo heroine often has a variety of adventures, but is, at least at first passive, an average student, and while pretty, not the most beautiful or popular girl in school. The heroine, while her various special abilities and powers may be revealed as the story unfolds, is exceptionally ordinary. She represents every girl (Orbaugh, 2003; Toku, 2007).

Most shōjo anime, according to Toku, employs a common theme, 'how love triumphs by overcoming obstacles' (2007: 19). One such obstacle is the challenge of falling in love with one's sibling; such a relationship provides a variety of plot complications and challenges for the characters, and therefore offers ample opportunity for melodrama, another feature of the romance stories in much shōjo anime. In many ways, the protective older brother becomes a perfect lover: he has always been there for the heroine, has always cared for and loved his younger sister with a love reinforced by family bonds; he will not go away easily because he is tied to the sister through the family unit, but is not, and never can be, a husband. In many mainstream shōjo titles, the true love is revealed early, and the plot involves the working out of relationship difficulties on a trajectory toward marriage, an exceptionally conservative trajectory. Drazen notes this feature of shōjo, claiming, 'They [girls] know – because they have been told, overtly and symbolically, for most of their lives – that their greatest destiny lies ahead: becoming not just a wife, but a wife and a mother' (2003: 129). In stark contrast, many of these incest-themed anime share a concern with deflecting marriage possibilities and deferring the acceptance of traditional gender roles – perhaps permanently – through the choice

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

of a brother as an intimate partner. In this way, these anime offer a story as transgressive to the norm.

While the few critics who discuss sibling incest in manga and anime are clear that these stories are fantasies not of incest but of romance, none consider more specifically what those fantasies seem to suggest to the girls who consume them. Toku (2007: 30) argues that while the romance of 'Shōjo manga is said to be a mirror of Japanese girls' and women's desires and expectations' in relationships, those desires do not translate to literal expectations. Moreover, Allison suggests Japanese popular culture stories of consensual incest should be considered 'less in terms of realistic probability and more in terms of desires and fantasies' (2000: 124). Thompson (2010) argues that while incest offers the ultimate titillation because it is the ultimate taboo fantasy, as a fantasy it is also even more dangerous and transgressive. While penetration by vampires and tentacles (common elements of anime pornography) 'may seem weird at first, they make it [the sex act] OK. As a friend in the manga industry said, "It's fantasy rape, which like fantasy violence doesn't count. Incestuous crushes are real, and therefore verboten"' (2010: online). The forbidden nature of incest fantasies, the pleasurable fear of thinking the forbidden, is at least part of what draws girls to these anime, these authors suggest. Or at least, what draws them *isn't* an interest in real incest.

However, to dismiss incest anime as merely reflecting fantasy desire for titillation is to ignore important aspects of real incestuous relations that might help in understanding girls' interest in this trope, and the reasons why media products exploring this trope have taken on a cult status; that is, a socially deviant transgression against gendered cultural expectations. In a culture where even today girls are expected, and indeed may feel pressure not only to marry but to have children, incestuous relationships undermine cultural expectations, because incestuous relationships are always already about sexual contact without marriage, since both cultural taboo and law prevent close family members from marriage. Moreover, if sibling incest is just a fantasy expression of girls' desire for relationships that are both taboo and exciting, they are nonetheless also fantasies that cannot

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

reproduce the gendered status quo, for they will never lead to marriage and its traditional roles for either girls or their chosen partners. Therefore, it is not their embrace of sibling incest that makes these heroines most perverse, most in defiance of cultural expectations; it is the act of choosing a culturally unfit partner whom they cannot marry.

In many ways, these narratives of consensual sibling incest offer readers a couple who will always be lovers outside the boundaries of acceptable sexual relationships – marriage, which in Japanese popular culture is typically constructed as a duty more than a pleasure, a relationship wherein adult men work and adult women are mothers (Jones, 2005). The pleasure of these anime for girls might be in the fantasy deferment of that future, in addition to if not instead of, a pleasure located in the titillation of a taboo sexual fantasy about a handsome and protective brother. As Jones suggests, any interest in sexual activity outside of procreational and heterosexual sex ‘demonstrates an interest in that type of sex’ (2005: 103) whereby women and girls are refusing to be passive in exploring their own sexualities, as opposed to simply accepting their culturally reinforced sex roles.

