

Getting into the Schwing of Things:

Hunter x Hunter's Progressive Gender Depictions and Exploration of Non-Binary Possibilities

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis investigates the depiction of gender in Madhouse's 2011 television anime adaptation of *Hunter x Hunter*; a commercially successful ongoing manga (comic) series with a multitude of incarnations. The thesis examines three groups of characters across three chapters, respectively: androgynous men who embody conflicting attributes of hegemonic and homosexual masculinities; masculine women who defy traditional stereotypes via their association of domesticity with violence; and gender ambiguous characters who potentially challenge the established gender binary model by demonstrating loyalty to neither category. These characters are studied in relation to both Japanese and western gender norms to highlight cultural differences, however emphasis is placed on western interpretation through the application of western theories to the text and incorporation of western fan discourse into my own textual analysis. I assess the characters with an understanding that gender is not a biological prescription but a social construction, and observe how characters are easily able to adopt masculine *and* feminine qualities regardless of their implied sex. I additionally aim to shed light on how *Hunter x Hunter (2011)* refreshingly tests the notion that mainstream *shōnen* (boys') series are necessarily conservative in their alignment with normative gender ideals; on the contrary, *Hunter x Hunter (2011)* fearlessly challenges its viewers to question established gender norms and encourages discussion about the legitimacy of binary gender categories. Overall, I posit anime is an important area of study due to its growing popularity in the west, signalling a need to better understand the texts in relation to our own ideological perspective.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Anime, its History and Contested Definition	8
Chapter Two: Introducing <i>Hunter x Hunter</i>	20
Chapter Three: Depictions of Masculinity	30
Chapter Four: Depictions of Femininity	57
Chapter Five: Depictions of Gender Ambiguity	85
Conclusion	110
Bibliography	114

TABLE OF FIGURES:

Figure 1: Tsubone intimidates Killua.	2
Figure 2: Alluka protects Killua.	2
Figure 3: <i>HxH</i> 's logo framed by its four protagonists as they appear in the 2011 anime.	20
Figure 4: Chart from vol. seven of the <i>HxH</i> manga depicting the six <i>nen</i> types.	23
Figure 5: Hisoka attaches his "Bungee Gum" to Gon's cheek.	24
Figure 6: Killua develops his <i>nen</i> ability.	24
Figure 7: Hisoka's character design.	35
Figure 8: Hisoka's exposed torso.	39
Figure 9: Gon and Killua stare at Hisoka's crotch.	39
Figure 10: Komatsu sees Melk in an <i>onsen</i> .	40
Figure 11: Gokudera spots Lal Mirch bathing.	40
Figure 12: Hisoka's "Schwing."	42
Figure 13: Hisoka imagines "breaking" Gon.	42
Figure 14: Hisoka's "Elastic Love."	43
Figure 15: Hisoka declares "you're so good."	43
Figure 16: "Ah, how I long to indulge in the delight of agonising."	44
Figure 17: Pouf showered with flowers.	44
Figure 18: Pouf's "Spiritual Message."	46
Figure 19: Pouf transforms his face into that of Komugi's.	50
Figure 20: Pouf's façade corrodes.	50
Figure 21: Pouf's clones dissolve.	51
Figure 22: The dissolved clones combine.	51

Figure 23: Pouf overwhelmed by the king's praise.	52
Figure 24: Pouf screams "Ou."	52
Figure 25: Fan service featuring Asuka from the film <i>Evangelion 2.22: You Can (Not) Advance</i> (2009).	64
Figure 26: Menchi jumps into a ravine to retrieve an egg.	67
Figure 27: Menchi wields her kitchen knives.	67
Figure 28: Machi preparing to reconnect Hisoka's severed forearm.	69
Figure 29: Machi uses her <i>nen</i> to lynch citizens.	70
Figure 30: Machi puppeteers people to shoot citizens.	70
Figure 31: Pike imprisons Shizuku in his web cage.	71
Figure 32: Shizuku escapes the cage with her vacuum cleaner Blinky.	71
Figure 33: Shizuku and Blinky after defeating Pike.	72
Figure 34: Bisky pre-transformation.	75
Figure 35: Bisky post-transformation.	75
Figure 36: Usagi post-transformation as seen in <i>Sailor Moon Crystal</i> (2014).	76
Figure 37: Bisky post-transformation.	76
Figure 38: Palm's introduction.	79
Figure 39: Coffee trickles down Palm's chin.	79
Figure 40: Cheadle as she appears in episode 144 "Approval x And x Coalition."	82
Figure 41: Alluka's shrine-maiden outfit.	89
Figure 42: Alluka reunites with Killua.	89
Figure 43: Poll results for Alluka's gender.	91
Figure 44: "Nanika" or "Something."	95
Figure 45: Something grants Killua's wish.	95

Figure 46: Comparison of Pitou in the manga versus the anime.	101
Figure 47: Poll results from Pitou's gender.	102
Figure 48: Pitou shortly after their birth.	104
Figure 49: Pitou greeting Youpi after his birth.	104

INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with the series *Hunter x Hunter* (2011) (typically pronounced “Hunter Hunter”) occurred shortly after my discovery of anime as a soon-to-be BA-graduate in 2014. It would be an understatement to say I was merely a reluctant fan of the foreign art form; having spent my earlier undergraduate years nurturing a passion for classical Hollywood cinema, nothing was further from my sights than anime. Despite my reluctance, I soon retracted my hasty criticisms of the animated cultural medium, finding it far more compelling and diverse than my initial impressions of childhood classics such as *Cardcaptors* and *Dragon Ball Z* led me to assume.¹ Yet, the *shōnen* (boys’) anime television series *Hunter x Hunter* (2011) (henceforth *HxH*) made a lasting negative impression after it first entered my field of vision on the banner of an internet blogger’s webpage: the highly stylised character designs and adventure-heavy plot appeared childish and unworthy of academic attention. When I diffidently watched the series over a year later however, I was surprised by *HxH*’s subtle complexity and subversive undertones. Not only does the anime delve into the intricate psychology of human nature and explore blurred boundary between good and evil, it does so at an expertly controlled pace with the animation quality one should expect from its seasoned creator studio Madhouse.² Yet the aspect of the series which truly excited my academic interest was the fascinating and highly progressive portrayal of gender, notably *HxH*’s subversion of gender normativity, and the projection of the contemporary liberal idea that sex, gender and sexuality are not necessarily correlated, nor biologically determined.

