

# Tales of lilies and girls' love. The depiction of female/female relationships in yuri manga

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**Abstract:** *Yuri* manga are focused on the representation of sentimental relations between girls. Despite still being a niche within the manga landscape, the popularity of this genre in terms of number of productions and fans is increasing, and in the last few years its fame has been expanding outside Japan as well. As a manga genre, *yuri* developed since the mid-2000s. Notwithstanding being a novel genre, *yuri* narratives are deeply embedded into the heritage of the late Meiji-early Shōwa *shōjo bunka* (girls' culture), and especially into the so-called «*esu kankei*» relationships, girl/girl bonds developing in girls' schools at the time. The aim of this article is double-folded: from one hand, I will highlight and discuss the birth of *yuri* manga, analysing the re-elaboration of the heritage of *shōjo bunka* and its cultural productions – such as Yoshiya Nobuko's *Hana Monogatari* – into the first examples of *yuri* manga, to demonstrate the intermediality and intertextuality of these media. On the other hand, I will map the development of *yuri* manga through the 2000s, stressing onto the increasing relevance given by these narratives to LGBTQ+ related themes, along with the detachment from the influence of *shōjo bunka*.

**Keywords:** manga; yuri; lesbian; female homosexuality; *shōjo bunka*.

**要旨:** 百合漫画では、少女同士の恋愛関係の描写に焦点が当てられる。いまだニッチな漫画ジャンルであるとはいえ、作品やファンの数という点で、その人気は高まりつつあり、ここ数年では日本国外でも広く知られるようになってきている。漫画の一ジャンルとして、百合は2000年代半ば以降に発展した。小説のジャンルではあるが、百合をテーマとした物語は明治後期から昭和初期にかけての少女文化を色濃く継承し、特に当時の女学校で発展していた、所謂「エス関係」と呼ばれる少女同士の関係を源流としている。本稿の目的は、以下のような二重構造になっている。一方では、百合漫画の誕生に光を当て考察することである。そのために百合漫画の初期作例における少女文化の遺産とその文化的産物—吉屋信子『花物語』のような—の再現を分析し、各媒体の間メディア性・間テキスト性を明示する。他方では、2000年代における百合漫画の展開を整理することである。ここでは、少女文化の影響下を離れながら、こうした物語がLGBTQ+に関わるテーマにもたらず関連性が増大しつつあることを強調する。

**キーワード:** 漫画、ユリ、レズビアン、女性同性愛、少女文化。

## 1. Counter hegemonic representations of gender and sexuality in manga

Manga are well-known for being an outlet to portray different embodiments of femininity and masculinity, displaying a wide range of androgynous or sexually ambiguous characters. Topics such as crossdressing and same-sex romance also are not new in this media, and especially in *shōjo* manga. Already in 1953, Tezuka Osamu in *Ribon no kishi* (*Ribon's knight*) introduced Sapphire, the first

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FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Marta Fanasca, *Tales of lilies and girls' love. The depiction of female/female relationships in yuri manga*, pp. 51-66, © 2020 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-260-7.03, in Diego Cucinelli, Andrea Scibetta (edited by), *Tracing Pathways 雲路. Interdisciplinary Studies on Modern and Contemporary East Asia*, © 2020 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-260-7 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-260-7

Female-to-Male crossdresser heroine to make her debut on the pages of *Shōjo Friend*, but it was in the 1970s that the real boom of *queer* characters began. In fact, in the 1970s the most iconic FtM crossdresser character, Ikeda Riyoko's Oscar François de Jarjayes, appeared as the main character of *Versailles no bara* (*The Roses of Versailles*, 1973), followed soon by the first representation of a transgender character in *Claudine!* (1978), also created by Ikeda. In the same decade came along the first examples of the later-called Boys' Love genre (focused on male/male romance), Hagio Moto's *Toma no shinzō* (1974) and Take-miya Keiko's *Kaze to ki no uta* (1976).

The first explorations in the realm of lesbian love also date back to the 1970s. In 1971 Yamagishi Riyoko published the first manga addressing a love story between two young women, *Shiroi heya no futari* (*The two of the white room*). Ichijō Yukari published *Maya no sōretsu* (*Maya's funeral parade*) in 1972; one year later Satonaka Machiko's *Ariesu no otometachi* (*Maidens of Aries*, 1973) appeared on the market, followed by *Oniisama e* (*Dear brother*, 1974) again from Ikeda Riyoko. In 1974 Fukuhara Hiroko's *Hadashi no Mei* (*Barefoot Mei*) was published by Shūeisha, and the author came back on the same topic of female/female romance also in 1979 with *Kurenai ni moyu* (*Blazing crimson*).

Contrarily to what happened to the Boys' Love genre, which popularity has steadily increased since nowadays, the topic of girls' love has somehow faded through the 1980s-1990s, to reappear from the 2000s onwards. Anyway, manga focused on the representation of sentimental and/or sexual relationships between girls is not a groundbreaking topic explored only in contemporary Japanese manga. Previous representations of female/female relationships were not classified as a special genre but, as forerunner BL manga, were part of the wider *shōjo* manga imaginary, while contemporary stories focused on girls' love appear under the label *yuri*. What differentiates *shōjo* manga and previous representations of lesbian love from 2000s *yuri* manga? What are the characteristics defining a manga as *yuri*?

