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Turning a Man's World into a Woman's World: Male/Male Erotic Fiction as a Tool for Female Readers and Writers to Create Quasi-Egalitarian Experiences within a Gendered Society

Emmi de Vries

Why do females who identify as heterosexual write and/or read male/male erotic fiction? The goal of this paper shall be to highlight one explanation of the appeal this genre holds as a form of entertainment for some, while certainly not all, of its female readers and writers. It will be argued that the key to understanding the genre's appeal for these women is not the homosexual content of the narratives. Rather, male/male erotic fiction, with its challenge to binary and hierarchical gender roles, is used by them to dabble in privileges traditionally reserved for men and thus as a tool to create quasi-egalitarian experiences for them within a gendered society.

The central question of this paper – or some variation thereof – has been asked many times and continues to be asked by researchers and non-academics alike. While there seems to be agreement among the authors of the research consulted for this paper that a large percentage of the readership of male/male (m/m) erotic fiction is female and identifies as heterosexual, a literature review by Bruner shows how it is very challenging to gain accurate demographic data on the readership of m/m erotic fiction.¹ The most recent quantitative data used for this paper was collected by Bruner during a study of slash fanfiction communities on Facebook.² 36 out of 40 survey respondents in her study identified as female and 27 out of 40 as heterosexual.³ An earlier study among readers

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¹ J. Bruner, 'I "like" slash: the demographics of Facebook slash communities', *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, Paper 170 (2013) 14-17, Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18297/etd/170> [Accessed: 10 February 2016].

² Bruner, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

and writers of English-language Boys' Love manga found that 89% of the survey participants were female, 47% identified as heterosexual, and 25% as bisexual.⁴

However, even with the focus limited to this specific reading population, no single reason has emerged which captures the motivations of the entire female, heterosexual readership of male/male erotic fiction. Indeed, there seems to be more than one purpose for the genre as gay romance author Ally Blue illustrates in her assessment that 'if you asked ten different women, you'd get ten different answers'.⁵ Thus trying to find any reason applicable to all women who enjoy m/m erotic fiction is not the purpose of this paper. The present argument shall merely highlight one explanation for the interest of part of this specific demographic in the male/male erotic fiction genre. In addition, it should also be noted at this point that any allusion to women's interest in m/m erotic fiction refers to the genre as a whole rather than to specific kinds of stories. Sexual fantasy is highly subjective⁶ and different women might choose to read and write very different stories for their entertainment. However, it is the common theme of a (sexual) relationship between two men that is of interest in this essay.

There are also several technical terms employed in this paper that need defining before any arguments can be put forward. While the term male/male erotic fiction will denote any fictional narrative whose central focus is an erotic and/or romantic relationship between two male protagonists, there will also be references made to more specific sub-genres throughout the paper. These genres, which one can consider as falling into the broader category of m/m erotic fiction, are Japanese Boys' Love manga and 'Western' slash fanfiction.

Boys' Love manga (BL) is an overarching label derived from the Japanese term *shōnen'ai* (boys' love) and is commonly employed for comics with male homosexual story lines targeted at a female audience.⁷ BL, as understood in this essay, shall also include works

⁴ D. Pagliassotti, 'Reading Boys' Love in the West', (2008) 5:2 *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*.

⁵ G. Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance I* (LR Press, 2012), loc. 2093, Accessed via Kindle. Available at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/kindle-ebooks> [Accessed: 7 January 2016].

⁶ J. Russ, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Feminist Essays* (The Crossing Press, 1985), 89.

⁷ K. Saito 'Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women's Male-Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan', (2011) 6:1 *Mechademia*, 171-191, 172-73.

sometimes denoted separately as *yaoi* (= no climax, no point, no meaning)⁸ which emphasize sex, usually at the expense of a carefully developed plot.⁹ There has been, and continues to be, much discussion about the terminology used and what to include under each of the various Japanese terms.¹⁰ Moreover, there has been significant change within the different genres over the years.¹¹ However, the term Boys' Love seems to best encompass the kind of fiction this essay is focused on.