¹ Note the series mentioned (*Dragon Ball Z* and the English release of *Cardcaptor Sakura*) which aired on *Cartoon Network* during my childhood were heavily edited, English-dubbed, “child-friendly” versions of the series aimed at teenagers and young adults. With major plot points removed and characters’ personality aspects altered in the pursuit of a younger target audience, these revised series greatly appealed to my 10-year-old-self but failed to pique my interests as a teenager.

² With such acclaimed classics as *Death Note* (2006-2007), *Nana* (2006-2007), *Paprika* (2006) and *Perfect Blue* (1997) to its name.

Take a scene from episode 140, “Join Battle x And x Open Battle.” As *HxH*’s final story arc builds to a climax, child protagonist Killua escapes his family’s lavish but stifling mansion with his housebound younger sibling Alluka in tow. The two are halted at the front entrance by the family’s staunch, male head butler Gotoh, whom they ask to accompany them. However Killua and Alluka are less enthused when the female butler Tsubone towers over the siblings demanding she escort them herself. Tsubone’s intimidating and masculine appearance

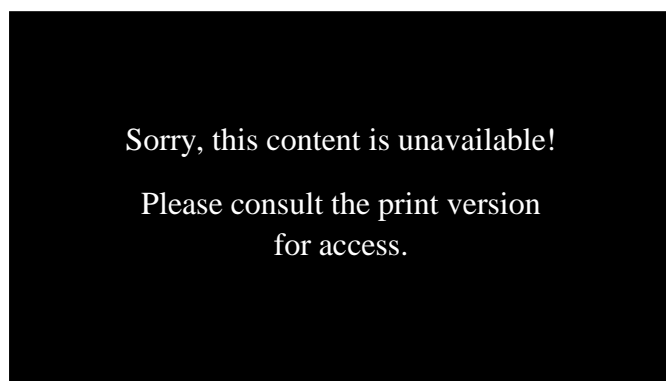


Figure 1: Tsubone intimidates Killua.



Figure 2: Alluka protects Killua.

is reminiscent of Miss Trunchbull from DeVito’s 1996 film adaptation of Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, which shifts the balance of power from male to female dominance (fig. 1). When Tsubone bends down to offer an icy smile, visible bullets of sweat dot Gotoh and Killua’s face. The sweat pellets indicate both characters’ recognition and respect for Tsubone’s strength and authority; Killua subsequently cowers and concedes to her demands. Amidst this tension, Alluka – who is a “sister” to Killua, a “brother” to their other siblings and an

“object” to their parents – interjects, protecting Killua from Tsubone’s aggression (fig. 2). At this point, the balance of power shifts from a masculine woman to a child of ambiguous gender: Alluka holds out a hand and kindly asks Tsubone for the nail of her little finger. Tsubone smiles and complies, peeling her own nail off without a wince of pain. Of all the players in this scene, it is the gender ambiguous character, the one many fans speculate to be transgender, who holds

the greatest amount of power. This short interchange between Killua, Tsubone, and Alluka illustrates the altered hierarchy of patriarchal systems prevalent in parts of the series: men submit to women's authority, and all submit to the potentially non-binary gendered character who takes complete control of the situation.

The interchange between Killua, Tsubone and Alluka is rich with subversive undertones, which begs a number of intriguing questions about the significance of traditional gender norms in patriarchal society. While *HxH* challenges traditional Western stereotypes, the Western viewer does not fully comprehend the extent to which characters challenge Japanese gender normativity. Furthermore, I am left to wonder whether *HxH* is unique in its portrayal of gender, or if other *shōnen* anime follow the same line of thought. This thesis aims to answer such questions by crafting an argument which highlights *HxH*'s uniqueness in its approach to gender normativity; my study explores the series' embodiment and possible encouragement of liberal postmodern theories regarding gender. The primary goal of this thesis is to investigate the characters' unique gender identities, analysing these in relation to Western and Japanese gender norms to assess their potential displacement from traditional gender conceptualisations. It is key to note that while Butler will not be explicitly referenced throughout my analysis, this thesis subscribes to her theory that gender is a "*a corporeal style*, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "*performative*" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 177). It is therefore understood that masculinity and femininity are not only social (and cultural) constructions, but necessarily institutionalised through repetitive acts; through *performance*. With this in mind, the following section outlines the general structure of this thesis and briefly summarises its various chapters.

The first two chapters in this thesis provide the reader with necessary contextual information regarding anime in general and my focus text *HxH*. The first chapter functions as a means to introduce anime to potential laypersons. I explore the history of anime's popularity

in the West, focusing on key academic arguments regarding the medium's hotly debated definition. This chapter also focuses on the development of Western anime scholarship since its inception in the 1980s, and briefly studies anime's stylistic conventions to better contextualise *HxH* in relation to the medium. The second chapter offers the reader necessary background information regarding *HxH*, briefly summarising the series' narrative, illustrating its popularity and commercial success, and justifying its viability as a rich object of study in need of more detailed analysis.