## 2. What is *yuri*?

Become known in the first half of the 2000s, the *yuri* manga up to now has nor been the subject of extensive studies, neither has attracted academic attention. A very different situation if compared with its ideal male counterpart, Boys' Love manga. The definition of '*yuri*' itself is still debated and subjected to different interpretations.

One of the first analysis of manga depicting love between women is provided by Fujimoto Yukari (1998). Fujimoto focused on early representations from the 1970s and does not mention the word '*yuri*', as the early examples she refers to clearly fit within the 1970s *shōjo* manga definition, both in terms of drawing style and narrative tropes.

Studies making of *yuri* manga (one of) their main themes are still extremely scattered. The Japanese scholar Akaeda Kanako undertook an historical approach, underlining the relationship connecting *shōjo bunka* and *yuri* manga

and paying special attention to *Maria sama ga miteru*, that the author defines as the «yuri manga bible» (Id. 2010: 285). Differently, Nagaike Kazumi (2010) analysed *yuri* manga for its LGBTQ+ contents, stressing the role of this manga genre in offering a media representation of female homosexuality, though (as I will explain later) this connection is slightly controversial. A completely different approach is taken by Kumata Kazuo (2005), who addressed *yuri* manga from the standpoint of the male fandom. Kumata compares *yuri* male readers to female readers of BL, stressing how both groups negotiate their relationship with hegemonic gender roles shifting from a more traditional interpretation of masculinity and femininity to a wish for less stereotyped relational models. Although relevant in terms of reception studies, this analysis is unbalanced as it presents the male perspective over an overtly feminine media, particularly since the female fans' experience has not been fully addressed so far. A similar approach is also undertaken by James Welker (2014), who focuses on the analysis of Kurata Uso's *Yuri danshi* (2011, which can be roughly translated as *Yuri male fan*). Kurata is one of the authors publishing on *Komikku Yurihime* (2005, one of the most important magazines for *yuri* stories), and likely a fan of the genre. This manga represents a sort of introduction to the *yuri* world, its fandom, and its producers but again, by mostly taking a male perspective. While these approaches are obviously relevant, to focus on a minority of the audience of *yuri* manga when the main readers of this genre (namely young women), or female *mangaka* producing *yuri* are still not the object of in-depth studies reduces the relevance of the female experience, which far too often and in too many cases is overlooked in favour of a male-centered investigation. Therefore, *Yuri danshi* might be seen as an autoethnographic study of *yuri* fandom (Welker 2014) but does not really address the role of women as producers and consumers of *yuri* productions. Moreover, academic and practitioners' attention given to the role of male fandom with regards to *yuri* underlines the disconnection of this genre with the actual representation of female homosexuality, stressing instead its fictional nature and the mixed nature of its audience.

Usually, manga genres are defined according to their (supposed) target readers. *Shōjo* manga target female young adults, while *shōnen* manga are intended to be read mostly by male adolescents; *seinen* manga address topics closer to an adult public, and so on. The *yuri* genre instead did not take its name from its readers. The word *yuri* literally means 'lily', and since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century this flower in Japan has been a symbol of spiritual love and women's (sexual) purity, often juxtaposed to the impure male desire (Watanabe 2009: 263). The word started to be associated with female homosexuality in the 1970s on the pages of *Barazoku* (*Rose tribe*), the first mainstream magazine for gay men in Japan. The editor of *Barazoku*, Itō Bungaku, called the female readers of its magazine as *yurizoku* (*Lily tribe*). Female readers of *Barazoku* had their own column on the magazine's pages called *Yurizoku no heya* (*Lilies' room*), and hence if '*barazoku*' was used to define the male homosexual community, '*yurizoku*' started to be a label for the lesbian community (Welker 2008). However, it must be noted that the word *yuri* as used on *Barazoku*'s pages was not an equivalent to

lesbian, but more a way to define those female readers attracted by other women, or interested in reading stories about (female) homosexuality. Nevertheless, the word has attached the inner meaning of female/female sentimental and/or physical closeness.

Interestingly, *yuri* manga are not openly thought for an audience of lesbian women, and rarely address issues relevant for the LGBTQ+ community, such as coming out, gay rights, discrimination and homophobia. Hence, more than representing a lesbian reality, it is more correct to say that *yuri* manga are focused on the description of homoerotic – rather than homosexual – relationships between girls. Age is in fact another distinctive point of this media: the majority of *yuri* manga (and definitely all the most famous titles) do not depict love relationships between adult women, focusing instead on juvenile feelings and love stories mostly experienced in a high school setting.

