

That's Way Gay: Negotiating Textual Gaps & Homoerotic Interpretation in Akira Amano's  
Katekyo Hitman Reborn!

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## Abstract

Most of the studies regarding *parody* dōjinshi – that is, comics created by non-professional artists, and based off of original manga or anime titles – tackle the revisionist tendencies of the texts towards traditional gender structures and notions of masculinity. However, it is important to remember that prior to any socio-political agenda that the authors may have, dōjinshi are, first and foremost works *for* fans and *by* fans, meant to entertain and pay homage to the original series before forwarding any message regarding the socio-cultural milieu that they arise from. Dōjinshi, then, can be studied in light of reader-oriented criticism, treated as the product of a reader’s active and participatory engagement with the original text.

Of course, reader-oriented criticism assumes that the text, through both the presence and absence of certain parts of narrative information, controls the range of possible meanings that a reader can eschew from its pages. In light of studying the homoerotic slants of the majority of *parody* dōjinshi today and how more homoerotic *parody* dōjinshi are produced for some titles than for others, we can then work with the assumption that some texts may lend themselves more easily towards a homoerotic interpretation than others. This paper uses Katekyo Hitman Reborn! – a popular shōnen manga series by Akira Amano – as an example.

## Introduction

One of the main differences between Western comics and manga, Japan’s equivalent, is the fact that unlike in Europe and America, where comics are classified in a set of genres that closely simulate traditional forms of literature, manga are classified according to both the age and the gender of its readers, with more ‘traditional’ genres serving as sub-genres within the

overarching categories of *shōnen* (boy's comics), *seinen* (men's comics), *shōjo* (girl's comics) and *jōsei* (lady's comics). This sort of distinction does, in one sense, make a marked difference on the content of the works and in the social function of the manga in question. Because each category has a very precise target market, editors and manga artists alike gear their works towards the tastes of their readers, adjusting the art, the dialogue, the characterization, the plot, the themes and other elements towards the sensibilities of the general audience. As the age and gender of readers have become increasingly heterogeneous in Japan, however, the categories have become both demographic and stylistic in nature (Kinsella 48).

Dōjinshi, on the other hand, are products of the so-called 'shadow culture' outside of the commercial industry, created by amateur artists and printed through small-time publishing houses. They can also be differentiated from manga on the level of content: where manga are categorized according to reader demographic and style, dōjinshi are more 'specialized' in their form, catering to different and highly specific interest groups of readers. Although some artists use dōjinshi as a means to produce original works that would otherwise not be published due to their content or to a lack of skill on the part of the author, the majority of the dōjinshi available to the public are classified as *parody*, described by Sharon Kinsella as "revised versions of published commercial manga stories and characters" (113). We note at this point that in spite of the classification, these re-renderings are not always specifically humorous in nature.

Scholars are particularly interested in the dōjinshi subculture for three reasons. First, the majority of dōjinshi – *parody* and original – are produced by women. Second, most *parody* have been based on leading shōnen manga stories serialized in commercial magazines. Last, a great number of *parody* dōjinshi produced today have a homoerotic slant to them, with the content

ranging from ‘innocent’ interaction to highly graphic portrayals of homosexual relationships between the main characters of the dōjinshi.

A lot of studies have been devoted to explaining why Japanese women (and, on a more global front, female fans in general) seem to be fascinated by homosexual relationships – or, more specifically, imagining the characters in the series that they follow engaged in homosexual relations with each other. Little research, however, has been done in observing how these women read the original text, or in studying the possibility that some texts may be more susceptible to homoerotic treatment than others due to the way they were written. Of course, studying this requires the use of reader-oriented criticism, and the main difficulty of this theory is the verification of claims. *Because* dōjinshi is a work produced by readers, however, it may be possible to treat dōjinshi as concrete evidence of the possible ways in which readers of a series may view and interpret the original text by studying both the content of the fan work and the factors contributing to its creation.

In summary, this paper aims to bring a more literary slant to the discussion of homoerotic dōjinshi by juxtaposing the source text with its dōjinshi derivatives in order to analyze the way through which dōjinshi authors encounter, engage and appropriate the original text to further particular interests. This will be done using reader-oriented criticism and claims from previous research done in fandom studies. The main subjects of this paper are Katekyo Hitman Reborn! (abbreviated as Reborn! for the remainder of this paper) and a sampling of some of the homoerotic dōjinshi derived from her work. This scholar has chosen Reborn! on the basis that there are perceived peculiarities in the text that may make it more susceptible to a homoerotic interpretation than other shōnen manga titles.