Slash fanfiction (slash) is a sub-genre of fanfiction where perceived homosocial undercurrents in popular media inspire the creation of prose stories about romantic and/or sexual relationships between two (originally heterosexual) characters.¹² These 'pairings' are usually identified by a virgule (or slash), which denotes the homosexual content to the reader.¹³ Just as with BL, there are many different types of slash with an infinite amount of settings and varying levels of eroticism,¹⁴ including the category of PWP ('Plot what plot?' or 'Porn without Plot'), which is roughly equivalent to the Japanese *yaoi*.¹⁵

Although there are some stylistic differences between the two genres, slash and BL are nevertheless comparable phenomena¹⁶ and will thus be used to find common themes applicable to m/m erotic fiction more broadly. However, it should be mentioned that research on 'Western' writing has mostly focused on fanfiction while research on Japanese works has included both original works and *dōjinshi* (fanfiction).¹⁷ Therefore, while the findings might also be applicable to women who read and write commercial works in the genre of gay romance, there is a definite need for future research in this area.

⁸ C. Camper, 'Yaoi 101: Girls Love "Boys' Love', (2006) 23:3 *The Women's Review of Books*, 1.

⁹ M. J. McLelland, 'No Climax, No Point, No Meaning? Japanese Women's Boy Love Sites on the Internet', (2000) 24:3 *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 274-291, 277.

¹⁰ Saito, 172-73.

¹¹ Camper, 1.

¹² B. Hansen, 'The darker side of slash fanfiction on the internet', in A. Mousoutzanis and D. Riha (eds.) *New media and the politics of online communities*, (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 52.

¹³ Hansen, 52.

¹⁴ Bruner, 10-11.

¹⁵ McLelland, 277.

¹⁶ Saito, 173.

¹⁷ Ibid.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE GAY!

Since the homosexual aspect of these narratives is a defining characteristic of m/m erotic fiction, it appears logical, at least on the face of it, to look for the reason why women enjoy the genre in its portrayal of homosexuality. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of participants seemed to be in support of gay rights among both the Facebook slash community surveyed by Bruner¹⁸ and the BL community surveyed by Pagliassotti¹⁹. However, there were still participants among both groups of readers and writers who fantasize about male/male sex and love for enjoyment but disapproved of gay marriage (in the case of the BL community)²⁰ and gay men serving openly in the military or adopting children (in the case of the slash community).²¹

A similar, seemingly paradoxically, observation can be made with regards to the content of both slash and BL stories. In slash stories, the authors often insist that their protagonists are not gay but simply could not help to fall in love with one particular person of the same sex,²² while many BL authors have their characters actively and vocally insist that they are not gay and gay politics are often avoided.²³ Moreover, gay clubs and gay men are sometimes even portrayed as perverted in BL.²⁴ This denial of homosexuality has been considered a sign of homophobia by both, other fans and academics.²⁵ However, past studies demonstrate how this may not do the role of homosexuality in BL and slash justice. Akatsuka argues in his essay on BL that the disavowal of homosexuality is meant to create ambiguity with regards to the sexual and gender identity of the character – and thus to allow for multiple interpretations by the readership – rather than an expression of homophobia.²⁶ However, he also points out

¹⁸ Bruner, 52-53.

¹⁹ Pagliassotti, 2008.

²⁰ Bruner, 52-35.

²¹ Pagliassotti, 2008.

²² S. Green, C. Jenkins & H. Jenkins, 'Normal female interest in men bonking: Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows' in C. Harris & A. Alexander (eds.) *Theorizing fandom: Fans, subculture and identity* (Hampton, 1998), 9, 22-24.

²³ Camper, 2

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Green *et al.*, 22-24.