At this point it is necessary to underline that the relationship between the words '*yuri*' and 'lesbian' is not biunivocal. According to Kumata Kazuo, *yuri* manga are about female homosexuality or they have a clear link with female homosexuality (2005: 73). However, it is also true that if *yuri* can potentially be used a synonym of lesbian this does not hold true the other way round. This is a pivotal point, especially taking into account the idea of identity and identification: the development of a homosexual identity, as largely proven by research in the field of gender studies since the 1970s (Cass 1979), cannot be separated from the step of self-definition and acceptance (Rifkin 2002; Stevens 2004; Shimizu 2007; Adams 2010). The adjective «lesbian» can be used to define a sexual identity, an individual, or a media text. On the contrary, *yuri* define specifically fictional materials, and especially manga and anime (Maser 2015). A lesbian woman does not define herself «*yuri*». Moreover, in *yuri* manga – and especially in the production until 2013 – the word 'lesbian' does not appear, and the main characters of these manga do not define themselves as lesbian. Hence, it is possible to argue that the word *yuri* is disconnected from the real condition of female homosexuality, and that female/female relationships depicted in *yuri* manga can be better defined as homoerotic, rather than homosexual, lacking of the identitarian, social and political values attributed to the word 'lesbian' and lacking of the characters' need to identify with a homosexual identity.

According to Katsuyama Toshimitsu (2016: 13) the word may take a very broad range of meanings: *yuri* defines narratives not only focused on «special relationships between girls» (*onna no ko dōshi no tokubetsuna kankei*), but also stories that are not about romantic involvement between girls, «girls' love» (*gāruzu rabu*; GL) stories, and also works involving characters who identify as bisexual or lesbian. In addition, for Katsuyama everyone can have its own definition of *yuri* (*Ibidem*: 12) and, thus, choose to see *yuri* when and where they so desire. This approach does not help to clearly define what a genre is and what is not, and does not help in marking the difference between *yuri* and *shōjo* manga. Moreover, the assimilation under the same label of manga focused on LGBTQ+ themes and *yuri* is probably too broad, also leading to a problem of misrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community and its issues.

Again Akaeda provide us with a encompassing definition of *yuri* manga, labelled as media representing intimate relationships between female, and especially girls (2010: 277), where there is not necessarily the need to use the word lesbian.

Drawing on what has been discussed so far, the inclusion under the label *yuri* of pornographic manga and anime focused on lesbian sexuality is striking, too. This is due to the word *yuri* itself, and the meaning of female sexual purity it endorses (Watanabe 2009: 195). Similarly, Kumata (2005) underlines how lesbian pornography in Japan is meant to satisfy the voyeuristic desires of a male audience, while *yuri* productions are not openly thought to satisfy the male gaze, and male fans of *yuri* manga and anime does not consume these media the same way as pornography (Maser 2013; Welker 2014).

To summarise, in this article, drawing on the definition provided by Akaeda and Kumata, and on my personal understanding of *yuri* manga, I will use and promote the word *yuri* to refer to original (not *dōjinshi*) manga (and deriving anime) published from the end of the 1990s-early 2000s, focused on the representations of sentimental relationships between girls which cannot be labeled as pornographic or openly erotic.

### 3. Features of *yuri* manga

The word '*yuri*' has started to be used to define a specific manga genre in the early 2000s, after the publication of the first title of this kind, *Maria sama ga mi-teru* (1997, 2003) and of the first magazines clustering different *yuri* stories such as *Yuri shimai* (2003) and *Komikku yurihime* (2005). However, as previously stated, these were not the first examples of manga focused on representing girl/girl love stories, being *Shiroi heya no futari* the first work of this kind. So why cannot manga from the 1970s be considered as *yuri* manga?

*Shiroi heya no futari* and the other above-mentioned titles from the 1970s did not have rupture elements with the *shōjo* manga produced in the same period. They did not represent a genre per se, but a variation (in this case regarding the biological sex of the main characters, which are both female) of a series of already established narrative patterns. Let's briefly analyse the main characters of *Shiroi heya no futari*, the couple Recine/Simone. Recine is a kind and innocent girl, shy and obedient. She has long blonde hair, big starry eyes, and she wears very feminine clothes. Differently, Simone is a rebellious character: she smokes, skips classes, and goes out at night unrespectful of the school's rules. She has long, straight black hair, and she dresses in a more androgynous fashion. Both represent stereotyped characters often appearing in couple in 1970s *shōjo* manga, no matter what kind of romance (heterosexual or homosexual) they experience. This is for instance the case of Candy and Terence from *Candy Candy* (1975), the female characters Misonoo Nanako and Asaka Rei from *Oniisama e* (1975), or Serge and Gilbert, the male couple of *Kaze to ki no uta* (1976). With this latter example, also the trajectory of the two love stories is very similar, with Serge/Recine finding themselves forced to share a room in the dormitory with Gilbert/Simone and being shocked by their unconventional lifestyles. Then, knowing each other day by day, Serge/Resine fall in love

with Gilbert/Simone, but their romance will not find a happy ending: the society will ostracize their bond, and both Gilbert and Simone will face a tragic destiny.