## Methodology

Reader-oriented criticism stresses the fact that the reader cannot be seen as a passive recipient of the text – instead, one must view the reader as an active producer of meaning. Furthermore, a text can no longer be regarded as a unified object with a single, determinate meaning, but “a fractured, unstable entity with plural and perhaps indeterminate meanings” (Regan 139). “The meaning of a text,” Regan says in his essay “Reader-Response and the Reception Theory”, “is never completely formulated, but rather ‘activated’ or ‘realized’ through the reader’s involvement. Texts have gaps or blanks... which the reader must endeavor to fill (141). Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser – two proponents of reader-oriented criticism – build upon this idea, claiming that meaning in literature arises from the convergence or interaction of text and reader (Regan 144). Fish’s critical method with regard to the textual gaps involves what he calls ‘interpretive strategies’: shared rules and conventions that function for reading in the same way that rules of grammar function for language (Regan 144). Iser views the textual gaps in light of the text as a framework of schematized aspects that must be actualized by the cognitive activity of the reader. To quote:

The literary work... [is] a *virtual* work, in the sense of its unrealized potential for meaning. It is the gaps and blanks of the text that give rise to communication in the reading process; the indeterminacy of the text increases the variety of communication possible. The reader’s viewpoint, however, cannot proceed arbitrarily. The blanks in the text both induce *and* guide the reader’s constructive activity, triggering off responses or ‘projections’ in the reader’s mind *and* simultaneously regulating or controlling the range and sequence of possible responses. (Regan 144)

Iser's point with regard to the role of the text as a regulator of the reader's act of interpretation cannot be stressed enough, and seems to work along the assumption that the text itself possesses certain "triggers" that premise particular interpretations over others. It then becomes important to identify these triggers in the source text through textual analysis.

The first step that this scholar took in her study was to perform a textual analysis on Reborn!, with special emphasis on the areas of ambiguity with regard to narrative information on the story, with an emphasis on the characters due to the particular interests of this paper. This scholar also attempted to identify any characteristics of the series that may serve as "triggers" that would fuel a homoerotic interpretation of the text on the side of the reader. She used other shōnen manga titles serialized in Shōnen Jump – the commercial weekly magazine that Reborn! is published in prior to the release of compiled volumes – as her point of comparison.

The second step that this scholar took was to peruse a sample of 284 *parody* dōjinshi using Reborn! as their source text. She analyzed them in the light of how these works may be viewed as applications of the interpretative strategies that their authors – readers of Reborn! – used in order to negotiate the textual gaps and ambiguities present in the original story. The analysis of these dōjinshi also affirmed or debunked any of the previous assumptions made with regard to the characteristics of Reborn! as similar to or different from other shōnen manga titles in Shōnen Jump. This was done in order to offer a tentative theory as to why Reborn! seemed to have a greater reception with regard to the production of homoerotic *parody* dōjinshi.

### **Katekyo Hitman Reborn!: A Brief Background & Analysis**

Reborn!, known in Japan as Katekyo Hitman Reborn! (literally translated as 'Home Tutor Hitman Reborn' in English) is a manga series written and illustrated by Akira Amano. It has

been serialized in Shōnen Jump since 2004, with over two hundred chapters in print at present. It is currently the tenth bestselling series of its home magazine, and has not dropped from the list since 2006. At this point, it is important to note that Shōnen Jump is the bestselling boys' manga magazine in Japan, boasting a circulation of over 2.7 million readers: this figure naturally excludes the readers that may have rented out issues of the magazine from shops, borrowed issues from their friends, or read discarded issues while in transit.<sup>1</sup>

At its most basic level, Reborn! appears to faithfully subscribe to the Shōnen Jump formula of Perseverance, Friendship and Victory. Something typical of shōnen manga is that the main character emerges triumphant from all the trials that come his way (Perseverance), and his reasons for fighting are always centered on protecting not himself, but his friends, his family, or his primary love interest (Friendship). The idea of battle and the battlefield, then, are romanticized as a means and place where one's individual abilities and strength of character are constantly tested against near impossible odds, and where the purity of one's resolutions – oftentimes fueled by the main characters affections for the people who matter most to him (Perseverance as a result of Friendship) – will ultimately shine through, triumphing over those with resolutions who are not as pure to his in comparison (Victory as a result of Friendship). The battlefield in question in Reborn! is that of the Italian underworld, and the characters forge lasting relationships through the connection of 'family', a central concept in the Italian mafia. A deeper textual analysis of the manga, however, reveals a number of key differences.