²⁶ N. K. Akatsuka 'Uttering the Absurd, Revaluing the Abject: Femininity and the Disavowal of Homosexuality in Transnational Boys' Love Manga' in A. Levi, M. McHarry & D. Pagliassotti

that while this use of homosexuality is neither pro-gay nor homophobic, the real issue is that BL fails to represent homosexuality as a real-world social identity with serious limitations, anxieties, and dangers attached, and thus marginalizes these issues.²⁷ He therefore expresses disapproval with regards to fictional works where readers or writers consume and produce cultural products which portray homosexuality but are not necessarily anti-homophobic.²⁸ More research would be needed to determine the extent of the adverse consequences of this portrayal of homosexuality but also to investigate potential positive effects of BL, and m/m erotic fiction more broadly, on attitudes towards homosexuality.

Jung, an academic and slash writer herself, stresses how slash is a diverse and ever-changing genre and how there has been a push to portray 'real' gay men, gay culture, and 'realistic' gay sex.²⁹ Curiously, this has not met the approval of all fans, some of which fear a more realistic portrayal might take away from their enjoyment of the genre.³⁰ This observation from Jung corresponds to Bruner's survey results where only 19% of her participants said they engaged in slash activities to express their political views about homosexuality.³¹ Another interesting finding linked to this was reported by Pagliassotti. 93% of the BL readers and writers who participated in her survey reported reading *yaoi* and *shōnen-ai* but only 24% reported reading *yuri* and *shōjo-ai* (the female/female equivalent of the BL categories).³² All of this leads the careful observer to conclude that for the women who read and write the genre, m/m erotic fiction is not primarily about homosexuality.

(eds.) *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-cultural Fandom of the Genre*, (McFarland & Company, 2010) 159-176.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ S. Jung, 'Queering Popular Culture: Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fan Fiction', (2004) 8 *Gender Forum Gender Queeries*, 11-12. Available at: <http://genderforum.org/fileadmin/archiv/genderforum/queer/jung.html> [Accessed: 10 February 2016].

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bruner, 50.

³² D. Pagliassotti 'Better than romance? Japanese BL manga and the subgenre of male/male romantic fiction' in A. Levi, M. McHarry & D. Pagliassotti (eds.) *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-cultural Fandom of the Genre* (McFarland & Company, 2010), 59-83.

IT'S JUST FOR FUN!

But if it is not about homosexuality, what is the use of m/m erotic fiction as entertainment about? There has been a lot of research into this and different theories have been advanced on why females read and write m/m erotic fiction but many of them fail to give adequate attention to the statements of the female readers and writers in question as to why they enjoy the genre.³³ The top three reasons given by slash fans in Bruner's Facebook survey were that they do it for fun (97%), because they find the characters in their favorite pairing attractive (89%), and to relax (72%).³⁴ Blair reports on a survey where the most received comment from BL readers was that they simply found BL hot.³⁵ While these reasons certainly cannot be ignored,³⁶ what the majority of them have in common, is that they do not go beyond the surface of what it is that causes slash or BL to be fun or relaxing or even hot (to heterosexually identified readers).

Therefore, the question remains why these women would choose this particular genre as opposed to, or perhaps simply in addition to, other forms of fictional entertainment. From a review of the research already conducted in this area, it is proposed here that there is an underlying cause for female readers and writers to enjoy m/m erotic fiction. It will be argued that female readers and writers derive enjoyment from the opportunity to dabble in privileges traditionally reserved for men in gendered societies by creating quasi-egalitarian experiences through the reading and writing of m/m erotic fiction.

CREATING EGALITARIAN EXPERIENCES

Male/male erotic fiction is attractive to women because it provides them with the opportunity to imagine, and thus vicariously experience, relationships based on mutual

³³ Bruner, 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵ M. M. Blair "'She Should Just Die in a Ditch': Fan Reactions to Female Characters in Boys' Love Manga' in A. Levi, M. McHarry & D. Pagliassotti (eds.) *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-cultural Fandom of the Genre* Jefferson (McFarland & Company, 2010), 110-125.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

trust and egalitarian values.³⁷ The nature of the relationship is what matters more to the female readers or writers of the genre than the gender/sex of the protagonists.³⁸