The standard couple in contemporary *yuri* manga is very different from this stereotype, and it is made by the pairing *ojōsama/moekko*. The *ojōsama* is a beautiful and elegant upper-class girl; she has very long dark hair, she is an excellent student one or two years older than the *moekko*. The latter is younger, usually shorter, she has a more childish look, with ponytail or similar hairdo, and she is inevitably attracted and charmed by the *ojōsama* charisma. If the *moekko* might recall the ‘innocent and shy’ characters from the 1970s, the ‘beautiful and damned’ stereotype falls out of fashion, leaving space to more positive behavioural examples, able to let the *moekko* develop feelings of *akogare*, fascination, or more openly romantic. The coupling *ojōsama/moekko* appears in the vast majority of *yuri* titles and it represents a trademark of the most successful productions, thus becoming *yuri* canon. The repetitive elements allowing only for small variations in this coupling creates its shared intelligibility, providing the reader with a sort of database of information regarding the two characters which can be easily accessed just looking at the characters’ appearance. The reader, after having read some *yuri*, becomes acquainted with the information suggested by the outer appearance of the *ojōsama/moekko*, and the role these characters play in the story. The stereotypical representation of characters is a way to increase a quick understanding of the narration (Azuma 2007), and also helps in creating a genre.

In terms of plot there is also a marked difference between 1970s female homoerotic *shōjo* manga and contemporary *yuri* titles. *Yuri*’s plots are usually focused on the sentimental relationship which develops between the two main characters. The narratives are characterized by light tones, and very unlikely the story takes a dramatic turn. The main problems faced by the characters are linked to identification and declaration of feelings or coping with jealousy caused by possible love rivals. There are no real obstacles that precludes the development of love feelings, and the story is lived within an enclosed environment, usually the girls’ school setting that the characters attend. The rest of the world, under the shape of family, male characters, society, is often completely absent or plays a minor role. The societal judgment does not really affect the happy ending, where the two girls finally become a couple, nor the couple has to confront with homophobia or similar hate reactions for being in love. Different the situation in the text from the 1970s, where the girls unavoidably faced stigma and homophobia for living their love, and the relationship was usually tragically ended with the death/suicide of one of the main characters.

According to Fujimoto (2014), this dark and negative depiction of female homosexuality in the 1970s is due to the idea that women were perceived as complete only in relation to a man. A fulfilling relationship and a full personal development were not possible to be achieved with another woman. Consequently, lesbian love would not allow a happy ending: thus it was depicted as a tragic, painful experience, a form of impossible love. What marks the change in the *yuri* approach is due, I argue, to two main factors: the first one is the different perception of homosexuality in the 1970s compared to the 2000s; the second one is that, in fact, *yuri* manga are not about lesbian relationships.

As for the first point, despite Japan cannot be considered *avantgarde* in terms of gay rights, still the country has greatly changed through the years. Especially after the 1990s «gay boom» (McLelland 2000), homosexuality is much more an open topic of representation and discussion in different media. Several municipalities in major cities came to recognize same-sex marriages, and gay pride parades represent a yearly appointment that an increasing number of LGBTQ+ community members and supporters enthusiastically join. Although it is not possible to assess the real dimension and impact of the change in the Japanese society's approach to homosexuality, it is possible to argue that a renewed depiction of female/female love in more positive terms might well be linked to a renewed interpretation of lesbianism as well, a view less affected by the patriarchal idea that real happiness for women can only pass through compulsory heterosexuality.

My second point, which I address in the next section, is that *yuri* manga do not depict 'lesbian' relationship, but female/female homoerotic stories strongly linked to the Japanese cultural heritage. Hence I argue that *yuri* manga are not subjected to the same stigma faced by actual (female) homosexuality.

#### 4. Love, friendship or something else? The heritage of «*esu kankei*» in *yuri* manga

To understand this second point it is necessary to discuss female/female homoerotic relationships developed as an accepted and transitory form of love for schoolgirls during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to connect these early experiences and narrations of female/female relationships with *yuri* titles.

Girls' schools developed in Japan from the Meiji period when the country, following interactions with the United States and Europe, started a process of Western-style modernization which also involved school organization. Higher education became available for the daughters of middle and especially upper-class families, and girls' schools were seen as pivotal in the development of modern women, according to the ideals of the *ryōsai kenbo*, «the good wife, wise mother» (Patessio 2013; Freedman 2019). The school years became a time during which girls could acquire an education but also came to represent a limited space in which the concepts of girl and girlhood took form. It was a time between childhood and adulthood for female students to enhance their intellectual and social life, outside the rigid control of families (Shamoon 2012).

Typical of girls' schools were the so-called «*esu kankei*» (S relationships), emotional bonds between schoolgirls. *Esu* is supposed to stand for the English letter 's', an acronym meaning 'sister', since girls in these relationships referred to each other as *onēsama* and *imōto*<sup>1</sup>. According to Gregory Pflugfelder, *esu kankei* were characterized by «emotional intensity and warm trust» (2005: 139) and by «a sense of youthful enthusiasm and of emotional richness» (175). Deborah Shamoon (2012) defines these relationships as «passionate friendships» and

<sup>1</sup> For other possible interpretation of the term 'esu' and for a wider discussion on how these relationships were defined see Pflugfelder (2005).

underlines how *esu kankei* were very common among schoolgirls, especially between 1920-1930. They were bonds based on «spiritual love» (2012: 29) and represented a sentimental (and in some cases also sexual) experimentation for young women before to step into the realm of adulthood, characterized by marriage, heterosexual sex and motherhood. Differently from homosexuality, which was seen as a deviated and pathological condition, S relationships represented a stage of schoolgirl's emotional development; they were seen as inherently platonic and hence generally accepted by the society (Suzuki 2012: 26), given that they were supposed to last only during the high school years.