The problem, of course, is that actual incest and its cultural meanings put pressure on these stories and distort readers’ interactions with them. For example, we cannot divorce these fantasies of relationships from the reality that most real sibling incest grows from dynamics of domination and control. Therefore, we must think of these stories as both/and: a mirror both to potentially emancipatory fantasy and to the reality of domination and dysfunction in real girls’ lives. In their book, *Telling Incest*, Doane and Hodges write, ‘In our cultural moment, for example, the idea of incest as fantasy is often invoked to discredit the truth of narrations of incest . . . and finding a way around the familiar and debasing personae associated with the tellers: the liar, the seducer, the hysterical, and the victim.’ (2004: 2) Interestingly, the four roles Doane and Hodges delineate are nearly entirely absent from incest anime, and yet a variety of other characters, representing social constraints on the young couple, attempt to read their relationship through such frames.

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

Sibling Incest as Moral Decay and Family Decadence

While cultural anxiety exists about the impact of shōjo anime (and the manga from which it is often adapted) on actual girls' behaviour, subject matter and characters are varied and represent many kinds of girls; a wide array of anime for girls under seventeen depicts both extremely passive heroines and uncomfortably controlling and non-consensual relationships of various sorts, including incest. However, in shōjo, strongly negative scenes of sibling incest are relatively rare. Two negative examples from popular anime can be found in *Ceres: Celestial Maiden (Ayashi No Ceres)* and *Revolutionary Girl Utena (Shōjo Kakumei Utena)*. Unlike depictions in shōnen discussed earlier, where the incestuous relationship occurs in minor characters, the sibling incest in these two shōjo titles occurs in characters and scenes central to the plot.

In *Ceres*, the loving friendship between twins Aya and Aki is destroyed on their sixteenth birthday when their wealthy and amoral grandfather bestows the family's inheritance on Aki (in the form of awakening the reincarnated spirit of the family's progenitor who inhabits Aki's body), discarding (and attempting to kill) the girl-twin Aya. Aya's loving and beloved twin brother Aki, driven mad by supernatural forces, attempts rape in a particularly violent attack. In this anime, the attempted rape is used to demonstrate Aki's complete break with reality and his core self, and the extent to which his sister is isolated from anyone who might give her aid. But perhaps more importantly, the entire story may be read as questioning the primacy of the son in terms of inheritance and carrying the burden of the family line; in a very real sense, the story lays bare the possibility that patriarchy itself is a morally defunct proposition, one that inappropriately discards girls and overvalues boys.

Somewhat less violently, but perhaps more disconcertingly, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* depicts an uncomfortably almost-consensual ongoing relationship between the unusually passive Anthy and Akio, her controlling brother. In this anime, Anthy's passivity is central to the plot, is hyper-feminized, and is strongly contrasted with Utena's (the female protagonist's) masculine confidence. Anthy's brother uses her as a prize he offers aspiring heroes, in an effort to gain back his own lost power. He

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

uses his sister as an outright medium of exchange, again, literally enacting what Levi-Strauss (1975) suggests is the economic basis for the incest taboo – men can't marry their sisters, so in patriarchal cultures in which they still control their sisters' destinies they can trade their sisters for goods or services. Moreover, according to Katoni, '*Revolutionary Girl Utena* thus makes a mockery of conventional gender roles and narratives. It makes fun of the heroic heterosexuality and monogamy of traditional fairy tales such as Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, or Cinderella. Ultimately, from episode to episode, it is this queer couple that survives the series of duels—the mock prince and slave princess' (2006: 163). Even (perhaps especially) in these examples where the incest is portrayed as not consensual or in otherwise negative terms, the portrayal illuminates the constrained role of girls within patriarchy.