Firstly, there is a notion of comradeship and equal ability within (fictional) m/m relationships. In slash, the protagonists usually share an adventure and maintain a non-hierarchical partnership.³⁹ Authors take great care to create egalitarian relationship dynamics in the different aspects of their stories from decision making to dress style, physical attractiveness, financial security, and, of course, sex.⁴⁰ In BL, too, the idea of male friendship based on comparable natures and levels of ability is translated into an ideal romantic relationship that is mutually caring.⁴¹ Underscoring this is the concept of androgyny. Characters with mixed gender attributes are used to override the dichotomy between male and female to present human beings outside these strict binary, and usually hierarchical, gender roles.⁴² Androgyny here is not meant as a loss of masculinity or simply a feminization of the male protagonists but rather a psychological androgyny with regards to gender, which calls into question the rigid boundaries between masculinity and femininity.⁴³ This fluid gender identity is not only represented by characters with mixed feminine and masculine attributes but also by the reader's or writer's ability to adopt different gender roles by, for example, identifying with both the *uke* and *seme*⁴⁴ in BL. When asked in a survey by Pagliassotti whether they identified

³⁷ A. Kustritz, 'Slashing the Romance Narrative', (2003) 26:3 *The Journal of American Culture*, 371-384.

³⁸ P. F. Lamb and D. Veith 'Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines' in D. Palumbo (ed.) *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature* (Greenwood Press, 1986), 236, 242.

³⁹ C. Salmon and D. Symons, 'Slash fiction and human mating psychology', (2004) 41:1 *The Journal of Sex Research*, 94, 99.

⁴⁰ Kustritz, 277.

⁴¹ Saito, 180, 183.

⁴² Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1209.

⁴³ H. Jenkins *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (Routledge, 1992), 218.

⁴⁴ The *seme* (from the Japanese term *semeru* = 'to attack') is the active partner during anal sex while the term *uke* (from the Japanese *ukeru* = 'to receive') refers to the passive partner. These terms often also reflect the status of the individuals within the relationship more broadly and give an indication of the gender attributes often ascribed to them, where the *seme* is more masculine and the *uke* more feminine. See Tan, Bee Kee 'Rewriting Gender and Sexuality in English-Language Yaoi Fanfiction' in A. Levi, M. McHarry & D. Pagliassotti (eds.) *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-cultural Fandom of the Genre*, (McFarland & Company, 2010), 126-156.

more with the *seme*, *uke*, or neither, the responses were roughly evenly distributed among the three options.⁴⁵

Secondly, there is a notion that both partners have equal value within (fictional) m/m relationships. Saito suggests a shift in BL relationships from the traditional relationship model between a (male) subject and a (female) object of love to one with a subject of love and a subject of being loved.⁴⁶ This is often symbolized in the depiction of anal sex. Anal penetration is usually framed as a gift and expression of love and trust from the submissive partner to the dominant one and, therefore, increases rather than diminishes the value attached to the individual being penetrated.⁴⁷ Akatsuka sees in this a reevaluation of femininity.⁴⁸ It also appears representative of the kind of relationship women desire, where one is loved for 'strength' but also for, and in spite of, 'weakness', or in other words, valued whether one is passive or active during sex or in a relationship.⁴⁹

It is commonly assumed that women prefer romance to smut but witty and sexy slash stories break with this stereotype.⁵⁰ Indeed, m/m erotic fiction does not seem to be entirely about romantic and egalitarian relationships at all. In fact, although less acknowledged by research, there is a sub-genre of slash fanfiction, commonly called darkfic, where the relationships of the protagonists are decidedly unequal, complicated, hierarchical, or even violent. Themes for stories in this category might include bondage, erotic asphyxiation, mutilation, non-consent, and torture among others.⁵¹ In a study on the slash fanfiction site 'Area 52', Hansen found that 94% of stories were rated using the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) system, with only 5% of those stories rated G but 61% rated R or NC-17.⁵² When asked about their story preferences, 46% of slash fans reported a preference for G-rating on the MPAA system, while 81 % replied that they read R-rated fiction and 92% expressed an interest in works rated NC-17.⁵³ A similar trend can be noticed in BL as well, where such darkfic themes are very common.