The remaining third, fourth and fifth chapters analyse *HxH*'s male, female, and gender ambiguous characters respectively. I discuss how masculinity, femininity, and potentially non-binary identities are depicted throughout the series as well as their reception by viewers. Chapter Three focuses on Hisoka and Shaiapouf to examine how the two men exhibit homosexual leanings and embrace effeminacy, ascertaining how *HxH* projects such transgressions. I argue the two characters become what Lester phrases to be "gender nonconformists," who "adopt gendered traits that are stereotypically associated with members of the opposite sex" (4). Hisoka and Shaiapouf's androgynous appearance furthers their nonconformity as androgyny blurs the line between masculinity and its supposed antithesis, femininity. Connell's ideas regarding Western hegemonic masculinity additionally situate Hisoka and Shaiapouf at "the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men" due to their apparent homosexuality (78). Hisoka's "schwing," – referenced in the title – is a notable indicator of his sexual leanings. However, Hisoka and Shaiapouf's strength, aggression and dominance in the narrative contradicts Connell's definition of masculine inferiority. Instead, Hisoka and Shaiapouf create unique masculine identities that trespass institutionalised gender boundaries. This chapter analyses such identities in relation to traditional Western hegemonic masculinity in order to highlight how *HxH* unapologetically represents and celebrates alternative masculine ideals. The chapter also takes into account Japanese masculinity to assess where Western ideals

differ, placing *HxH* in its sociocultural context to better understand how the series rejects or aligns with Japanese normativity.

Chapter Four broadens the scope of analysis by studying six of the series' women. In a similar vein to the third chapter, this fourth chapter analyses feminine identities in relation to traditional Western and Japanese femininity. However, this chapter places greater emphasis on the *Japanese* context, exploring the curious way these women reject the patriarchal structures which bind them to a greater extent in Japan. *HxH*'s somewhat radical depiction of women stands apart from other Japanese media in this regard. The first section of this chapter studies Menchi, Machi, and Shizuku, who wield domestic objects as murderous weapons to transform the domestic space into a battlefield. I argue that by attaching domesticity to their characters, the series acknowledges the space women typically occupy in patriarchal societies; however the association of domesticity and *violence* reflects the series' rebellion against conservative conceptualisations of gender. Biscuit Krueger and Palm Siberia receive attention in the second half of the chapter for the way these two women parody typical depictions of women in anime (and manga). Bisky performs an inverted magical girl transformation of sorts, where she transforms from a fragile little girl into a Hulk-esque woman who dwarfs her male foes. Palm's disruptive interest in romance borders on the grotesque, and it is only when such thoughts become obsolete that she is able to aid the protagonists in their mission. Finally, I discuss Cheadle as a prime example of a career woman who climbs the ranks in the political sphere; a stark contrast from Japan's current situation where women occupy a worryingly small role in government.

The focus of the final chapter changes somewhat in order to accommodate my study of the series' gender ambiguous characters. As the series' authors intentionally create ambiguity around Neferpitou and Alluka's gender identity, rather than overlook this resolve I explore the intriguing variety of fan theories debating their concealed genders. This study is

performed in order to construct an image of the ways in which this series encourages online discussions about minority groups and potential non-binary identities. I maintain the same methodological approach to *HxH* and its depiction of characters, however my primary focus in this chapter is fan discourse. The main theories surrounding Alluka and Neferpitou's genders and/or biological sexes are explained through viewers' comments as sourced from various online forums. I analyse how these comments – reinforced with relevant literature – reflect contemporary ideas regarding gender and how the series provokes such discussions. This final chapter posits that *HxH* questions the legitimacy of the gender binary model and unapologetically challenges viewers to see gender (and potentially sex to a certain extent) along a spectrum.

The subject of gender is particularly topical at this moment in time especially regarding non-binary identities and minority groups. Olympian Castor Semenya has long been under the watchful eye of the media due to her being intersex, for example, and her participation in the 2016 Rio Olympics evoked predictable controversy. However, pertaining to the 2016 Games, Kahrl's *ESPN* article reports the IOC's announcement which allowed transgender athletes to compete without sex reassignment surgery – previously a prerequisite – granted they spent at least one year undergoing hormone replacement therapy (Kahrl, np).³ This policy represents western society's current progress towards more unexclusive rulings in the sports world, where binary gender categories are strictly enforced. However the controversy surrounding Mack Beggs, a transman who was forced to compete in the girls' wrestling league, indicates there is still much progress to be made towards full acceptance and inclusion (Robinson, np). Transwoman Caitlyn Jenner's highly publicised transition has also resulted in raised awareness

³ According to Petrow's *The Washington Post* article, one year is sufficient time for the effects of hormone medication to impact one's athletic performance creating fair competition.

of transgender in the media. *HxH*'s fascination with alternative portrayals of gender is therefore a particularly relevant topic for discussion in our current Western disposition.

CHAPTER ONE: ANIME, ITS HISTORY AND ITS CONTESTED DEFINITION

“Anime” is the current Japanese word for animated media and has been used by the general Japanese public since the 1970s (Patten, np). Essentially, all animated texts, whether made by Disney, Studio Ghibli, Warner Brothers or Gainax, are technically “anime.” The term derives from the English word “animation” and was only coined in the mid-twentieth century (Clements, 1). Clements notes other words used to describe animated texts in previous eras, including “*senga* (‘line art’) or *kuga* (‘flip pictures’), alongside the archaic *dekobō shin gachō* (‘mischievous new pictures’) [and] *chamebō-zu* (‘playful pictures’)” (1). Patten notes that “the actual Japanese word for cinematic animation is *dōga*, from *dō* (motion) and *ga* (drawing, picture),” which Clements identifies as a popular term alongside “*manga-eiga* (‘cartoon films’)” that later came into prominence (np; 1).