Brotherly Love: Stories of Incest as True Love

In contrast, the two anime/manga I discuss in more detail here, *Angel Sanctuary* and *Vampire Knight*, depict sibling incest in what is perhaps an even more transgressive way, in that it challenges the patriarchal underpinnings of traditional love and marriage, as it depicts love without even the possibility of marriage. Although I focus on the anime here, in a previous article about the manga, my analysis highlights some differences between the two media (Birmingham, 2010). These two anime, and their source manga, have three things in common that make them of particular interest: the sibling relationships are consensual, loving, and based on long-term and ongoing relationships. In addition, while the depictions are not sexually explicit, they clearly imply various kinds of sexual contact, always initiated by the sister, who is not portrayed as seducing, but merely in love. Finally, in both cases, the sexual activity is a substitution for marriage that the girl willingly forgoes for love.

Angel Sanctuary, first released in Japan in 2000 as an OVA directed by Kiyoko Sayama, is based on Kaori Yuki's 20-volume manga of the same name. Both are created for a teen audience. Although the 90-minute play time of the three episodes of the OVA only cover the first two volumes of the manga, no other director has taken on the uncomfortable story premise, consensual sibling incest, and an almost incomprehensible cast of hundreds. *Angel Sanctuary's* pseudo-Christian mythology

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

offers a world of fallen angels, heavenly politics, reincarnation, a multi-layered heaven and hell with no clear good or evil, but many seemingly baseless taboos among which incest is only one.

The story follows Setsuna Mudo, who viewers discover immediately is in love with his sister, Sara. Because Setsuna is not only the protagonist, but is nearly always the point-of-view character in most of the scenes he occupies, the viewer realizes quickly how much he wants his sister. After he saves her from a threatening situation and he carries Sara's seemingly unconscious body to her bed, he kisses her; she allows herself to be kissed, and their religious mother, as a witness vows to keep them apart to save Sara's soul (and already regards her son as irredeemable). Although the anime is a much-abbreviated version of the manga, the key scenes the director chose to incorporate all include the relationship between Sara and Setsuna, and the eventual consummation of their love in a hotel room.

The incestuous relationship Kaori sets up as a dyad between Sara and her brother Setsuna is played out as a more complex triad in the gothic *Vampire Knight*, which along with its sequel, *Vampire Knight Guilty*, comprises a 26-episode story arc. *Vampire Knight* is a far more mainstream and popular title than *Angel Sanctuary*, one that is easily available in the US dubbed into English via internet, cable, or DVD. The series, televised weekly in Japan in 2008-2009, tells the story of Yuki Cross, the 15-year-old protagonist and point-of-view character, who, after losing her memory as a five-year-old, is raised with an adoptive brother, Zero Kiryu by the headmaster of Cross Academy. The school houses a day-class of humans who share the campus with a night-class of vampires in an effort to prove that the co-existence of the two groups is possible. The leader of the night-class is Kaname Kuran, a beautiful older boy who is the object of Yuki's infatuation, who saved her life when a vampire attacked her ten years before, and is revealed to be her older brother. The anime effectively employs Matsuri's European gothic visual style, in the architecture of the crypts, classrooms, and dorms, as well as the gothic school uniforms. In both the anime and the manga, the central characterizations do not change. Yuki is warm, open and loving, and has loved Kaname since she can remember; he has also

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

treated her with a notable kindness for someone considered aloof by his peers. Similarly, Yuki pledged her love and care to Zero, nearly at their first meeting; as they have grown up, Yuki has made it clear that she will do anything to protect him.

Both *Angel Sanctuary* and *Vampire Knight* employ flashback scenes to establish earlier childhood interactions between siblings. Flashback scenes reinforce that a loving childhood bond led to the current romantic relationship. The scenes exist to demonstrate that the love relationships are authentic, deeply felt, and not coerced. Although these flashback sequences are more fully developed in the manga, they also reoccur like a refrain through each episode of *Angel Sanctuary*. In each scene, the child Setsuna protects his little sister Sara from harm or hurt. These flashback scenes mirror contemporary scenes in which Sara is threatened with sexual violence or harassed with sexual innuendo, and is saved by Setsuna's intervention. In each case, the impositions on Sara are sexualized, and the anime also illustrates contemporary examples of Setsuna's friends sexualizing Sara in their conversations. Setsuna's reaction suggests that he is the only one of them who sees his sister as a complete human being and not only an attractive object.

