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Fetishisation of androgyny in anime

at the example of the 2012 TV adaptation

of *Hunter x Hunter*

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Abstract:

In anime androgynous characters are a common and beloved trope, even though the shows are mostly aimed at the average male and female viewer. In this essay I will attempt to analyse and demonstrate what purpose androgyny has to a straight cis-binary audience and, in consequence, why it's so popular, at the example off the 2012 TV adaptation of the japanese multi media franchise Hunter x Hunter. I will analyse the way some of Hunter x Hunter's androgynous characters are treated and portrayed, notably Kurapika, one of the main characters; as well as look at examples from other shows and the greater anime fan culture in general. I will demonstrate how androgyny is fetishised by its straight audience instead of representing or profiting real life androgynes and compare the differences between anime and western media in how they approach androgyny. Finally I will use relevant gender theory and online commentators' work to back up my arguments.

[157 words]

Terminology:

Before we start I'd like to clarify some terminology both for the uninitiated and in regards to how I intend to use specific words in this context for simplicity's sake.

Androgyny refers to any combination of traits that would traditionally be associated with male and female gender respectively. This can be in expression, body, or identity.

Assigned gender/Birthsex refers to the gender one was referred to at birth ("It's a boy!"/"It's a girl!")

Trans(gender) refers to any person whose assigned gender doesn't match their gender identity, f.e. a trans woman is a woman who was assigned male at birth.

Cis(gender) refers to any person whose assigned gender matches their gender identity.

Intersex refers to anyone whose natural physical attributes fall outside the sex-binary.

Non-binary is an umbrella term for any gender identity outside of strictly female and strictly male.

Gender non-conforming (gnc. for short) refers to gendered expression or behaviour that does not conform with traditional gender norms.

I will be using the term **androgyne** as an umbrella term for gnc., non-binary, intersex, and (binary) trans people, as all of them are defined in some aspect by androgyny and were historically grouped together based on that, as Other from the strictly binary traditional gender norm.

I will be using the words **man** and **woman** in this essay to refer to (cis-) straight men and women unless otherwise specified, as it would be too bothersome to specify every time when the whole essay is about this group.

Essay:

Androgyny is a common trope in japanese animation or 'anime'. Whether in art style, characters, or narrative almost every mainstream anime features some kind of androgynous characters. But, seeing as mainstream media is generally geared toward gender conforming, straight, cisgendered male and female viewers, where does this obsession with androgyny come from? Does it help further gender equality by questionning traditional gender roles and provide much needed representation for gender divergent people, or is it merely used to reinforce gender discrimination such as sexism, homo- and transphobia, and everything in between? In this essay I will be examining the way some of the androgynous characters in the 2012 TV adaptation of the japanese multi media franchise *Hunter x Hunter* are presented, and how they are not geared toward the real life androgynous people in *Hunter x Hunter*'s audience but instead toward its heteronormed binary viewers.

Heterosexuality is based in its attraction to difference from itself, "hetero-" meaning "different", as opposed to "homo-" which means "the same". That brings up the issue that traditional binary gender builds its own identity on its untaintedness from the other. Maleness is defined as non-female and femaleness is defined as non-male. To maintain their identity they need to prevent the other from invading it. (Easthope, 1990) With the rise of feminism over the past century, women have mostly liberated themselves of the restrictions that traditional gender role brings with it, but masculinity hasn't reached that point yet. (Tolson, 1977) The masculine ego is paranoid, both fearing an outside threat in other people, as well as a threat from the other within itself. In order to protect itself, it built a bubble of media content, for men, by men, about men, that the feminine other isn't allowed into. Now as this masculine ego conforms to traditional heteronormativity, it still feels attracted to that feminine other, traditionally women, that it just banned from its safe space. In order to solve this problem it makes its own fantasy images of Woman, in the absence of the real thing. (Easthope, 1990) These fantasy images bring certain sexist and fetishistic tropes with them that can also be found in the female androgynous characters in *Hunter x Hunter*.

Melody, for example, is a small round person with a balding head and buckteeth. She is mistaken for a man at first, which she promptly corrects, asserting her femaleness despite her

fig. 1 - Melody

androgynous appearance. Later it is revealed that she was cursed by a powerful artefact, the encounter with which she just barely survived. It is implied that she used to have a

different body and this one was a consequence of that curse. Her changed body is a punishment for dabbling with power she could not handle, a parallel to a lot of sexist storylines in the superhero genre, with the implication that a woman, by default, cannot handle power. It will either corrupt her and turn her evil or it will punish her (Fingeroth, 2004), in this case by robbing her off her gender conforming womanhood.