An intense and detailed depictions of the different aspects of schoolgirls' emotional life is provided by Yoshiya Nobuko in *Hana Monogatari* (*Flowers' tales*). Published on the magazine *Shōjo Gahō* between 1916 and 1924, these short stories are a collection of 'passionate friendships' between students, or a student and a young teacher. As Paola Scrolavezza (2020: 215) quoting Suzuki (2006) states, these stories celebrate romantic friendship as a kind of unique love typical of the adolescence time-frame and neatly separated from the adult world: a form of love disengaged with heterosexuality. *Hana Monogatari*, despite letting the readers indulge in the idea that some of the stories were not only romantic but also involved girls' sexuality, it is ultimately a collection of short stories focused on girls' feelings and emotions in the transitory time of adolescence.

Although these emotional (physical?) relationships were experienced from a female perspective, they cannot be read as homosexual, especially taking into account the sociopolitical relevance given to the lesbian definition and experience today. As Scrolavezza discusses it:

[...] dell'amore omosessuale si parla in termini di un'esperienza formativa: nel contesto della fiorente cultura femminile degli anni Venti infatti, il *dōseiai* – letteralmente l'amore per una persona dello stesso sesso – lungi dal rappresentare una sfida alla società patriarcale e al modello dominante di femminilità (il già citato *ryōsai kenbo*, la 'buona moglie e saggia madre'), è socialmente accettato come una sorta di apprendistato sentimentale in vista del matrimonio (2020: 219).

The S relationships configured thus an alternative and temporary reality where girls were allowed to dive in a world of emotions shared among peers, experiencing a different form of love not tied to the expected social duties for women (Dollase 2003). Moreover, differently from marriages which were mostly arranged by the family and oriented to reproduction, these love stories were of a purely romantic nature, and entitled girls an high degree of freedom in terms of choosing their partner, and of the physical involvement desired. However, S relationships were not a way to define one's sexual identity, nor girls in these bonds refrained from entering into heterosexual marriage at the end of the high school<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Relationships running outside the accepted track of S relationships were actually opposed by the society. They were called *ome* and were presented especially by the press in an extremely negative light. During the 1920s there were different cases of schoolgirls' *shinju* (double suicide

*Maria sama ga miteru* (hereafter *Marimite*) is a franchise started as a light novel (1998) then turned into a manga series (2003) and in a three seasons animation (2004). It tells the story of a group of schoolgirls in a prestigious private Catholic school. In the school, students share a sort of tutoring scheme where senior schoolgirls choose among the fresher students a 'younger sister' (*petite soeur*) to take care of and guide during the high school years. This mutual and exclusive relationship is officialized through the exchange of personal rosaries (every student owns one). This bond is based on feelings, since students choose or accept as sister only those who they admire or have affection for. The rosary exchange is possible only if feelings are reciprocated.

In *Marimite* there is not a real plot: the story is focused on the students belonging to the Students' Council and on the relationships between them. *Marimite* is considered the first *yuri* title and from the very beginning the word *yuri* and the lily flower are openly quoted: the name of the high school is Lillian Institute and the Students' Council is called Yamayurikai<sup>3</sup> (*Mountain Lily*). Despite the plot is focused on the interactions between the students in the Yamayurikai, none of these relationships involve the physical/sexual sphere, nor they are defined in terms of love, while we can better talk of *akogare*. Students are attracted by their 'sisters', they can face feelings such as romantic attraction or jealousy in relation to their classmates, or they long for the attention of a certain *senpai*, however we do not witness kisses, sex scenes, or love confessions: the feelings girls nurture for each other can be guessed, but they are never openly defined. This platonic depiction of love closely recalls of the *esu kankei* as they were understood by the Japanese society.

As already noted by Anna Specchio, manga and literature share several contact points, and the countless contaminations between these two media can be divided into two main categories: 1) literature in manga and 2) manga in literature (2019: 58-59). *Marimite's* franchise reflects the heritage of *Hana Monogatari* as the story portrays passionate friendships and closely recalls the *shōjo bunka's* cultural milieu as depicted by Yoshiya, belonging thus to the second category. The story unfolds in the enclosed setting of the girls' high school, and very little of the external world is allowed in this secluded haven for girls. The relationships between schoolgirls are intense, emotional but never physical; it is also controversial to define them in terms of romantic love. Male characters are almost entirely absent, and when they appear, they often occupy the role of a fiancé chosen by a girl's family for a perfect marriage waiting for schoolgirls at the end of their three years at Lillian.