Flashback establishes similar circumstances in *Vampire Knight*, both the manga and anime, in which the older brother sibling protects his sister from sexualized violence. Every episode opens with a flashback—five-year-old Yuki being attacked by a vampire when Kaname intervenes. As in most vampire stories, the vampire's desire to share blood is sexualized, and the attack on the child Yuki depicts the bestial vampire in a tight frame, leering 'Are you lost, little girl? May I drink your blood?' Yuki responds with a tiny, but clear 'No,' before Kaname kills her attacker. Each time the flashback of this scene occurs (in several episodes), the viewer is given a little more information: Yuki's terror at her attack, Kaname's kindness, Yuki beginning a new life with the kind Headmaster Cross at Cross Academy, the child Yuki coming to love her saviour Kaname, and finally the realization that Kaname is one of the vampires she so fears.

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

In contrast, when Yuki meets Zero in episode one, Yuki is the saviour. A bloody and silent child Zero is brought to the academy, and an 11-year-old Yuki gently bathes the pale and frightened boy. Readers discover later that Zero was orphaned in this attack by a pure blood vampire. The vampire's unwelcome attack is framed as a sexual imposition. In episode three, again by means of flashback, Yuki comforts the child Zero as he claws at the healing wound on his neck, causing renewed bleeding and pain. He says, 'It feels yucky. I can still feel that woman here.' Later, when he discovers Kaname is a vampire, he stabs and attempts to kill him, saying, 'You smell the same as that woman.' Yuki's childhood relationship with her two 'brothers' is of being protected by one and protecting the other, but in both instances the anime replicates scenes of normalcy: Yuki and Zero bickering and laughing together, Kaname reading to Yuki and helping her learn to dress herself in a light-hearted and not sexualized scene. In both anime, the siblings share a history, and both Sara and Yuki are depicted in repeated scenes saying 'I love you, big brother' in scenes that carry no discomforting undertones.

As Leder suggests of siblings, 'They know us in a unique way during our childhood and share a history that can bring understanding and a sense of perspective in adulthood. Friends and neighbors move away, former co-workers are forgotten, marriages break up and parents die, but our brothers and sisters remain our brothers and sisters.' (1993: 3) In each iteration of the sibling relationship in these texts, the characters demonstrate love, protection, and a notion that their relationship is forever.

Even when Zero attacks Yuki (2008, episode 4), biting her too hard and drinking too much blood, all Yuki thinks is that he had suffered alone for four years, having not shared with her – his closest confidant – that he had become a vampire when attacked those years before. She intervenes before he can kill himself in his horror and remorse at what he has done, and understands that his long hatred of vampires (his family was one of famous vampire hunters) assures that he must now hate himself. Similarly, Setsuna is filled with horror and remorse that he might have sexual

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

feelings for his sister, and responds to those feelings by attempting to distance himself from Sara, telling himself he won't see her again.

In each series, the story's fantasy setting, a world so clearly not ours yet like ours, nonetheless establishes the menace and danger presented by patriarchy to little girls through the many moments of sexual imposition (usually by strangers) that these characters experience. As Suter (2009: 254) would argue, these texts both produce and contain dissent: they highlight the menace of patriarchy, while containing that menace within an existing patriarchal structure when the weak passive heroine is 'saved' by her elder brother. Although each brother refuses to protect his sister's sexual value as a commodity for exchange, in each story he is the one with the power to consent to (or refuse) the sexual relationship.

In neither of these anime is there any suggestion that the characters have a sexual relationship, although in each case they have fought against their shared desire for some time. Moreover, in both series the female protagonists clearly demonstrate through action and dialogue that, in contrast to depictions of real-world incest, they are neither victims nor seducers. By the end of *Angel Sanctuary*'s first episode, Sara declares her love for her brother (in the presence of their horrified mother); Setsuna, in an effort to protect his sister from his 'unnatural' feelings, denies that he feels love for his sister, suggesting instead that he 'was getting really horny' and wanted to 'get some from my little sister. I mean, you were right there.' But the viewer is privy to his thoughts, very different from the words he speaks, 'All I have to do is say the exact opposite of how I feel', suggesting that the impetus for the contact was not arousal, as he claimed, but the desire to be with the person he loves. The anime version of this scene follows the manga translation nearly word-for-word.