In Anglophone scholarship, the word “anime” has a more specific meaning which has been hotly debated since its introduction (2). Prior to the word’s widespread use however, Japanese animation was referred to as “Japanimation” in the West (Ruh, 7). According to Patten, this term was introduced in 1978 (cited in Ruh, 7). Ruh notes that the word fell out of popularity nearly a decade later due to the way it could be “easily twisted into a racially derogatory term by detractors (e.g. “Jap Animation”)” (7). Denison tracks the point at which the word “anime” subsequently entered English parlance by studying Western journalists’ reviews of globally significant anime texts in the late twentieth century. Denison concludes that between the late 1980s and 1990s, “anime” became better recognised in name and more general terms by the general Western public. Denison’s study demonstrates how journalists’ reviews of *Akira* (1988) tended to categorise anime into pre-existing Western genres and hybrids in an attempt to understand the hitherto unknown and unique cultural medium. Words such as “Japanimation” and “Japanese manga animation,” among others, would later be

replaced by “anime” in these journalists’ reviews as the medium became more prominent and accessible in the West in the late-1990s and early 2000s (Denison, 39).

Since Anglophone anime scholarship arose in the mid-1990s, the definition of “anime” has been widely disputed (Ruh, 8). Denison notes that anime is “a shifting, sliding category of media production that refuses attempts to pin it down,” highlighting the diverse nature of the medium and the subsequent challenges scholars face when defining it (1). Nevertheless, as Denison outlines in her comprehensive *Anime: A Critical Introduction*, many academics have offered various definitions and understandings of the medium, each of which are born out of unique and valid methodological approaches. As discussed in the following paragraphs, scholars’ emphases on different aspects of the medium have shaped their understanding of anime; different perspectives offer differing results. For example, academics who prioritise emphasis on the cultural (such as Clements and Tsugata), technical (such as LaMarre and Cavallaro⁴) or textual (such as Newitz) aspects of anime arrive at different conclusions of what the medium is. As a result, creating a universal definition of anime appears impossible. As this chapter demonstrates, anime is indeed a complex medium which is hard to define. However trying to “pin [anime] down,” to borrow Denison’s phrasing, is perhaps less important than gaining an understanding of the current discourses of Western anime scholarship. In certain fields (such as Japanese literature and cultural studies) which filter analyses of anime through a focus on genre rather than medium, this debate is virtually ignored. I assert the importance of such arguments to this thesis as understanding the current landscape of Anglophone anime scholarship aids in identifying the complex way in which a seemingly universal topic such as gender can be filtered through concerns with the cultural medium that expresses it. This is

⁴ I acknowledge there is some controversy as to the legitimacy of Cavallaro’s works and the use of them in academic writing, however I discuss them due to Denison’s mention of them in her debate regarding anime’s definition.

particularly relevant to *HxH* as it has not been studied to the same extent as canonical anime texts such as *Akira*, but nonetheless shares traits and tropes similar to other anime.

Early English-language anime scholarship had a particular interest in differentiating anime from Western animation. For example, Newitz, writing in 1995, focuses on describing the narrative and thematic content of anime's more graphic examples in an attempt to separate Japanese animations from their child-friendly Western counterparts. Newitz makes a point of stating that anime "is far more than just cartoons for children," addressing the common Western misconception that animation can only be for children (2). She follows this up by describing anime as "[often] graphically violent and sexual," and acknowledges anime's wide array of genres, which can "range from comic romances about high school students to pornographic tales of demons whose penises are larger than skyscrapers" (2). From Newitz's statement, it becomes apparent that anime is a broad medium covering many genres catering to any audience, unlike contemporary Western animation which seems divided between the polar opposites of children's Saturday morning cartoons and late night adult satire. Newitz's understanding of anime is constructed through its relationship with Western animation, and she defines anime through a study of anime's narrative and thematic content.

While early anime scholarship by Newitz focused on defining anime in relation to Western animation, later studies by Clements and Tsugata emphasised a need to define anime in relation to other *Japanese* animated texts. Clements' 2013 work identifies a tendency in the West to broadly categorise all Japanese animated works under the term "anime" in his book *Anime: A History*, which he notes is incorrect. Denison recognises his desire to situate anime "within a local animation production culture comprised of everything from cel animation through to puppetry, cut-out animation and stop motion" (4). Clements' definition and understanding of anime stems from a need to locate anime in relation to other Japanese animated texts and designate the medium accordingly. Tsugata's 2013 writings similarly

address this tendency in Western countries toward using “anime” as an umbrella term for all animated Japanese texts. Tsugata makes the point that this is too simplistic an approach and does not account for Japan’s early history of animation. Denison links these scholars by their emphasis on using the correct terminology: Clements stresses the need to keep anime separate from other forms of Japanese animation, while Tsugata problematizes the issue of calling all animated texts in Japan’s history “anime” (5).