With the implied loss of a better, more beautiful, more feminine form, her androgyny itself is treated as the curse, like her very worth as a woman is diminished by it. Contrasted with her gentle, feminine character her ugly form makes the audience pity that loss, grieve the gender conforming woman she once was, now unable to perform that traditional womanhood, tainted, broken. (Pacteau, 1986) At the same time the idea of her hidden former "true form" is titillating to the gynophile viewer. Much in the same way that Bruzzi (1997) describes: "The hidden penis (or, alternatively, hidden breasts and vagina) is […] one of the eroticising features of the transvestite body which, for the spectator, remains an imagined fantasy", the idea that Melody's old form was a more desirable one, despite, or maybe because of, its never being revealed, lets the viewer's imagination run wild.

fig. 2 - Bisky Krueger

Bisky Krueger presents as a little girl in cutesy pink dresses and with blonde pigtails, while in reality she is a middle-aged woman. She uses her magical "nen"-powers to alter her appearance, but to access her true physical strength she needs to revert to her "true form", that of a tall, wide-jawed, muscular person, which she considers "too macho", too masculinised. She compensates for her masculinised body with her hyper-feminine presentation, something masculinised women in real life, like trans women (Wynn, 2018) and female athletes (Steinfeldt, Zakrasjek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011), feel socially pressured into as well. In a way she is a representation of Joan Rivière's idea of the womanly "masquerade", a presentation of femininity masking a base masculine character (Rivière, 1929), or body in this case. But then again, as Heath (1986) points out, isn't all gender presentation constructed, male as well as female, parade as well as masquerade, and if the masquerade is womanhood itself, as Rivière suggests, how can it be fake in the first place? Rivière's notion is a deeply flawed phallocentric idea that does not hold up to scrutiny. Gender is far more complex than just presentation or body. (Garber, 1992)
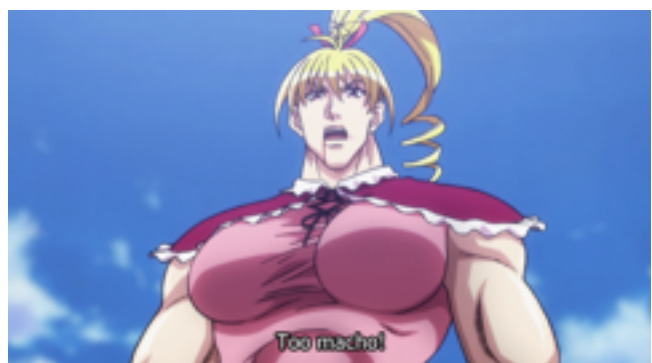

fig. 3 - Bisky Krueger's "true" form

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Bisky's true form, when it is finally revealed, is only shown in bits at a time, as if it's too much to fully take in. Her bulging muscles are shown under the now extremely tight feminine clothes she usually wears. The limits between male and female are being transgressed (Bruzzi, 1997), woman can be strong, stronger than her male foe, and traditional gender roles are threatening to crumble, leading to absolute phallic panic. This panic is lessened for the audience by the pleasure of looking. The satisfaction of the long hinted at finally revealed, and the masculinised female body at the mercy of the viewer's gaze. Feminine object after all rather than masculine subject. (Mulvey, 1973)

While phallic women are fetishised by men (ibid., 1973) and discriminated against under traditional gender expectations, they can also be a source of empowerment for women. (Mizejewski, 1993) Where Melody's androgyny desexualises her, she is freed from the traditional expectation of women to only exist for the pleasure of men. (Heath, 1986) Where Bisky's masculine body becomes the object of the male gaze, that gaze's reassurance is subverted in her opponent who, looking at her true form, realises his doom.