⁴⁵ Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1231.

⁴⁶ Saito, 85.

⁴⁷ Kustritz, 277.

⁴⁸ Akatsuka, loc. 3002-2009.

⁴⁹ Lamb and Veith, 254.

⁵⁰ Camper, 2.

⁵¹ Hansen, 51.

⁵² Ibid, 54.

⁵³ Bruner, 49.

In a survey by Pagliassotti, 50% of the 391 respondents found rape, physical torture, and cruel heroes acceptable in BL, while only 12% opposed the inclusion of rape and 8% that of physical torture.⁵⁴

One explanation for the violent themes might be that they are part of so-called hurt/comfort scenarios, where injuries or other misfortunes are used to necessitate and facilitate emotional and physical closeness between the protagonists. Hurt/comfort is commonly used in both slash and BL.⁵⁵ Pagliassotti even goes as far as saying that non-consensual sex scenes are an extreme extension of the hurt/comfort theme.⁵⁶ However, there may be other explanations for this phenomenon, which could be described as an erotization of violence.⁵⁷

An alternative reason for the prevalence of darkfic and expressive sex might be that (fan) fiction provides a safe way to explore taboo topics and thus a way for women to take control of their sexual desires.⁵⁸ In traditional manga for heterosexual male readers, for example, sex is rarely presented as an equal exchange for mutual pleasure but rather shown as something men either take from women or that is bestowed on them by women. In both cases, women are submissive and passive with sex being something that is done to them.⁵⁹ Removing female characters is a way to circumvent misogyny and other common stereotypes, and it leaves female artists, authors, and readers free to explore sexual desire and imagination.⁶⁰

But not only can the female readers and writers control the sexual scenarios taking place and recast sex as a mutually enjoyable experience, they can also use slash and BL to manipulate male bodies in ways similar to those male authors and artists have traditionally taken the liberty to manipulate female bodies in. They can display and

⁵⁴ Pagliassotti 2010, loc. 1130.

⁵⁵ Russ, 82; and Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1166.

⁵⁶ Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1137.

⁵⁷ Unfortunately, there will not be space here to analyse this aspect of darkfic in more detail and explore the very engaging topic of violence in BL and slash more generally. Nevertheless, it surely is a worthwhile avenue for further research and a good starting point would be the short literature review on the topic of rape in BL in an essay by Pagliassotti (Ibid., loc. 1145).

⁵⁸ Tan, loc. 2571.

⁵⁹ M. J. McLelland, 'The Love Between Beautiful Boys in Japanese Women's Comics', (2002) 13 *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15-16.

⁶⁰ Camper, 1.

penetrate male bodies to fulfill their personal sexual desires and act out various sexual fantasies.⁶¹ One of the survey respondents in Pagliassotti's article suggests that she likes how BL presents men as the primary objects of sexual interest for a change. Similarly, another respondent stresses how most pornographic images are created by men for men and that heterosexual women do not necessarily want to watch another woman having sex but rather focus on attractive males instead.⁶²

QUASI-EGALITARIAN RATHER THAN EGALITARIAN EXPERIENCES

As Blair points out, there is a notable absence of female characters in BL manga.⁶³ If there are female characters, they are often demonized rather than valorized.⁶⁴ This poses a problem with the aforementioned theory that m/m erotic fiction is a tool for women to create egalitarian experiences. Blair has made the effort to try and explain the negative reactions of female fans to female characters in BL as a result of the efforts of the *mangaka* (artist of a manga) to depict them as unsympathetic and a barrier to the main couple.⁶⁵ She thus sees the dislike many female fans hold towards certain female BL characters neither as a sign of an innate dislike of all female BL characters nor an expression of misogynistic views.⁶⁶ However, as this observation does generally not apply to male rivals,⁶⁷ there might be more going on here than meets the eye. Scodari investigates this issues in her article on slash and poses two alternative suggestions for the absence of female characters: firstly, it might simply be akin to what happens in lesbian porn targeted at a male audience where competition from the same sex is removed and both attractive characters are there solely to fulfill the fantasies of the female reader or writer; and secondly, the lack of female heroes, the refusal to valorize female characters, and the not uncommon insistence that there are no suitable female role models to use for the creation of likable female characters may be an expression of

⁶¹ M. Stanley, '101 Uses for Boys: Communing with the Reader in Yaoi and Slash' in A. Levi, M. McHarry & D. Pagliassotti (eds.) *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-cultural Fandom of the Genre* (McFarland & Company, 2010), 99-109.