Linking this to my focus text, locating *HxH* within the realm of Clements’ and Tsugata’s understanding of “anime” thus becomes a case of differentiating the series from other forms of contemporary and historic Japanese animated media: *HxH* is a stylistic descendant of Tezuka’s original *Astro Boy* (1963) which introduced a number of aesthetic conventions and production methods that would later define anime (I discuss this in more detail later in this chapter). It is separate from other forms of Japanese animation such as “cut paper” animation which Tsugata identifies as Japan’s first type of animated text (referenced in Denison, 5). Thus *HxH*’s status as “anime,” by Clements and Tsugata’s writings, in part privileges its aesthetic and production method. Taking Newitz’s above argument into account, distinguishing *HxH* from western animation can be additionally performed by observing the series’ narrative content, for example: the series’ inclusion of more complex themes such as its exploration of the liminal space between “good” and “evil,” or its serious critique of particular political systems, situates it outside the bounds of common American children’s cartoons and adult satire. Applying these scholar’s arguments to *HxH* reinforces its status as anime, but also usefully contextualises the text in relation to other Japanese and American animated products.

Denison groups LaMarre and Cavallaro together as scholars who focus on the more technical aspects of anime (9). Rather than defining anime in relation to other animated texts like the previously mentioned scholars, these academics take an interest in analysing anime in its own right, defining it through a study of its aesthetic and technological innovations. LaMarre

takes note of what he dubs the “animatic machine,” which involves a study of the technology and personnel involved in the production process in addition to the surrounding industry (Denison, 8). LaMarre illustrates how anime has a “limited” aesthetic which emphasises flatness and rejects realism in the same tradition as the limited animation found in some US television cartoons (Denison, 9). Cavallaro similarly notes anime’s flat 2-Dimensional nature which she sees as very deliberate and historically grounded (9). In her introduction, she discusses anime as a descendant of Japan’s history of art, which often emphasised a very flat aesthetic, forming anime’s foundations (Cavallaro, 5). The two scholars understand anime through an analysis of its unique aesthetic, sharing the opinion that anime distances itself from reality through its flat appearance. With regard to this thesis, recognising anime’s stylistic conventions – particularly its emphasis on flatness – is essential to my analysis in later chapters as I pay close attention to character design. With knowledge of anime’s limited aesthetic and its importance in categorising series and films as “anime,” one can understand that *HxH*’s characters are reflections of this; furthermore, due to the series’ limited disposition, one can expect obvious indicators of characters’ personalities visually expressed through their appearance (in addition to an emphasis on dialogue). I will discuss anime’s stylistic conventions in more detail shortly.

Putting these scholars’ methodologies into practise, one can identify where their definitions of anime differ. For instance, there has been much debate, specifically in fan circles, as to whether or not the popular Nickelodeon American-made anime *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005) and its sequel *The Legend of Korra* (2012) constitute as “anime.” O’Brien, for example, considers the series to be anime in his article, commenting on the visual, narrative and thematic similarities to anime of Japanese origin “such as *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, *Bleach*, [and] *Trigun*” (np). O’Brien argues that “it seems a bit silly” to label anime as Japanese-made products only, since the medium’s influence “now stretches far

outside the confines of the tiny island country in the Pacific from which it originates” (np). However, *My Anime List* (henceforth *MAL*), a popular anime database and forum, disagrees with O’Brien’s argument in the “Anime Database Guidelines” (posted by Kineta), and denies database entries of any animated series or film “where all work, aside from the animation, was done outside of Japan/Korea/China,” such as the *Avatar* series. Incorporating scholars’ methodologies into the *Avatar* debate, it is reasonable to assume that the scholars previously discussed in this chapter might be torn as to whether or not the series can be considered “anime.” LaMarre and Cavallaro’s emphasis on anime’s style and aesthetic would likely side with O’Brien’s opinion, which argues that despite its American origin, the aesthetic similarities of the series to Japanese-made anime would be enough to include the series under the title. Scholars such as Clements and Newitz might disagree, however. Newitz, who recognises that anime is a Japanese art-form with specific differences to American animation, would likely reject claims that the series be anime as it is not Japanese but American-made. Similarly, Clements’ prioritisation of anime’s cultural history in one’s understanding of the medium might not categorise *Avatar* as anime due to its non-Japanese origin. Clements and Newitz’ methodologies suggest that *Avatar* be considered an anime-inspired series, while Cavallaro and LaMarre’s arguments tend to offer leniency due to their focus on anime’s aesthetic rather than cultural uniqueness.

Note there is no question as to *HxH*’s status as “anime” in this regard due to its Japanese origin: Madhouse is an anime production company located in Japan which exclusively creates and releases anime products. Recognising its Japanese origin, however, is essential to my methodology as I interpret the series’ characters as products of their Japanese context (despite *HxH*’s fantasy setting and the characters’ non-Japanese descent) and thus consider them conscious representations (or challengers) of Japanese gender norms. By analysing these Japanese conceptualisations of gender through a Western lens, I postulate one

can identify cultural differences between Japan and Anglophone countries through contesting ideas regarding gender norms as expressed through the characters. Yet I also highlight how some characters reject certain Japanese gender stereotypes, studying the characters' subsequent transgressions and asserting that the series offers progressive insights and critiques. One must note Fennell, Liberto, Hayden and Fujino's writings on anime's cultural content, however. Fennell et al. divide contesting opinions regarding anime's Japanese-ness into two camps: those who recognise the animation medium as entirely separate from reality and thus acknowledge its cultural odourless-ness⁵ (Allison, Saitō, Napier), and those who identify Japanese cultural references woven through most anime texts – despite potential fictional settings such as that of *HxH* – as examples of cultural odour (Price, Azuma) (440). My methodology supports the latter idea as I maintain the importance of *HxH*'s cultural origins is crucial to our understanding of how it projects gender identities.