One of the first things that readers of Reborn! will notice is its art, and the way in which its artist renders her characters. It is normal for a shōnen series to have at least one or two

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Kinsella, Paul Gravett and other writers have mentioned that manga is seen as a disposable commodity in Japan: high-circulation magazines, much like Shōnen Jump, are often bought, read once, then left in the trash or in public venues for other people to pick up and read at their leisure. Gravett, in particular, emphasizes how much time the average Japanese citizen spends in commute – reading manga, then, becomes a form of airport fiction for these commuters, giving them something to do while they're heading for their destination.

*bishōnen*<sup>2</sup> characters – that is, young male characters drawn with androgynous or almost feminine features, portrayed without any notable physical flaws or any distinctly masculine characteristics. All of the main characters and a good number of the supporting cast in Reborn! are drawn as *bishōnen*, turning the exception to the rule into a norm. Portraying male characters as ‘perfect’ is a characteristic of shōjo manga, as means of reaching out to their readers: girls who are often disgusted with the opposite sex in general during puberty (Gravett 80), and would rather read about ‘ideal love’ rather than something close to what they encounter in real life.

Interestingly, the art of Reborn! was originally not as aesthetically pleasing to the female demographic of readers – the first sixty chapters of the series, for one, were more distinctly *shōnen* in their rendering of the characters. Chapter 61, however, heralded the first ‘major’ plot arc and introduced the series’ first *bishōnen* villain – a common trope in Japanese anime and manga. Previously introduced characters then received a visual “makeover”, and young male characters introduced after that particular arc of the manga were also rendered in a less masculine fashion. Whether this shift is deliberate on the part of the author or if it is a matter of individual style and an increase of skill remains undetermined, but it may be safe to say that the art of Reborn! appeals more to a female audience more than it would to a male one. Appendices A through D of this paper show a chronological progression of the portrayal of Tsuyoshi Sawada, the main character of the series.

Another point of difference is the treatment and usage of characters in the series. In more traditional *shōnen* manga, the main character is the only ‘round’ character in the story – while there are a few series that also create complex supporting characters alongside the hero of the story, most *shōnen* manga opt to surround their hero with archetypes and stock characters. Furthermore, antagonists and secondary characters are introduced without any buildup or

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<sup>2</sup> Literally translated as “beautiful boy” in Japanese.

preamble, and usually exist as a means to an end (i.e. a minor opponent for the protagonists to fight against, often in tandem with displaying a newfound skill to the audience). Antagonists and secondary characters in Reborn!, however, are nearly as complex as the protagonist and his closest friends. This is usually unheard of, as the particular motivations of antagonists and secondary characters in shōnen series are often left unexplained – in the final analysis, many of them are flat characters, often designed to follow particular stereotypes in Japanese culture.

Beyond the treatment and usage of characters, there are a remarkable number of chapters devoted to character development and introspection versus the number of chapters devoted to battles. It should be noted that a trend in a number of shōnen weekly titles is to stretch any combat sequence across a number of chapters, with the average being 2-5 full chapters per battle: this is both an adherence to the Shōnen Jump formula and a good marketing strategy on the part of the magazine, given the fact that chapters are serialized on a weekly basis. Combat sequences in Reborn!, however, usually average at about 1-3, and ‘minor’ combat sequences are usually relegated to a section of a chapter devoted to another theme entirely rather than made the focus of the chapter at hand. Barring that is the fact that nearly all of the battles that take place are always between principal characters, and battles involving the main hero and characters that exist only as a means to an end are few and far between. Reborn! is not the only title with this sort of take on combat, but it is certainly one of the few running at this moment.