As the episode draws to a close, their mother comforts Sara, telling her she will meet an appropriate man with whom she can truly fall in love and be happy, but the reader/viewer knows Setsuna's thoughts on this matter; 'She will never meet a man who loves her more than I do; he doesn't exist.' Setsuna's love for Sara represents a love that is true and mutual, but Setsuna denies his love, unwilling to subject his

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

sister to the pain of being an outcast. Although he offers Sara the role of victim, she will have none of it. She is sad and angry that he has denied his feelings for her but declares her unwavering love. Setsuna considers himself deviant: 'I've had an earnest desire to make love to my real sister. I am weird, I am abnormal. I am condemned by my mother, by all of them.' In flashback, Sara gazes at the toy ring Setsuna gave her as a child, and he finally says aloud, 'Sara, I love you! I've always loved you.' And although the depiction of their intimacy is not at all explicit, they are shown in bed together in a hotel, where Sara murmurs 'Wait a moment', to which her brother responds, 'If I wait any longer I'll turn into a fossil.'

The melodrama of this angsty teen romance is perhaps its most salient feature, and the awkward overacting on the part of the American voice actors does little to mitigate that, but the first episodes of the story establish that the love between the characters is real, they have both fought it but, as Setsuna's friend Kira puts it, those people denying his love for Sara are 'smugly dispensing smart, but unoriginal moralistic cliché.' The incest taboo, in these anime, becomes one more way the world attempts to control teen sexual behaviour and impose patriarchal views of appropriate relationships and social expectations on girls.

The incestuous relationships in *Vampire Knight* are more complex because Yuki has two brothers who she loves. In addition, because the characters are vampires the sex act is conflated with the penetration of the bite and the sharing of blood. But the anime makes it clear that viewers ought to interpret these acts as equivalent. For example, in *Vampire Knight*, (2008, episode 4), Kaname responds to Zero's attack on Yuki as a lover would, with an attitude of sexual jealousy toward Zero, but also love for Yuki: 'I can't keep my composure when my dear girl has been pierced by someone else.' He reiterates twice within minutes Yuki's 'dearness' to him, reaffirming his love while he curses Zero for 'robbing' her. In the second season (2009, episode 5), when Zero confronts Kaname about information he might be with withholding from Yuki (that he is her brother), Kaname responds violently. He wants to kill Zero but won't, because he both needs Zero to protect Yuki and knows that hurting Zero would lose him Yuki. Kaname is aware of the bond between Yuki and

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

her brother, and will not risk losing her, though he clearly despises Zero, and especially despises him for being Yuki's 'first'.

Although sex is conflated with the vampire's bite in these cases, it is also clear the 'sex' between Yuki and Zero is taboo. Zero admits to the 'father' he shares with Yuki, 'You do know that I'm still drinking Yuki's blood?' Their father replies in an interesting way: 'Of course . . . Even despite the obvious pain, you both chose that path anyway. So I won't do anything for now, even if it is a forbidden act . . .' He suggests that he understands this act to be incestuous sex by calling it 'forbidden', but he also refuses to place Yuki in the role of either seducer or victim.

Yuki also explicitly refuses the role of victim when Zero offers it to her. She says to him, 'You think that I'm your victim, Zero? You're wrong. You're so naïve. Can't you see that I'm the one you can never escape from, Zero? I'm the one who has forced you to play along with my selfishness.' Not only does Yuki refuse the victim role, but she also reveals an important truth about siblings—they don't quite have their own pasts; childhood is shared with siblings. Her amnesia robbed her of one brother, Kaname, but fate supplied her with another, Zero.