Not only is the identification with Bisky as a powerful woman a source of female enjoyment of the scene, the subversion of power relations between her and her male opponent satisfy women's own erotic desires. Women's fantasy images of men, similarly to their male equivalent, are based in aggression toward the other on one hand, which is where the Schadenfreude in the above example comes from, and the desire to make men more like themselves on the other. "The sick man clearly takes on the virtues associated with women. But not only does an invalided hero allow for the differences and divisions between the sexes to be emotionally and intellectually transcended, physical differences also in some way dissolve […] Soft, sweet, spiritualized, who do these sick men resemble, if not women? In order for men to appear desirable they have to resemble *the* objects of beauty and desire in our society — women." (Kent, 1985) A bit of gentle femininity can balance out aggressive masculinity. (Pacteau, 1986)

This is found in a lot of anime's androgynous male characters, who at times are visually indistinguishable from females. In Hunter x Hunter, characters like Kurapika or Sedokan are clearly differentiated visually from their more traditionally male as well as female peers. Sedokan's trickery and slender figure are contrasted with his fellow male prisoners' physical violence and huge frames, as well as his female collegue's mind games and curvy

fig. 4 - Sedokan

body. Kurapika, within his own party, takes up the mantle of a motherly figure to young Gon and Killua as well as a co-parental and wifely one to Leorio, similarly to the trans woman Hana in Kon Satoshi's *Tokyo Godfathers* (Napier, 2016), all while maintaining his incredible fighting skill.

fig. 5 - mom needs a break

Comparing and putting them into relation to other characters makes them not only possible objects of desire, but also potential characters to identify with without being restricted by traditional gender roles. The androgyne lends themself to exploring gender expression without being restricted to one's own gender identity. Just like an example Marjorie Garber (1992) gives about women taking to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s androgynous main character: "Only as a female female impersonater, playing a character (not an actor but a character, Frank-N-Furter) so masculine he could never be taken for a woman could she realize her own fantasy of power, the 'masculine element' in her." While for women, backed by feminism and liberated to explore their gender freely, identifying with an androgynous character can be empowering, for men with fragile masculinity it can be distressing. They might not want to identify with a feminised man, a male who has been put into a traditionally female role (Kent, 1985), so by putting the androgyne next to more traditionally male characters, they have the ability to choose to identify with them and put the androgyne in relation to themselves, as the Other, and as such as a potential object of desire.

There is a conflict between the visualisation and characterisation of the androgynous characters and the fact that their assigned gender is constantly reinforced. Melody is misgendered in one of the first episodes she's in, and promptly corrects the person who did it. Bisky's pink dress stretching over her big body and her pigtails reinforce her femininity even in her true form. Although this notion is probably the most prevalent in Kurapika. He is a slender young man with soft feminine features, even voiced by a female voice actor. As previously mentionned he occupies quite a traditionally female role within his party, as a foster mother and wife. One way in which his maleness is reinforced is by putting focus on his traditionally masculine traits. In one scene he is

faced with an opponent much bigger and seemingly stronger than himself. Getting ready to fight he takes off his cape, revealing his small stature under his shirt and pants. This is soon contrasted with him taking out his opponent in one fell swoop, slamming him into the ground with his superhuman strength. Later, after developing "nen"-powers, he can

fig. 6 - Kurapika smash

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conjure up magical chains with which he single handedly executes one of the strongest enemies he and his party have faced at that point.

Another way in which the characters' assigned gender is reinforced is by the characters themselves. Similarly to Melody, in one scene Kurapika is misgendered while dressed up. He proceeds to correct and even shame the perpetrator for making such a foolish assumption.

     Chrollo: "I didn't expect the chain user to be a woman."

     Kurapika: "Did I say that I was?"

     Kurapika, as he takes his wig off: "You shouldn't let appearances deceive you."

In making it seem like a foolish mistake to think him female, despite the visual basis for it, in his

fig. 7 - Chrollo and Kurapika

androgynous features and, in this case, more feminine looks than usual, is reinforcing the kind of essentialism that would hurt him were he an androgynous person in real life. Just like Mizejewski's (1993) "woman as an agent of patriarchal law" the androgyne reinforcing the very system that excludes and discriminates against them brings a "multidimensional problem" with them. He reinforces his own maleness while crossdressed (Garber, 1992), but in this case it's a "passing" kind of cross dressing, or, to use a slur, a "trap".