General references to flowers, stressing the connection with *Hana Monogatari*, are countless: different chapters/episodes have as titles flowers' names and

for love). Facing the impossibility of living their love openly, few girls decide to kill themselves together. These stories were largely spectacularised by the press at the time and instrumentalized to create negative stereotypes about female homosexuality (Pflugfelder 2005: 150-162).

<sup>3</sup> 山百合会.

some pivotal scenes take place in the school's greenhouse. The already mentioned Students' Council Yamayurikai consists of three representative students from the third year, named after rose species: *Rosa Chinensis* (red rose), *Rosa Gigantea* (white rose), and *Rosa Foetida* (yellow rose). These senior members meet in the *bara no yakata*<sup>4</sup> (Rose mansion) and they are called roses. Roses are elected by students, and any student attending the Lillian Institute can candidate herself for this position. However, it is very common for the *petite soeur* of a rose to run for the election and to be elected. The *petite soeur* of roses are called *rose en bouton* or *bara no tsubomi*<sup>5</sup> (rose bud), and they are usually second year students. Through the exchange of rosaries, the *rose en bouton* can also have their own young sister among the first-year students, who are called *en bouton petite soeur*.

To stress the connection between *Marimite* and *Hana Monogatari*, and the similar way these two texts relates to female homosexuality, emblematic is the case of one of the characters in *Marimite*, Satō Sei. Sei is very different from all the other characters: she is loud, she speaks a less polite Japanese, she often plays tricks and jokes (also slightly sexual) to younger students, often teasing them. She is definitely a non-conformist compared to the standard of Lillian Institute's students. Sei is the only character to experience a non-platonic relationship with a schoolmate. A relationship not ratified by the rosary exchange, but based on reciprocal attraction. In a flashback, we also have the only scene (although not openly showed) of a passionate and not platonic kiss between Sei and her lover. While the common bonds between younger and older sisters are based on *akogare*, and are supported by the school because they do not represent a threat to the school's and society's heteronormative order, Sei's unorthodox relationship is strongly opposed by the School directorate as it clearly is a lesbian love story. Facing the opposition of the school, the two girls decide to run away together to be free to live their love. However, instead of providing the audience with a possible happy ending (or with a tragic end), Sei's partner will give up to the idea of running away with her and will refuse to meet her again, putting an end to their relationship.

Sei's love story represents the difference between female homosexuality and *yuri* relationships molded on the *esu kankei* model. There is another element that stresses the connection between Sei's storyline with *Hana Monogatari*'s heritage. In fact, Sei is the *Rosa Foetida en bouton*, so she belongs to the yellow rose group. In *Hana Monogatari* there is one story titled *Kibara (Yellow rose)*, which is also the one in the collection more openly focused on the romantic and sexual love story between a student, Urakami Reiko, and a young teacher, Katsuragi Misao. Katsuragi, to escape from her family willing to see her married soon after her graduation, decides to become a teacher and is appointed in a high school for girls. On the day she is leaving Tokyo for her new workplace, while on the train, her attention is caught by a beautiful young girl riding on

<sup>4</sup> 薔薇の館.

<sup>5</sup> 薔薇のつぼみ.

the same train, Urakami Reiko, who will eventually be one of her students. As time passes, the two become very affectionate to each other and develop strong, reciprocal feelings. They plan to go to Tokyo together, and after Reiko's graduation, to attend a college in the United States. However, Reiko's parents ask Katsuragi to convince their daughter to accept a marriage already organized years in advance, and Katsuragi finds herself torn apart by her feelings for Reiko and the best choice for the young girl's future. In the end, Katsuragi convinces Reiko to accept the marriage proposal, and then leave the girls' school to go to study in Boston alone, soon disappearing from her family and friends. Two years later Katsuragi is spotted by an acquaintance in Colorado: she looks gaunt and gloomy, and works in the basement of an anonymous center for immigration. Understanding to have been recognized, Katsuragi will run away again, to live in isolation and loneliness.

A purely lesbian love, unrespectful of the heterosexual social order, is presented both in *Marimite* and in *Hana Monogatari* as impossible and ultimately wrong, leading only to a life of sorrow. Sei and her narrative arc symbolize the difference between an emotional relationship linked to an imaginary well rooted and accepted in the Japanese culture, and homosexuality. To support this view, and how homosexuality is a concept alien to the tradition of the S relationship (and thus *Marimite*), Sei is depicted not as Japanese but as American. The emotional and physical relation she experiences is not an *esu kankei*, nor it develops from the heritage of the Japanese *shōjo bunka*. It is a form of love that contrasts the heteronormative, patriarchal order of the society, an egoistic feeling based on (sexual) attraction, a quasi-alien concept, linked to different instances which are not those promoted and supported by the *Marimite* storyline and ideals.

To conclude, *Marimite* is the first *yuri* title and it is not about female homosexuality. It explores girls' feelings during the adolescence, following a narrative style that reflects the heritage of *shōjo bunka*'s girl/girl relationships, a *yuri* genre trademarks. Hence, as argued at the end of the previous section, *yuri* manga (especially titles published until 2010) do not represent lesbian relationships, but girl/girl love stories more or less closely linked to the concept of *esu kankei*. For this reason *yuri* stories are not marked by negative and dark endings (as manga from the 1970s), nor they are affected by the stigma still attached to female homosexuality.