When Yuki is finally bitten by Kaname and remembers her past, not only as Kaname's sister but also as 'the pure blood princess', the language becomes even more clearly sexual. Kaname says that Yuki is now his 'lover'; the scene occurs when Kaname flies through the windows of her bedroom and takes Yuki away in her nightgown. The next time viewers see them together, Yuki and Kaname are in bed and Yuki forces herself on top of him, drinking his blood as he moans, 'Yes, deeply.' Yuki replies, 'I'm afraid something is wrong with me because this whole time I've been in love with my brother.' Kaname asks, 'What's wrong with that?', kissing her. When Zero arrives, presumably to kill Kaname for turning Yuki into a vampire, Yuki stops him. Yuki loves both her brothers, and they each respect her enough to know that harming the other man would lose her. Both the manga and the anime texts repeat and reinforce that the relationships are consensual, the teen girl heroine is the

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

driver of both relationships, and that even her father cannot intervene because the partners 'chose' the relationship.

Neither *Angel Sanctuary* nor *Vampire Knight* offer blanket acceptance of brother-sister incest; in fact both texts make clear that their acceptance is of consensual love based on a girl's own choices. In both texts, other (nonconsensual) incestuous relationships are treated as disgusting. That Yuki's uncle (the true villain of the series) desires her is presented as creepy and horrifying, and his reminiscing about drinking the blood of Yuki's unwilling mother, his own little sister, is also presented as depraved. So all incest is not created equal, nor is all sibling incest acceptable in these worlds, for in fact, only the freely chosen relationships, not determined by the power to coerce, are treated as acceptable. Both Zero and Kaname understand that Yuki has a relationship with the other man, but neither forces her to choose between them.

In *Angel Sanctuary*, the somewhat confusing love relationship between twin angels Rosiel and Alexiel is depicted as powerfully taboo, and almost bringing about the end of the world. Therefore, the desire reflected in these narratives is not for an incestuous relationship, but for a mutual caring affection, and perhaps a questioning of weighty social mores, things that we might argue are constitutive of the teen reader's lurching march toward adulthood.

Both of these anime adaptations include a plot climax centered on exchanging vows and establishing the relationship's permanence. In *Angel Sanctuary*, a toy ring figures prominently in the story. Setsuna gives Sara the ring during childhood that has become a treasured item; in fact, she keeps it in a velvet-lined jeweler's box. The viewer understands that the ring functions as a symbol of the love vows this couple can never share publicly. Similarly, at the moment Sara makes the decision to leave with her brother, when he publicly yells to her that he loves her, she turns to her mother and says, 'Oh, mother, I'm sorry.' In her first act of adulthood, she takes down her hair, which had been in a school-girl pony-tail, pulls away from mother and thinks, 'Big brother, don't go. I don't need God's blessing, I don't need a white

Birmingham, Elizabeth *Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love*

bouquet. All I need is you.' She then runs from both her mother and airport police – showing that she has turned her back on the institutions of family, church, and law, rejecting the need for a wedding, and for the accouterment of being a bride: the ring, the wedding, and the bouquet.

After they consummate their vows, Setsuna takes his first step into adulthood, by taking responsibility for his actions in a way viewers haven't previously seen this character do: confessing to Sara that he had killed a man, but that his friend had taken responsibility for the act, and therefore he had to go back, and set the record straight. He leaves Sara with the choice of what she wants to do – stay with him or not. Sara, still lying in bed, says, 'I'm going to protect you just as you protected me.' While Sara shows a new strength with her promise to protect him, Setsuna corrects her use of the honorific, 'Big brother', telling her 'Call me Setsuna.' They have become not only lovers, but true peers, no longer siblings.

In *Vampire Knight*, the overt suggestions of three-way sex in the blood sharing, the BDSM in Yuki's control over Zero (with weapons and a magical chain), and Kaname's ever-creepier manipulation of both Zero and Yuki, make the play with incest seem one of the least deviant things about this teen girls' series. Certainly the model of love presented in *Vampire Knight*, like the one in *Angel Sanctuary*, offers girls pleasure in a fantasy romance – not a fantasy of incest, but a fantasy of mutuality, of love with a peer who they neither seduce nor play victim to; one with whom they may have sex but never marry.