The previous paragraphs have very briefly outlined how several prolific anime scholars have approached and attempted to define the medium, as aided by Denison's study. Whether this be through differentiating the medium from Western animation via its content, separating it from other Japanese animated texts, or studying its aesthetic, each approach is valid and adds to a pool of scholarship which has been steadily growing since the mid-1990s. Taking the *Avatar* discussion into account, it is highly unlikely that scholars will ever agree on a single definition, making attempts to arrive at an "expert" definition futile. In response to this, Ruh references Hill's 2002 *Fan Cultures* as a "tool for examining the definitional limbo of the term "anime"" (6). Hill stresses the need to approach the study of fan cultures with a "suspensionist" position which acknowledges "the contradictions of fan cultures and cult media as *essential*

⁵ On the topic of cultural odour, Iwabuchi defines odour as "cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" (27). Fennell et al. thus define odourless-ness in anime as the "[minimization of] cultural references for marketing purposes," or potentially a result of "the nature of the medium rather than cultural white-washing" (441).

cultural negotiations that can only be closed down at the cost of ignoring fandom's cultural dynamics" (cited in Ruh, 6). Ruh applies this to his discussion of anime by stating that he, too, is not focused on searching for "a singular, 'expert' definition of anime," but on "[pursuing] how anime is discussed within fan and academic circles in order to explore how the meaning of such terms may change over time, sometimes taking on and discarding new connotations" (6). This chapter follows Ruh's example and prioritises an understanding of the current discourse surrounding anime's definition by both fans and academics over constructing a single "expert" definition. I also agree with Ruh's suggestion that the word "anime" "needs to be given structure, even if this structure does not point in the end to a singular definition" (7). Thus, the following paragraphs outline some key elements of anime's stylistic conventions and historical and global significance in order to properly contextualise my focus text *HxH*.

Brenner acknowledges that anime (and manga) has its foundations in historical Japanese art traditions which reach as far back as the twelfth century (1). Tsugata states that Japanese cinematic animation began in 1917 (25). The content of these early animations were typically Japanese folk tales and slapstick comedy, and each production lasted between two and five minutes (Tsugata, 25). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Tsugata groups animation production into two categories: collective production, which emphasised a more industrial approach that divided the labour, and individual production, where a single person "attempted to achieve artistic expression" (27). It was not until 1963, however, when a single television programme "pioneered the development of [anime], in terms of content [and] the look and feel of the show [...]" (Ruh, 36). Most, if not all, academics of anime agree that Tezuka's *Astro Boy* was the series which changed the face of Japanese animation (see Denison, 5; Clements, 116; Napier, 16; LaMarre, 145-146). *Astro Boy* was the first Japanese series to air on American television sets, and was the first of its kind to gain a large following in the United States (Ruh, 36). Its influence cannot be understated; dissatisfied with American television animation,

Tezuka set a number of principles which emphasised longer and more complex stories, reduced labour via fewer frames per second, and introduced commercial strategies such as merchandising (Tsugata, 29). Tezuka did, however, borrow from Western animators with regard to his series' aesthetics; the large eyes found on his characters were inspired by Western cartoons such as Betty Boop and Mickey Mouse (Brenner, 6). *Astro Boy* was the first weekly half-hour television animation from Japan, and was an international and commercial success (Tsugata, 29).

The labour-saving techniques developed by Tezuka would revolutionise the anime industry. Furniss highlights the use of sound and lack of drawn movement in categorising the anime as limited animation; the series' "camera movements" – the panning, tilting, shaking and zooming – are used to add dramatic effect to static images (135). As Denison details, *Astro Boy*'s animation aesthetic comprised of fewer frames per second (according to Hu, "sometimes as few as two frames per second were present"), using stills in close-ups and zooms, recycling footage (cycles), and animating only portions of a character's body such as the mouth or limbs (80; 99). LaMarre explains that this aesthetic was born out of Tezuka's proposal to create a television series on a low budget (approximately ¥500,000 per 30-minute episode), introducing a need to create a cost-cutting and labour-saving method (187). These techniques would come to define anime, and the limited aesthetic continues to be used in the majority of television and theatrical anime productions today.

In the tradition of Tezuka's *Astro Boy*, anime from the 1960s onwards is generally characterised by its adoption of limited animation techniques. In contrast to "full animation" which "employs constant movement with a minimum of cycles," limited animation "tends to utilise cycles or be devoid of movement to a great extent" (Furniss, 133). Whereas full animation requires at least 12 (ideally 24) different images be drawn per second of film, limited animation can use as few as one or two images for each second, with a maximum of around

eight images (Furniss, 134; LaMarre, 187). As a result, full animation achieves constant and fluid movement while limited animation commonly employs still images and apparent camera movement to create a sense of motion. It is not uncommon to find static images which are subject to tilt and pan shots to imply movement in limited animation texts. Sound is also used to a large extent in limited animation as a means to drive the story, prioritising dialogue and sound effects over action and movement. Furniss recognises that “[f]ull animation has an emphasis on visuals; in contrast, limited animation is dominated by its sound, typically in the form of voice-over narration or dialogue between characters” (134). Furniss additionally cites the anime theatrical feature *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) to highlight a common limited technique, which is to use a device or object to cover characters’ mouths as they speak (134). This is another labour-saving device which requires fewer drawings.