##### 5. The recent developments of the *yuri* genre

Even though the *yuri* titles that followed *Marimite* slightly deviate from its format, presenting more openly physical love relationships between the main characters, it is still arguable the definition of *yuri* stories as LGBTQ+. During the second half of the 2000s several different titles with a similar plot debuted on the market. For their school setting, and for the stereotyped characters presented, they fully belong to the *yuri* category. At the same time, these new titles also include interesting novelty elements. The most representative example from

this second turn in the *yuri* production is *Strawberry Panic!* (Sakurako Kimino and Namuchi Takumi 2005).

In this case also the setting is a prestigious girls' school. The main couple reproduces the *ojōsama/moekko* pair (Hanazono Shizuma/Aoi Nagisa). Differently from *Marimite*, the relationship between Shizuma and Nagisa is clearly a love story, which is explored also in physical terms: we have different kiss and sex scenes throughout the story, even though not explicit. Moreover, the ending shows the two girls becoming a couple. However also in this case it is difficult to talk of a lesbian relationship, and again the definition of homoerotic seems more fitting. The two girls do not identify with nor they use the word 'lesbian', and again we have a love relationship between two girls, in a setting secluded from the outside world and society. There is no contextualization of a homosexual relationship within the wider frame of its reception by the adult and external world. Topics such as the development and acceptance of a lesbian identity, coming out or gay rights are not addressed, confining the different love stories in *Strawberry Panic!* to a depiction of homoerotic attraction between girls. The point that differentiate this work from 1970s manga and also from *Marimite* resides in showing a female/female relationship, also based on sexual attraction, as actually possible.

The reasons behind the choice of presenting a happy ending, and to show more physical expressions of girls' love can be sought in the wide readership *yuri* manga address. Differently from *shōjo*, *shōnen* or *seinen* manga, *yuri*'s target readers are more variegated. *Yuri* are mostly read by women, but not necessarily lesbian women. Nagaike Kazumi, in analysing *Komikku Yurihime*, states that «The female homosocial (not necessarily homosexual) qualities that *Yurihime* represents seem to attract not only readers who are self-identified lesbians, but also heterosexual women» (Nagaike 2010<sup>6</sup>: n.p.). According to an informal survey undertaken by Sugino Yōsuke at *yuri* events (quoted in Welker 2014: n.p.) «over half of *yuri* readers are female, among whom are a significant minority of self-identified lesbians and bisexuals, along with transgender or otherwise genderqueer people<sup>7</sup>» which lets us assume that the majority of readers are women but less than half of the audience is also made of male fans.

As already highlighted by Gretchen Jones in her investigation of Japanese ladies' comics, the representation of sexual scenes in manga for women can be read as an expression of increased agency of female readers, which shift from being sexual objects to sexual subjects (2002). Being the *yuri* manga mostly read by women it is possible to apply a feminist perspective to the interpretation of sexuality as it appears in this typology of manga. Sex scenes involving only women can be read as a rebellion against the stereotype of representing female sexuality as intrinsically heterosexual and male dominated, thus em-

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2010/Nagaike.html> (12/20).

<sup>7</sup> <https://jmpc-utokyo.com/keyword/yuri/> (12/20).

powering the female readers. It is also possible that sex scenes can be enjoyed also by male readers.

As for the choice to provide fans with a happy ending, this represents a way to gain the faithfulness of different segments of the audience. According to Verena Maser (2013), *yuri* are read also by men who seems to prefer romantic stories between young girls over the depiction of overtly erotic scenes. Happy endings can thus potentially attract also those readers interested in romantic stories. Therefore, the choice to present *ecchi* scenes, or to provide readers with a romantic finale are ways to satisfy the possible requests of a mixed audience made of both women and men with different sexual orientations.

The tendency towards more realistic love stories in lesbian terms increases with the *yuri* titles produced from 2010 onwards. This new trend is well represented by titles such as *Citrus* (Saburouta 2012) and *Yagate kimi ni naru* (*Bloom into you*, Nakatani Nio 2015), recently translated into different European languages including Italian. If *Marimite* represents the first stage of the *yuri* manga, characterized by platonic love stories based on *akogare* more than love, which evolves in *yuri* title from 2005 onwards, where love is the feeling portrayed and it is also physically expressed, then *Citrus* and *Yagate kimi ni naru* (hereafter *Yagakimi*) represent the third evolutionary stage of *yuri* manga.