In her thesis, Megan Harrell draws the distinction between the public or outer sphere, analogized as ‘interaction with the world’, and the private or inner sphere, analogized as ‘interaction within a relationship’, in narrative: it has been traditionally understood that the public sphere is masculine and the private sphere is feminine (10), and where shōnen manga have the tendency to focus on the public sphere in terms of character interaction, shōjo manga

dwell on the private sphere. It is impossible to make a final analysis at this point due to the fact that the story has not yet finished, but it would not be too far out to assume that Reborn!, for the moment, puts equal premise on both the public and the private spheres of narrative, balancing the focus on the internal world of its characters with the demand for a shōnen manga series to have as much action as possible. This is notable, especially in light of the fact that female fans, in general, are far more interested in character interaction and development than they are in other elements of a story they are following.

### **Katekyo Hitman Reborn!, Parody Dōjinshi & Fandom**

The first paragraph of the previous section already established the fact that Reborn! is an immensely popular series in its home country, and one of the ways in which one can measure a manga title's popularity is through the amount of parody dōjinshi that emerge using it as a basis. The Comics Market (abbreviated as Comiket for the remainder of this paper) is first and largest comics-related event in Japan, with a whole day devoted to the selling of dōjinshi. Given the sheer number of possible titles that non-professional artists can produce parody dōjinshi for, it is rare for a series to have its own category (and, in effect, its own section of the venue exclusively reserved for groups producing dōjinshi for it). That Reborn! was given its own category during 72<sup>nd</sup> Comiket is telling, and the number of participating dōjinshi circles<sup>3</sup> producing for Reborn! has increased from the initial 802 to 1,196 since 2005. Comparatively speaking, Reborn! has over twice or thrice the number of circles in several other Shōnen Jump titles who possess their own categories in the event, and currently holds the record for having the most number of participating circles across all Shōnen Jump titles.

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<sup>3</sup> Circles are the 'formal' term given to groups of artists or individual artists who produce dōjinshi, whether parody or original in nature.

Interestingly, while both the professional manga industry remains largely dominated by male artists and consumers, the non-professional sphere of *dōjinshi* production is largely controlled by both female artists and female consumers (McHarry). It was previously stated that *parody* often target *shōnen* manga stories, and something that characterizes these stories are their strong adherence to socially accepted gender roles, manifested in the traditionally feminine and masculine personalities for their characters. *Dōjinshi*, on the other hand, generally contain more radical revisions of socially acceptable masculinity (Harrell 6), with the first major subversion lying in the fact that the artists often portray the subjects of their work engaged in a homosexual relationship. Kinsella makes an interesting observation about *parody* manga:

*Parody* manga often makes light of the seriousness of the masculine heroes in commercial boys and adult manga series. While on the one hand favourite manga characters are positively celebrated, on the other hand, their authority and aloofness is punctured, by inserting scatological humour or embarrassing jokes about their physical desires and distresses. The overall effect of this type of naughtiness in *parody* manga is to make... characters... more fallible, allowing readers to feel more intimate towards them. ...Moreover in the case of... *parody*... this playful subversion is focused particularly on cultural items which contain strongly identified gender stereotypes. (120)

Kinsella adds that *parody* manga have given young women the avenue to express an ambiguous occupation with (alongside a deep uncertainty about) masculine gender stereotypes, which are typical to the characters in weekly manga magazines (121). *Parody* then expresses “the frustration” experienced by young readers who have found themselves “unable to relate to the opposite sex”, given a disjuncture between the expectations of men and the expectations of

women in contemporary Japan. “Men who persist in macho sexist behavior,” Kinsella concludes, “like that often depicted in boys and adults manga magazines, are gently ridiculed and rejected by the teenage girls involved in writing *parody* manga, or reading gay love stories” (124).

Other scholars point out the possibility that homoerotic stories appeal to women because gender roles in Japan are still very fixed, and the female readership of today is disillusioned and bored with traditional male-female relationships (Gravett 80) – a statement that alludes to Kinsella’s observations regarding *parody* manga. Still others state that these works are simply the equivalent of heterosexual and lesbian pornography for men, and it is not at all shocking for Japanese women to consume these works because, in general, pornography has not been as strongly compartmentalized in Japan as it has been in other countries (Kinsella 46).