There is certainly sometimes a desire to bracket off potentially culturally complex texts and ignore readings of potential transgressiveness because those texts are written for teen and pre-teen girls, whose interests are rejected as 'facile and banal' (Bode, 2010). Orbaugh concurs, suggesting that the connotation of the word 'shōjo' itself came to represent Japanese cultural anxieties about women's shifting roles: 'in the 1980s [it] signified a state of passivity, consumerism, commodification, narcissism, consumption without production, moral and ethical emptiness, and self-referentiality' (2003: 204). Girls could not be unaware of the concerns for their future

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

and the increasing pressure to maintain traditional gender roles, that is to reject the shōjo identity for marriage and children, not as a choice but as a cultural responsibility (Kinsella 1995: 249; Leheny 2006). As Leheny writes, increased social concern about the personal choices and public behaviours of young women made them become, in the popular press, a 'gendered symbol of a selfish generation that refuses its most basic responsibility of reproducing a nation' (2006: 40). Incest-themed anime are easily read as fantasy and critique that push back at that gendered social concern.

Vincent, writing about another variety of shōjo romance, yaoi, suggests, "every single phantasy", as Freud wrote, "is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality." While children are allowed their fantasies (in the form of play) [...] the[se] fans and authors [...] indulge their fantasies in public. In this, they have refused to grow up and accommodate themselves to an "unsatisfying reality" (2007: 76-77). Vincent calls this unwillingness to accommodate to gender expectations a 'juvenile intransigence' that he sees as the 'radical value' of these media for girls (2007: 77). In a very similar way, these incest plots offer girls a deferral of marriage and reproductive adulthood, while insisting on love and pleasure. Of course, these stories are not without cost, for they require that readers ignore that sibling incest, in our world, is most often another misuse of patriarchal power against women. These stories both evade and resist patriarchal categories and are contained by them.

The creators of these media are young women working in a powerfully masculine and traditional media industry, and the texts themselves represent not just a questioning of roles for girls, but more deeply question the 'naturalness' of mores and taboos that reinforce traditional femininity and dependence. Cultural mores and rules of conduct strictly inhibit the kinds of pleasures girls are able to seek and find in their lives as women. Allison explains that incest taboos help establish kinship, which in turn, generates the social exchange of women between and among men. Because men aren't allowed to have relationships with their own sisters, they must trade them to other kinship groups, assuring that 'women are the medium of an exchange conducted in terms of male authority and desire' (2000: 135). These television

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

fantasy worlds, where brothers are under no obligation to trade away their sisters to strangers, and girls embrace the freedom to avoid the nearly compulsory roles of marriage and mothering, certainly flirt with taboo and titillation. But what they offer girls is a chance to explore desires that are truly their own because they undermine one of the earliest and most universal taboos of patriarchy by suggesting that kinship might offer girls agency and choice rather than the object-role of a medium of exchange in a social contract they did not agree to take part in.

References

- Allison, A. (2000) *Permitted and prohibited desires: Mothers, comics, and censorship in Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Birmingham, E. (2010) 'No man could love her more,' in Steiff, J. and Barkman, A. (eds.), *Manga and Philosophy*, Chicago: Open Court Publishing.
- Bode, L. (2010) 'Transitional tastes: Teen girls and genre in the critical reception of *Twilight*', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24, 5, 707-719, Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost, viewed 13 February 2013.
- Church, D. (2011) 'Freakery, cult films, and the problem of ambivalence', *Journal of Film & Video*, 63, 1, pp. 3-17.
- Cornog, M. (2005) 'Non-Western sexuality comes to the U.S.: A crash course in manga and anime for sexologists', *Contemporary Sexuality*, 39, 3, p. 1.
- Cowie, E. (1992) 'Pornography and fantasy: Psychoanalytical perspectives', in Segal, L. (ed.) *Sex exposed: Sexuality and the pornography debate*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Doane, J. and Hodges, D. (2004) 'Introduction' in Doane, J. and Hodges, D. (eds.) *Telling Incest*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Drazen, P. (2003) *Anime explosion: The what, why, and wow of Japanese animation*, Berkeley, CA: Stonebridge Press.
- Gardener, R. (2008) 'Aum Shinrikyō and a panic about manga and anime,' in MacWilliams, M. (ed.), *Japanese visual culture: Explorations in the world of anime and manga*, London: M.E. Sharpe.