In this third stage too the stories develops in (girls') high schools, and again the main characters stick to the *ojōsama/moekko* stereotype. However, differently from all the previous examples, the stories start to be embedded into the reality. Where previous *yuri* manga were mostly taking place within the school's walls, giving the idea of a private world separated from the outer reality, where few if no adults, men or outsiders were in fact allowed to enter, the action in *Citrus* and *Yagakimi* is fully blended in a much wider and realistic setting. *Citrus* offers a detailed and faithful representation of nowadays Tokyo. The characters appear in situations that can be experienced by any high school student in Japan: they go to karaoke or manga cafés, they shop in famous department stores, or they have a school trip in Kyoto. The dreamy atmosphere of a high school setting, seemingly belonging to another era steps out in favour of a more realistic depiction of daily life -which is easier to relate with. Consequently, also the love story gets out from the school's precinct and it is experienced in a wider world.

This is a fundamental change compared to the previous titles. The relationship between the two girls seems not to be only a 'phase' linked to the homosocial context where they live and which the girls come through in their adolescence as a part of their emotional development. The attraction for a same-sex person starts to be defined as something that exists in a wider world, and that involves other people and not only two girls in love. In *Yagakimi*, one of the teachers in the school the characters attend lives with her girlfriend. The story thus discusses the problems arising from having a lesbian relationship and the need to keep it hidden to avoid problems at work. The teacher's girlfriend run a coffee shop, and from the counter she dispenses advices to one of the characters who is trying to define her sexual identity, using her own experience as an example. Furthermore, the relationship between the two main characters, Yū (*moekko*) and

Nanami (*ojōsama*) is a matter of discussion between Yū and her older sister, who clearly hints at the possibility for the two to date and being a couple, repeating different times that a relationship between two women is a normal thing nowadays. In this case we do not have a relationship between two girls that is experienced only by them, but a more faceted concept of homosexuality as a situation and a relationship model that different characters confront with, either experiencing it in first person or confronting themselves with those who experience it.

A more realistic representation of a lesbian relationship, detached from the S relationship model, is also the one between Mei (*ojōsama*) and Yuzu (*moekko*), the main characters from *Citrus*. Several times the story addresses topics such as how to present a homosexual relationship to other people or to come out with parents, as well as the possibility for a gay couple to marry, which is one of Mei and Yuzu's main concerns but also a problem often experienced by actual homosexual people. In this sense, for the first time in a famous *yuri* title we witness a happy ending which also coincides with the wedding ceremony of the two main characters.

Both in *Citrus* and *Yagakimi* the link with *Hana Monogatari* and the heritage of *shōjo bunka's esu kankei* is less direct though still present<sup>8</sup>, and these two titles also present a series of cross-references with previous *yuri*. These kind of metatextual links demonstrate how *yuri* is clearly a manga genre per se, defined by its aesthetic and narrative tropes. A genre that, starting from a well-known previous cultural example, is creating its own system of metatextual references, canons and stereotypes.

## 6. Conclusion

Excluding *shōjo* manga from the 1970s, the contemporary Japanese manga production focused on the representation of female/female relationships can be divided in three different streams: the classic *yuri*, where more than love are represented feelings (often *akogare*) and teens' emotional turmoils, and where relationships between characters more closely adhere to the 'passionate friendship' stereotype, limited to the time/space frame of the female high school the characters attend. The second kind is the new wave of *yuri* manga (the one identified as the third stage of development of *yuri* manga in the article), titles that even though keeping a connection with the heritage of the past and of the *shōjo bunka* also introduce elements of novelty (such as kiss/sex scenes), offering a less idealized depiction of love between girls, and integrating issues more closely related to the reality of lesbian couples.

There is a third strand of women's love representations in manga, namely titles that can be more clearly defined as LGBTQ+. Here the heritage of *Hana*

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in *Citrus* the two girls become 'sisters' since Yuzu's mothers marries Mei's father, and the idea of sisterhood as a metaphor for a female/female relationship is hinted by other characters in the story.

*Monogatari* and *esu kankei* is completely absent, the relationships portrayed are not necessarily between two schoolgirls, but characters belong to a wider age range, and the problems they face are a more realistic depiction of the issues experienced by lesbian individuals and couples. Titles of this kind are, for instance, *Love my life* (Ebine Yamaji 2006), *Sabishisugite Rezu Fūzoku ni Ikimashita Repo* (*My lesbian experience with loneliness*, Kabi Nagata 2016), or *Oya ga Urusai node Kōhai* (♀) *to Gisō Kekkon Shitemita* (*I Married My Best Friend To Shut My Parents Up*, Kodama Naoko 2018). In all these titles homosexuality is presented with its name, and the topics addressed cover different issues that homosexual individuals may experience in their life. Despite being interesting to discuss also this third example of manga representing female homosexuality, especially in terms of adherence to reality and reception from the (lesbian) audience, this is out of the scope of this article, but it will be material to be addressed in future research.

To conclude, I would like to stress that it is not the aim of this paper to judge which one of these three narrative strands is more representative of the lesbian universe or has the right to be defined as representative of female homosexuality. Being manga ultimately works of fiction, not necessarily they need to portray the reality. Perhaps it is more useful to identify different narrative styles to attempt a categorization, but keeping in mind the impossibility of providing a unique definition of the experience of female homosexuality, homoeroticism, or women's same sex love experiences; as I strongly believe that to approach *yuri* manga it is necessary to keep in mind that love, both in fiction as in the reality, may take many different shapes.

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