Of course, these arguments are not exclusive to parody *dōjinshi* – these observations have also been noted with regard to original *dōjinshi*, and to the homoerotic manga produced by the commercial sector. What distinguishes parody *dōjinshi* is its status as a fan work, a product of a particular demographic of people with a keen interest in the source text at hand. In Understanding Popular Culture, Jonathan Fiske describes a fan group’s engagement with the text as active, enthusiastic, partisan and participatory (146-147) – fans have the tendency to go beyond simply reading the source text by seeking to produce their own interpretations of the story through the creation of their own works based off the original series. While there may be a deeper, underlying agenda to their interpretations of the text, it must be stressed that many fans involved in producing homoerotic fan works do so in order to entertain themselves; most of them concede that erotic pleasure “is central to their interest in the genre” (Jenkins). *Parody* *dōjinshi*, then, are created primarily for entertainment: a fact that should not be ignored, as it would therefore color the ways one can view the text at hand.

The unique nature of gender structures alongside the notions of gender in Japan cannot be ignored, but the status of *parody* dōjinshi as fan works must also be taken into consideration. Dōjinshi, then, must be viewed as the negotiation between three factors: the perceived agenda of female manga artists in general (positing an alternative view of masculinity versus the status quo while providing entertainment in the form of erotica), the desire to actively engage with the source text through the production of one's own creative work, and the desire to provide a means of entertainment for one's self and for other fans.

Dōjinshi must also be viewed within the framework of reader-oriented criticism, precisely because it is a fan work. Ambiguities in the source text, glaring absences in “necessary” information (textual gaps), typification on the part of the reader and emotional investment directed towards particular characters fuel particular readings of the text. Dōjinshi serve as the concrete manifestations of these interpretations, responding by presenting aspects of their reading of the text through the medium of the comic.

Reborn! is notable due to the perceived strength of the response that its audience has had to the original text, concretized in the number of homoerotic dōjinshi produced for the series. It is the title with the most number of artists producing homoerotic works using its text as their material, notwithstanding the fact that these numbers are already beyond the average count for artists producing works for shōnen titles in general. It seems naïve to attribute reception of this sort to the popularity of the work, and leads one to the conclusion that the manga appears to be more susceptible to a homoerotic reading than other titles due to the presence of characteristics that “trigger” that particular response, based on the expectations of the readers at hand. We have identified these characteristics in the succeeding paragraphs.

**Findings: Noting Textual Gaps and Peculiarities in Reborn!**

First, it is important to return to the title's attention to characters and character development, the already identified "private sphere" in the narrative. Beyond the fact that Amano's major characters – protagonists and antagonists alike – are relatively well-developed, there is also the fact that there are a good number of characters, each built differently from the other. This leaves readers with a wide range of characters whom they can invest their time in, either as casual readers (passive in their receiving of textual information) or actively engaged readers (producing their own interpretations of the characters they are interested in).

A related point to this characteristic is the presence of what this scholar would like to refer to as "two-faced" characters – that is, characters that can be interpreted in at least two different ways, with enough textual evidence to back up all of the possible interpretations. An example of this sort of character can be found in Takeshi Yamamoto, one of the main character's closest friends. He is portrayed as incredibly friendly throughout the series, and reputedly oblivious to the fact that he has been recruited into Tsuna's "family" – he constantly alludes to how he thinks that he is playing some sort of game, regardless of the very real injuries he receives. In Chapter 103, however, Tsuna's mentor describes Yamamoto as either "a remarkable idiot" or "a natural-born assassin", implying that Yamamoto may not be as ignorant or as nice as he appears to be. As there is enough textual evidence to support both claims, readers are then left to view Yamamoto either way in accordance to their tastes.

Second, while Reborn! is remarkably clear with regard to the plot, it is incredibly ambiguous when it comes to character relationships. The text has the tendency to provide very basic information about how any two particular characters or group of characters know each other, or why they behave a certain way around each other, but it does *not* give specific details,

leaving a lot of room for creative interpretation. In addition to this point, Amano structures the manga such that all of the major protagonists and antagonists in the story have met every *other* major protagonist or antagonist – or have heard of him or her – at least once in the story, thus creating even *more* ambiguities for readers to look into.