Madhouse’s 2011 *HxH* is a contemporary example of an anime which utilises the same limited techniques Furniss recognises in *Astro Boy*. An early scene in the pilot episode “Departure x And x Friends” demonstrates this: after protagonist Gon successfully catches the “Lord of the Lake,” a number of villagers surround the large fish. The low angle shot of the crowd as seen from the fish’s perspective is actually a static image; there is no drawn movement, but a side-to-side tilt gives the scene a dramatic effect. A zoom out to a high-angle static long shot of the villagers crowding around the fish follows. Though there is dialogue of the villagers aweing and congratulating Gon, there is still no movement. Finally, movement occurs in the following shot when a villager speaks, his words expelled through the flapping of his mouth; the only drawn movement in the shot. In a later scene, we are presented with a photograph of Ging while a woman’s voice praises Gon’s fishing feat as comparable to his father’s. There is a slow zooms out to an over-the-shoulder shot featuring the back of Gon’s grandmother’s head as she continues talking. This is another trope of the limited aesthetic Furniss discusses, where objects or angles obstruct characters’ mouths so there is no need to

animate their talking. An extreme example of this also occurs in the series' third episode "Rivals x For x Survival" where the first examiner of the Hunter Examination, Satotz, does not even have a mouth; his thin moustache twitches slightly as he speaks, but otherwise no movement is required. These examples demonstrate how *HxH*'s aesthetic aligns with Furniss' description of limited animation.

While *Astro Boy*'s revolutionary aesthetic and production method contributed to its international popularity, Otomo's *Akira* also greatly impacted anime's global following due to its striking narrative and thematic content. Otomo's adaptation of his own highly successful post-apocalyptic manga depicts a dystopian Japan in the wake of World War III. Susan Napier praises the film's impact on global audiences, considering it to be a catalyst for anime's growing popularity throughout the 1990s (5). Bolton concurs, claiming the film to be the "origin or ground zero for the explosion of anime's popularity in North America in the 1990s" (295). Napier acknowledges that at the time of the film's release in the West, "animation was generally regarded as a minor art, something for children, or, perhaps, the occasional abstract, art-house film" (5). *Akira*, which Bolton describes as "one of the most lavishly produced anime to date" displayed the medium's unimagined potential, graphically depicting a war-torn setting which unapologetically reflected an exaggerated version of Japan's own state post-war (295). From the film's aesthetics to its heavy political statements, *Akira* showed international audiences the potential inherent in film animation; notably its capability to provide social critiques by taking advantage of the virtually limitless scope of the medium to take bleak realities to a refutable extreme (Brenner, 11). The global success of anime as exemplified through the example of *Akira* "undermines arguments about Hollywood's dominance over local markets, as well as the U.S. resistance to foreign film products" (de Valk & Arnold, 111). According to Napier, *Akira* was a best-selling video in the United Kingdom in 1990 (5). Brenner described the film as "shocking [and] exhilarating," but most importantly, its "brilliant

visual style and weighty issues [...] left audiences wanting more” (11). *Akira* provoked a boom of Japanese pop-culture in the United States during the 1990s and beyond.

This brief summary of Japanese animation’s history has focused on two productions – *Astro Boy* and *Akira* – which had a major impact on anime’s development and international success. It would not be presumptuous to assume the success of any anime series overseas stems from these two works as a result. Understanding *why* these two projects succeeded globally is important to our understanding of the medium’s popularity in the West today and what foregrounded *HxH*’s international success. *HxH* continues many of the trends responsible for elevating *Akira* and *Astro Boy*’s popularity. For example, *HxH*’s graphic depictions of violence (notably the York New City massacres in episodes 43, “A x Shocking x Tragedy,” and 51, “A x Brutal x Battlefield,” which portray the villainous Phantom Troupe slaughtering citizens at the underground auction and on the streets after Uvagin’s death) spectacularly reject the notion that animation appeals exclusively to children, as *Akira* demonstrated decades before. *HxH*’s criticism of political corruption and exhibition of deluded omnipotence in the Chimera Ant Arc also deems the series capable of seriously tackling controversial subject matter without the use of parody or humour (a popular trope in animated adult satire such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*) like *Akira*. As mentioned, in terms of its production method, *HxH* utilises the conventions *Astro Boy* set in the 1960s, with its labour-saving limited aesthetic and complex narratives. Without the influence of Tezuka’s production methods on the anime industry, or the impact of *Akira*’s narrative overseas, it is unlikely texts such as *HxH* would have gained the global popularity and success it enjoys today.

CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCING *HUNTER X HUNTER*

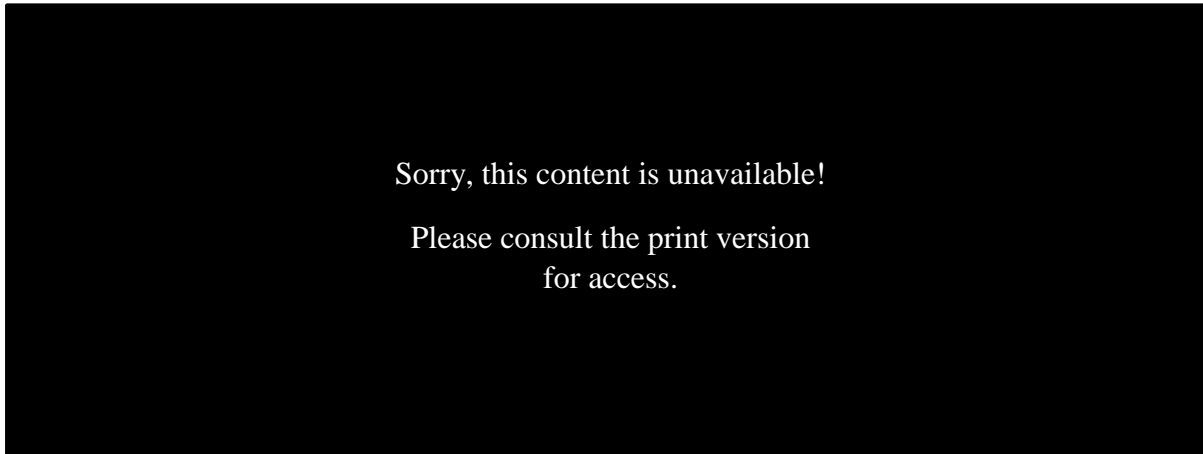


Figure 3: HxH's logo framed by its four protagonists as they appear in the 2011 anime. Left to right: Kurapika Kurta, Gon Freeccs, Killua Zoldyck and Leorio Paradinight. Source: <https://www.hulu.com/hunter-x-hunter>.