Plenty of trans people on the internet have already debunked the validity of the notion of traps (Wynn, 2019; ThePedanticRomantic, 2018), yet the concept still exists and while it is, in practice, highly dangerous to real life trans and gender non-conforming people, in theory it says more about heterosexual anxieties about identity loss and feelings in general than anything else. The fear is that, in feeling attraction to an androgynous person, in whatever way that androgyny might present itself, that attraction is of homosexual nature rather than its usual heterosexual one, which would put the person's sexual identity as a straight person in question. Because of this attraction to androgynes is seen as an expression of latent homosexuality, rather than simply part of the complex nature of each individual's experience, regardless of labels, or in the more extreme, fetishistic version, the narcissistic projection of oneself onto the Other that it is. (Mulvey, 1973)

If it was homosexual attraction that would surely be the gender one would want the androgyne to lean into, but that's not how straight people make the images of the androgynes they want to sexualise. In the anime fandom, images of androgynes aimed at a male audience usually emphasise femininity, with characters taking up feminine poses, their hips and the absence of a

fig. 8 & 9 - two very different pieces of fanart of Kurapika

bulge emphasised or the crotch hidden altogether — removing the anxiety-inducing phallus from the phallic woman that is the androgyne; while images aimed at a female audience tend to exaggerate the characters' masculinity, emphasising shoulders and an intense yet emotive gaze.

The androgyne is adapted and molded into whatever gender the straight viewer prefers, regardless of their assigned sex.

fig. 10 & 11 - *Boku No Hero Academia's* Eraserhead in fan content vs the manga

Bruzzi (1997) sees the androgyne as "the sensuous focus of the desires of men and women alike" She finds: "It is important that the androgynous image is not confined […] to either sex, but can function as a symbolic substitute for both. Whilst the androgyne is of 'blurred sex' […], s/he is also of 'blurred sexuality', and thus […] an agent of discovery and danger." The blurring of what is real and imagined, that this perception of the androgyne is based in, is what "generates the eroticism of the image" (ibid., 1997), in other words makes it the fetish object of the viewer. Those who feel attracted to "traps" don't feel attracted to a person of the same assigned sex underneath a constructed image in a sudden fit of latent homosexuality released, they feel attracted precisely to the constructedness of that image, to its ambiguity and the "discovery and danger" it promises to their anxious straight identity. Maybe they're envious of the sexual freedom queer people have outside of traditional expectations and strict labels. Or maybe I'm projecting just as much as any phallocentrist talking about women's penis envy. "As a concept, 'penis envy' tells us more about male castration anxieties and fears of

sexual incompetence than it does about women's sexual identity." (Kent, 1985) The Other must obviously also want what one oneself enjoys.

Within straight people's images of androgynes, there are two ways of adjusting the androgyne to be more binary, like themselves:

The first is to reinforce the character's birth- or physical sex, in an attempt to use essentialism to reinforce the notion that androgyny is a mere moment of transgression, an illusion with a binary "real" gender underneath. "[…] I know that the person I'm looking at is either a man or a woman, but nevertheless, s/he is neither man nor woman." (Pacteau, 1986) That it isn't real, and at best people get tricked into indulging in the fantasy where it could be. This is the reasoning both phallocentricity and the notion of "traps" being gay prescribe to and that is very dangerous to real life androgynous people.

fig. 12 & 13 - *Fate Apocrypha*'s (male-assigned) non-binary Astolfo, in fan content vs the show

The second is to bend the gender of the androgyne into whatever binary gender one prefers them to be. This is a performatist notion, in that, whatever gender one presents as, one is for all intents and purposes. This might be the same gender as their assigned one, the opposite one, or either of the two binaries in case the person is intersex or unspecified. In the case of trans and non-binary characters this might be blatant misgendering, while in the case of gender non-conforming ones it is still problematic, by reducing them to only one side of their expression. Sometimes the same character will be bent into either direction depending on the inclination of the author.

The thing to note is that the former technique is seen in the actual text of the show. The characters, both androgynes and their peers, as well as the show itself, reinforce their gender constantly, through speech as well as emphasising whatever bits of gender conformity they present. The latter, on the other hand, is something mostly found in the fandom's treatment of the characters from the show. To some extent this can be attributed to the fact that the canon of the show is made to conform to whatever social norms are in place, in an effort to make it kid-friendly — even if those

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social norms are those of bigotry; while the fan-content, by and/or for fans, has more leeway to indulge in people's deep dark desires and blatant fetishes. Generally though, because of anime's huge international fanbase, there is cultural exchange happening. Whatever meaning the original japanese creators intended, in their cultural context and with their set of values, and "encoded" into their work, international fans, in a vastly different cultural context, will "decode" it in a very different way. (Levi, 2006)