An example of this can be found early on in the manga, specifically in Chapter 16. Tsuna, Gokudera and Yamamoto – the three main protagonists – have a first-hand and extremely violent encounter with Kyouya Hibari, the head of the Disciplinary Committee of their school. Oddly, Yamamoto is the only one who knows who Hibari is, in spite of the fact that he should technically be a well-known figure in this school. Some readers may pass this off as harmless, but other readers may choose to speculate on why Yamamoto, specifically, is the one who identifies Hibari and if this is supposed to be significant in one way or another.

Another example of this can be found in the relationship between Dino Cavallone – an important supporting character – and Squalo Superbi, one of the villains during the second major plot arc in Reborn!. This pair is first seen together in Chapter 84, when Squalo was sent to attack one of the other supporting characters in the manga; Dino intervened, addressing Squalo in a personal and rather familiar tone. Later on, in Chapter 131, it is revealed that Dino saved Squalo's life after his battle with one of the protagonists. Although the canon text explains Dino's actions as his means of gathering information on the antagonists, questions regarding exactly how Dino and Squalo knew each other or why it had to be Dino saving Squalo specifically remain unanswered. Readers who are interested in their pairing are forced to turn to supplementary texts<sup>4</sup> in order to learn more, but information remains sketchy nonetheless.

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<sup>4</sup> Reborn!, like many other manga series, has guide books that provide in-depth information with regard to the plot, the characters and other aspects of the story. It also has Drama CDs and a series of novels that describe or dramatize extra scenes beyond whatever occurs in the actual manga.

Third, the concept of time travel opens up a whole new playing field both for plot and for character interaction. Time travelling was originally restricted to one character, whose weapon switches whoever is shot by it with his or her self from ten years into the future for five minutes. The concept is vastly expanded later on, as the future becomes the setting of the third major plot arc in the story: the protagonist is abruptly transported into the future in order to figure out how his future self was killed, and to stop that event from happening. Suffice to say, the protagonist is not the only one who ends up transported into the future later: many of the other members of the cast are also brought in from the past, and interact with the future versions of their companions. Suffice to say, this offers a new and dynamic for the readers of the comic, as encounters between the younger versions of the characters with the future versions of their friends complicate the established equilibrium between the characters, leaving room for additional complexities.

Fourth, Reborn!'s status as an action manga allows it to focus on rather romantic notions of the battlefield and the intimacy that comes with close combat. The element of conflict binds characters together, breeding special relationships between pairs or groups of characters. Reborn! takes this theme a step further through the recurring motif of training, fostering mentor-student relationships between different pairs of characters: this plot device is integral to all of the major plot arcs of the manga, but it is emphasized the most during the second major plot arc, where the protagonist and his six Guardians are paired off with suitable mentors in order to fight off the main villain of the arc and his own set of Guardians. Strangely, the most notable relationship in this arc does not involve the main character: it involves Dino and Hibari, characters who, prior to the second major plot arc, remained mostly on the fringes of the action.

From his first appearance early on in the series, Hibari was established as something like a wildcard: although circumstances would occasionally make him fight with the protagonists, he

was uninterested in the main protagonist, and always acted independently from the other characters. During the second major plot arc, however, it became obvious that the group needed his strength, and Dino was sent to “train” him to become one of the main character’s Guardians. Hibari eventually shows up at a crucial point in the story as one of the protagonist’s “allies”, although he continuously insists that he is not interested in them. In the third major plot arc, however, the protagonist’s encounter with Hibari’s future self reveals that Hibari formally joined their group – he even has a hand in training the main protagonist to fight, in a very similar fashion to how Dino trained his younger self in the past. Dino’s absence, however, remains glaringly obvious: he is only vaguely alluded to in Chapters 209 and 210. There is a great amount of speculation with regard to just how much of a role he played in getting Hibari to aid the group. Readers may naturally interpret their relationship, then, to be remarkably close, as evidenced in some of the *dōjinshi* about their pairing.

Fifth, the aesthetic conventions of Reborn! – more specifically, the androgynous, almost ‘feminine’ way in which most of the characters are rendered – blends with the expectations that a reader would usually have with a *shōjo* or boy’s love manga title rather than a *shōnen* title. Its appearance, coupled with the odd amount of attention it pays to the private sphere of the narrative (odd, at least, for a *shōnen* manga title), may make some readers treat it more like a *shōjo* or boy’s love title than the *shōnen* title it is in name, thus making them more comfortable with interpreting the source text with a homoerotic slant to it.