⁶² Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1272.

⁶³ Blair, loc. 2009.

⁶⁴ Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1029.

⁶⁵ Blair, loc. 2111+2190.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., loc. 2136.

an underlying assumption of female inadequacy.⁶⁸ While this topic is certainly very important and the extent of the negative consequences would need to be investigated further, for the purpose of this paper it shall suffice to conclude that m/m erotic fiction does allow women to create a space where they can unleash their creativity and explore their romantic and sexual desires. Nevertheless, they might be paying a price for it by devaluating women or even completely erasing them as positive presences in the narratives themselves.⁶⁹

In his article, Akatsuka brings up a second point of potential conflict with the argument presented in this paper by outlining how there is clearly a homosexual pretext in BL stories but also a heteronormative subtext.⁷⁰ The latter one he locates in the prevalence of *seme/uke* relationships and the depiction of sex as involving (anal) intercourse among other things.⁷¹ Similarly, Jenkins proposes that slash is a negotiation rather than a radical break with what is presented in the original material.⁷² While further research is certainly necessary to give a comprehensive analysis of this, especially with regards to newer slash and BL works, one response to arguments such as those presented by Akatsuka and Jenkins would be to concede that it is very difficult to transcend a culture's givens, as Russ notes,⁷³ and that consequently m/m erotic fiction is not used by female fans to overturn gender norms but rather to negotiate their desires within the existing gender discourse of their society.⁷⁴

Ultimately, it seems that despite the shortcomings outlined above, m/m erotic fiction holds the potential for women to utilize it for, at the very least, the creation of quasi-egalitarian experiences. Stanley holds that playing with gender and sexuality in fiction and thus transgressing the rules of a gendered society is empowering for the female readers and writers rather than simply a way of compensating them for some lack.⁷⁵ It might, however, be argued that it is both. Male/male erotic fiction enables female readers and writers to dabble briefly, and fictionally, in privileges which they lack in

⁶⁸ C. Scodari, 'Resistance Re-Examined: Gender, Fan Practices, and Science Fiction Television' (2003) 1:2 *Popular Communication*, 111, 114-16.

⁶⁹ Pagliassotti (2010), loc. 1324.

⁷⁰ Akatsuka, loc. 2917.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jenkins, 219-20.

⁷³ Russ, 85.

⁷⁴ Saito, 183-87.

⁷⁵ Stanley, loc. 1772.

real life. In this way, m/m erotic fiction does some compensatory work but this does not necessarily take away from its empowering potential. Indeed, as Kustritz suggests, m/m erotic fiction may not have the potential to change the world and bring the egalitarian fantasies discussed above into the real world by challenging the binary and hierarchical notions of gender on such a large scale, but it has ‘the potential to change women’s lives, one individual, one story and one day at a time’.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

It was argued in this essay that some female readers and writers enjoy male/male erotic fiction because it provides them with the chance to enjoy, at least in fantasy, the privileges traditionally reserved for men in gendered societies. The use of this genre enables these women to create quasi-egalitarian experiences by exploring the workings and consequences of an egalitarian relationship as well as giving them a medium to explore sexual desires and fantasies. As was stressed at the outset, this is surely not the only – and perhaps not even the most prevalent – reason for female interest in this specific genre. However, it certainly seems to be a useful way to think about this phenomenon and explain at least a part of the appeal that male/male erotic fiction holds for an overwhelmingly heterosexual and female audience.

⁷⁶ Kustritz, 283.

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