Japanese media tends to be different from western, here meaning american and american-inspired, media in the fact that, while both parts of the world prescribe to similar notions of traditional binary sex roles and what is associated with them, japanese media takes a more essentialist approach to gender while western media takes a more performatist one. In western media you might find a masculinised female character who is allowed to be "one of the boys" under the condition that she commits to that masculinity and often gives up core parts of her femininity. (Mizejewski, 1993) Otherwise she might be *stated* to be a masculinised, strong, empowered woman, but ultimately reduced to nothing more than a damsel in distress, victim, and/or love interest. (Pecora, 1992) Effeminate male characters meanwhile are discriminated against under homophobia and misogyny, antagonised and ridiculed. (Bruzzi, 1997) In anime, even just looking at the examples of *Hunter x Hunter* we've touched on, it is different. Masculinised women's androgyny is treated as a loss or sacrifice, a curse even. Meanwhile feminine male characters maintain their social status as men.

The androgyny of the characters in *Hunter x Hunter*, or that of any character really, can generally be divided into "good" and "bad" androgyny. "Good" androgyny is any combination of desirable traits from male and female gender. This might be beauty and strength, or emotional intelligence and activity for example. Because the androgyny adds to the already gender conforming traits, it is a valuable addition that makes up for the transgression of traditional gender that occurs. An example of this in western media might be Wonder Woman. "I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way", her original creator William Marston once said. (Finn, 2013) "Bad" androgyny on the other hand is any addition of undesirable androgynous traits, or the trade of gender conforming traits for gender non-conforming ones. Most Disney villains fall in this category, as ugly women, flamboyant men, and overall morally corrupt people. (Ellis, 2016) Because gender non-conformity is seen as lesser than gender conformity, swapping one for the other, even if what is traded are both positive attributes, like for example Bisky trading her pretty, feminine appearance for access to her full, physical strength, is considered a bad trade. If bad traits are added, possibly at the loss of positive gender conforming ones, like Melody losing her old body leaving her with a less desirable one in its stead, the kind of benefit of the doubt that positive androgynous traits would get, is not applicable, and the

androgyny is treated not only as a loss of positive traits for negative ones, but also has the loss of gender conformity packed on top of that. It's a double negative effect. In *Hunter x Hunter*, this disparity between good and bad androgyny is mapped onto the assigned genders of the characters though in order to maintain the male superiority of phallocentric ideology (Easthope, 1990) in the spirit of eastern essentialism, allowing the male characters androgyny without repercussions, while the female characters are made to suffer for it.

Straight people's images of androgynes are ultimately an expression of the conflict within their own attraction. (Pacteau, 1986) In feeling attracted to people other than themselves, they struggle with their difference and resentment for one another, all while trying to relate and find common ground between each other in order to live out their duaric attraction. The way they have found to consolidate this to themselves is by using androgyny as a means to an end, a fetish to resolve their conflict and bring the binary other closer to oneself. Sadly this poses the androgyne as nothing more than a sex object, a fantasy to be fetishised and an image onto which to project their own issues and desires. Straight people's fantasies about androgynes aren't actually about the real deal, so gender non-conforming, non-binary, intersex, and trans people. It's the same as what Laura Mulvey (1973) said about men's fantasy images of women: "The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies." Fetishism or erotica are dehumanising and an "assault" on one's dignity when on the eroticised, not the eroticising, end. Sarah Kent (1985) notes that this goes both ways for men and women: "This was not a conclusion arrived at glibly. To admit to sexual responses and interests despised in the opposite sex is difficult, especially as one wants to respect oneself and be loved by others."

In conclusion the androgynous characters in shows like *Hunter x Hunter* in the end don't really do anything for the good of real life androgynes. They reinforce the traditional gender they transcend instead of questionning it. Their existence as androgynes is undermined by reinforcing their assigned sex and denying their nature as a third term (Bruzzi, 1997). "Things that are nameless because their existence has not been acknowledged can neither be recognised nor properly considered." (Kent, 1985) They are not relatable to their real life equivalent, as they aren't representing their experience. They aren't there to be identified with *for* their androgyny but rather in spite of it. And finally they are made to be the object of a gaze, they make the androgyne viewer feel exposed, viewed, yet invisible for their lack of realism. These characters are only there for the pleasure of the straight people that fetishise the very idea of us. To quote Sarah Kent (1985) one last time: "Contrary to much writing about androgyny that considers it to be an impossible idealisation or a non-sexual state, most cinematic representations of the androgyne stress the eroticism of his/her ambiguity."

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