The next section of the paper will discuss some of the ways in which *dōjinshi* respond to the characteristics listed above.

**Findings: Negotiating Textual Gaps in Reborn! through *Parody Dōjinshi***

One of the strategies that *parody* dōjinshi artists develop in order to negotiate textual gaps is by building on the ambiguity of the canon text: Harrell, in particular, observes how dōjinshi generally tend “not to borrow too heavily from events in canon”, and are “largely set in either domestic settings, or in situations of highly casual and mundane interactions between characters” (10). This effectively cuts them off from the plot-driven “public sphere” of the narrative and focuses instead on the “private sphere” of the relationship. “It is clear”, she adds, that the story is first and foremost about the *relationship*, and not really about any canon events that may be occurring at the same time” (10). The majority of the Reborn!-based *parody* dōjinshi that this scholar has read were written in this fashion, involving the characters interacting in various parts of the school, in their homes or around the town where the story takes place.

At this point, one must consider the fact that while Reborn! as a whole may be more susceptible to a homoerotic reading than most manga titles, this does not mean that all of the relationships between the characters can be eschewed as homoerotic automatically. It may be possible to make a distinction between “obvious” and “obscure” pairings, the former being pairs of characters who are more susceptible to being interpreted as homosexual in the reader’s eyes and the latter being pairs that require a little more thought or ingenuity on the part of the reader before the reader interprets them in a homoerotic light. Personal tastes and preferences along with emotional investment on the part of the reader play an important role in determining what are “obvious” triggers, vis-à-vis the “obscure”. Suffice to say, canonical logic or textual evidence is not always important.

Conversely, the story lines of a few dōjinshi titles intersect heavily with canonical narrative, seeking to explain ambiguities with regard to their characters of interest by offering an alternative viewpoint of the events. A dōjinshi titled “Shall We Fall in Love?”, for example,

accurately parallels events in the second major plot arc of the story, intersecting them with scenes that cover the developing relationship between two of the characters, seeking to explain exactly why the younger one in the pair elects to help the main protagonist and his group out. The author, of course, alludes to his “mentor” being the reason why he aids them. There is also a three-part *dōjinshi* revolving around another pair in their younger years, seeking to explain how they became friends and the circumstances that led to their tension in the canon text.

The third and last strategy that *dōjinshi* artists employ is a complete departure from the narrative by providing the characters with an alternative setting that would allow the artist to indulge their personal fantasies. Some of these settings are based off of other narratives, such as fairy tales, popular films or other manga series. One of the *dōjinshi* titles that this reader has encountered involved placing two of the characters in the Meiji Period of Japan, situating one as a member of the mafia and another as a male prostitute. Yet another rendered two of the characters as anthromorphs<sup>5</sup>, and basically retold the story of their friendship in the form of a fairy tale. Yet another was a parody of the popular movie “Mr. & Mrs. Smith”, aptly renamed “Mr. & Mr. Hitman”.

As illustrated above, it is important to note that the interpretations that the creators of these *dōjinshi* have with regard to source text do not always follow the logic presented by the canonical narrative – this stands in direct contrast, we note, to Iser’s idea of the text controlling the range of possible meanings that one can skew from the text. This is because of the fan work element present in *dōjinshi*: regardless of the “triggers” present in the source text, the fan’s interest in the character may override her viewpoint regarding a pairing, making her premise particular characters in relation to her favorite rather than characters who would, following

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<sup>5</sup> Anthromorphs refer to the rendering of people as half-human and half-animal. The most popular example are the so-called *neko-mimi* in various anime and manga series: people with cat ears and a tail.

canonical logic, be “better matched” with the character she is interested in. Of course, in light of reader-oriented criticism, this can be viewed more positively as an alternative and creative interpretation of an aspect of the source text.

## Conclusion

*Parody* dōjinshi, like other types of fan work, have remained on the fringes of scholarly studies, and opinions with regard to their value as a literary text remain mixed. This paper, however, has established that dōjinshi are important in the realm of reader-oriented criticism, as they may serve as a concrete reference towards how readers actively engage a text and produce their own meaning, presenting these interpretations in a creative work. This effectively eliminates the principal difficulty of performing reader-oriented criticism, as much of the claims remain in the level of the subjective with minimal textual back-up.