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

- Jones, G. (2005) 'Bad girls like to watch: Reading and writing ladies' comics', in Miller, L. and Bardsley, J. (eds.) *Bad girls of Japan*, New York: Palgrave.
- Kinsella, S. (1995) 'Cuties in Japan,' in Scov, L. and Moeran, B. (eds.), *Women, media, and consumption in Japan*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 220-254.
- Kotani, M. (2006) 'Metamorphosis of the Japanese girl: The girl, the hyper-girl, and the battling beauty,' *Mechademia*, Vol. 1, 162-169.
- Leavitt, G. (1990) 'Sociobiological explanations of incest avoidance: A critical claim of evidential claims', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 92, no. 4, 971-993.
- Leder, J. (1993) 'Adult sibling rivalry: Sibling rivalry often lingers through adulthood', *Psychology Today* Jan/Feb, [Online], Available: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199301/adult-sibling-rivalry> Accessed January 20, 2010.
- Leheny, D. (2006) *Think global, fear local: Sex, violence and anxiety in contemporary Japan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Levi, A., et al. eds. (2010) *Boys' love manga: Essays on the sexual ambiguity and cross-cultural fandom of the genre*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1975) *Elementary structures of kinship*. Bell and Von Struner, trans. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Lunning, F. (2011), 'Under the ruffles: Shōjo and the morphology of power,' *Mechademia*, Vol. 6, 3-19.
- Lunning, F. (2012) 'Cosplay and the Performance of Identity,' *Constellation*, vol. 20 [Online], Available: <http://www.quodlibetica.com/cosplay-and-the-performance-of-identity/> Accessed June 5, 2013.
- Mizunashi, A. 'Every incest manga, ever' *Baka-Updates Manga* [Online], Available: <http://www.mangaupdates.com/showtopic.php?tid=16039&page=1#post348888> Accessed 2 February 2010.
- Napier, S. (2005), *Anime for Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, New York: Palgrave.
- Orbaugh, S. (2003), 'Busty battlin' babes: The evolution of the shōjo in 1990s visual culture,' in Mostow, J., Bryson, N. and Graybill, M. (eds.), *Gender and power in the Japanese visual field*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 201-228.

Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media

Birmingham, Elizabeth ***Girls' Fantasies, Freedom, and Brotherly Love***

- Prough, J. (2010), *Straight from the heart: Gender, intimacy, and the cultural production of shōjo manga*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Shamoon, D. (2004), 'Office sluts and rebel flowers: The pleasures of Japanese pornographic comics for women,' in Williams, L. (ed.), *Porn studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 77-103.
- Shamoon, D. (2008), 'Situating the shōjo in shōjo manga,' in MacWilliams, M. (ed.), *Japanese visual culture: Explorations in the world of anime and manga*, London: M.E. Sharpe. 137-154.
- Shamoon, D. (2012), *Passionate friendship: the aesthetics of girl culture in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Suter, R. (2009), 'From Jusuheru to Jannu: Girl knights and Christian witches in the work of Miuchi Suzue,' *Mechademia*, Vol. 4, 241-256.
- Takahashi, M. (2008), 'Opening the closed world of shōjo manga,' in MacWilliams, M. (ed.), *Japanese visual culture: Explorations in the world of anime and manga*, London: M.E. Sharpe.
- Toku, M. (2007), 'Shojo manga! Girls' comics! A mirror of girls' dreams', *Mechademia* vol. 2, 19-32.
- Tompson, J. (2010), 'The other love that dare not speak its name.' *ComiXology*. [Online], Available: http://www.comixology.com/columns/manga_salad/ Accessed 15 June 2010.
- Vincent, K. (2007), 'A Japanese Electra and her queer progeny,' *Mechademia*, Vol. 2, 64-79.\
- Winge, T. (2006), 'Costuming the imagination: Origins of anime and manga cosplay.' *Mechademia*, Vol.1, 65-76.