One of the most interesting observations regarding *parody* dōjinshi is that they do not only often use shōnen manga titles as their source text, but are also homoerotic in nature. These works function separately from the main narrative of the story, focusing the attention away from the characters as they are engaged with the ‘world’ to the characters as they are engaged with each other, in a ‘relationship’. Some of these stories are explicit in their content, and contain much more radical revisions of socially acceptable masculinity. This may not be unique within the commercial manga industry, but it is important to note that such subversions are often relegated to niche genres (Harrell 6). This stands in direct contrast to how the boy’s love genre and other homoerotic stories dominate the dōjinshi market as a whole.

Scholarly attention is usually directed towards establishing the reasons behind the radical revisions, and point towards several factors, the first being that gender structures in Japan remain

rigid and therefore oppressive towards women. Of course, while this factor cannot be ignored, it is important to note that *parody* dōjinshi are products of a demographic of fans. Hence, socio-political agendas remain in the background of a larger concern: the desire to produce creative works as a tribute to a series of interest (specifically towards the author's favorite characters in that series), and the desire of the author to provide entertainment both for one's self and for one's peers, using the common ground of the source text as material.

Reader-oriented criticism postulates that the text is an abstract set of schemata whose meaning can only be actualized through the cognitive activity of the reader. One can then say that ambiguities in the source text, outright textual gaps, typification on the part of the reader and emotional investment directed towards particular characters fuel particular readings of a source text: dōjinshi are the concrete manifestations of this process. Of course, this would assume that some texts are more susceptible to a particular reading – in this case, a homoerotic reading – than others. Reborn! was selected as an example due to its reception; it was clear that the text lent itself towards a homoerotic reading, as a comparable number of readers sought to pursue such an interpretation of the source text over other shōnen titles.

Fandom studies have continuously struggled for legitimacy in the academic field, and most of the scholarly work continues to take the form of surveys and ethnographs – blending fandom studies with literary criticism and theory has proven itself to be a difficult process. Bridging the gap, however, may help in changing the reception towards fan works in general, as many of the concepts introduced in this paper may possibly be applied towards fanfiction, an exclusively textual medium. Furthermore, it lends more literary strength towards reader-oriented criticism, providing a possible means for reader-oriented criticism to be evaluative rather than descriptive at least in terms of discussing fan works.

Another thing to consider is Reborn! as a manga title, separate from the *parody* dōjinshi using it as source material. Is it fair to say that the *parody* dōjinshi alone forward an alternative view of masculinity and gender structures? Reborn! itself does not follow the standard conventions of a shōnen manga in several aspects, and parts of it may be received as a shōjo or boy's love manga by readers, hence fueling the homoerotic interpretations of a good number of the title's fans. Perhaps a more in-depth textual analysis of Reborn! is in order, juxtaposed against the more "traditional" shōnen manga titles serialized in Shōnen Jump. Given the importance of manga as a literary form in Japan and the fact that Reborn! is published commercially, it may be indicative of a move towards revising gender structures as a whole, giving a voice to the women who seek to change popular notions of sexuality in their country.

## Appendix

### APPENDIX A & B



The picture on the left is taken from the first arc of the manga, when the chapters were episodic in nature. The picture on the right is from the third major plot arc, at least one hundred chapters after the previous picture was drawn. There's a marked difference in the character's appearance, especially with regard to the face and hair. It might also be interesting to note that in the earlier part of the manga, Tsuna is usually dressed in his school uniform – this changes after the first major plot arc, where he is usually dressed in casual wear.

### APPENDIX C & D



The picture on the left shows the main character in his Dying Will Mode, which is the earliest manifestation of his abilities: close attention must be given to his almost comical appearance. The picture on the right, however, is his Hyper Dying Will Mode, an ability he develops during the first plot arc of the story. This second “form” of the main character has remained as his primary ‘battle mode’ since the first plot arc – the plot explains this move off as his second “form” being stronger than his first. On an aesthetic level, however, the main character's Hyper Dying Will Mode is a lot more visually appealing to a female audience.

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