Madhouse's 2011 *HxH* anime is the most recent adaptation of Togashi's (creator of *Yu Yu Hakusho* and *Level E*) ongoing manga series. The fantasy adventure manga first appeared in Japan's leading manga magazine *Weekly Shōnen Jump* (henceforth *WSJ*) in March 1998; it has been serialised in the magazine somewhat infrequently ever since.⁶ Despite the author's recurrent hiatuses, *HxH* ranks as *WSJ*'s eighth best-selling manga with over 65 million volumes sold (Davis, 9). As of Davis' 2016 study, *HxH* ranked as the 24th best-selling manga of all time across all genres and publishers (9). The manga has been on indefinite hiatus since mid-2016 due to Togashi's serious back pain – an occupational hazard – much to fans' frustration. News abounds, however, of its slated return in late-June 2017, which, according to Ashcraft of *kotaku*, was officially announced in late May 2017.

⁶ Out of the near 900 issues which have been published since the series' start, *HxH* has only appeared in 352 issues due to the author's breaks. Since 2006, Togashi has spent more time on hiatus than he has writing the manga, much to the frustration of many long-time fans who often comically refer to the series as "*Hiatus x Hiatus*." One (unnamed) fan's frustration has materialised in the form of a useful fan-made website which provides statistics on Togashi's hiatuses, tracking the *WSJ* issues where *Hunter x Hunter* is both absent and present: <https://hiatus-hiatus.rhcloud.com/>

In 1999, Fuji Television broadcasted what would become the first of two *HxH* anime television adaptations. Nippon Animation's 62-episode series aired until 2001, concluding mid-way through the York New City Arc (the manga's fourth story arc). The arc's remaining events were adapted, alongside the following Greed Island Arc, into three Original Video Animation (OVA) series released by Nippon Animation between 2002 and 2004. Due to the author's disruptive hiatuses, new material for the original anime was scarce, resulting in convoluted filler arcs, new characters and the anime's eventual end. In response, Madhouse's *HxH* reboot aired its 148 episode series on Nippon Television from 2011 to 2014, loyally covering all seven of the manga's completed story arcs to date. The series has enjoyed critical and commercial success since its open-ended conclusion in 2014 which teased the series' Dark Continent Arc, continued in the manga.

In addition to the acclaimed series, Madhouse released two successful *HxH* films: *Hunter x Hunter: Phantom Rouge* (2013) and *Hunter x Hunter: The Last Mission* (2013). *Phantom Rouge* debuted in January 2013 and sold 357,976 tickets in its opening weekend, topping the box office and earning 456,799,000 yen on 257 screens, according to the "Hunter x Hunter Film Tops Box Office with 457 Million Yen" resource on *Anime News Network*. The film is based around an unpublished story Togashi wrote a decade prior and offers an alternate version of the York New City Arc. *The Last Mission* was released in late December of the same year and, according to the "Japanese Box Office, December 28-29" report on *Anime News Network*, boasts the third highest grossing film during its opening weekend, earning 157,970,861 yen, airing on 258 screens nation-wide.

As a studio, Madhouse has a history of creating successful and acclaimed anime products. The studio was founded in 1972 and produced a number of popular *shōnen* anime series such as *Trigun* (1998) *Death Note* (2006), *Ace of Diamond* (2013), *Parasyte* (2014) and the recent *One-Punch Man* (2015). It has also released a range of successful anime series

targeted towards the *shōjo* and *josei* (school-age girls and women) demographic, such as *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1998), *Nana* (2006), *Chihayafuru* (2011) and *My Love Story!!* (2015), which reflects the studio's ability to create a wide variety of anime popular with different audiences. Acclaimed films such as *Perfect Blue* (1997), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003), *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (2006), *Paprika* (2006), and *Summer Wars* (2009) were also created by the studio and have aided in elevating the studio's reputation.

For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to study Madhouse's adaptation of *HxH* due to the greater scope of material which provides more fruitful data for the gender analysis. In addition to covering more material, the reboot closely follows the events of the original manga, omitting the additional characters and filler arcs of the 1999 series. In accordance with the manga and 2011 series, *HxH* follows the adventures of 12-year-old Gon Freecss and Killua Zoldyck as they search for Gon's father; the renowned Hunter, Ging Freecss. The story is set in a fictional world where super-human powers are attainable to all but realised by few. Only the elite few who pass the deadly Hunter Examination and prove themselves to be among humanity's most capable beings (excelling in strength, intelligence and endurance) are awarded the prestigious title "Hunter" and officially able to unlock the secrets of the mysterious "*nen*." Essentially one's "life energy" or "aura," *nen* can be awoken, harnessed and manipulated to perform certain super-human functions (as knowledge of *nen* is critical to my analysis, I explain it in greater detail shortly). Upon completing the exam alongside the revenge-seeking (but kind-hearted) Kurapika and aspiring doctor Leorio, Gon and Killua continue on to attain and develop their *nen* abilities as necessitated by the various detours taken on their quest to find the elusive Ging Freecss. As is stated during the final episode's end card, the characters ultimately discover that what is learnt on the journey proves more invaluable than what lies at the destination. The anime's narrative is divided into seven different story arcs, however to spare the reader

unnecessary descriptive detail, I focus on and explain certain arcs when such information is called for throughout the thesis.

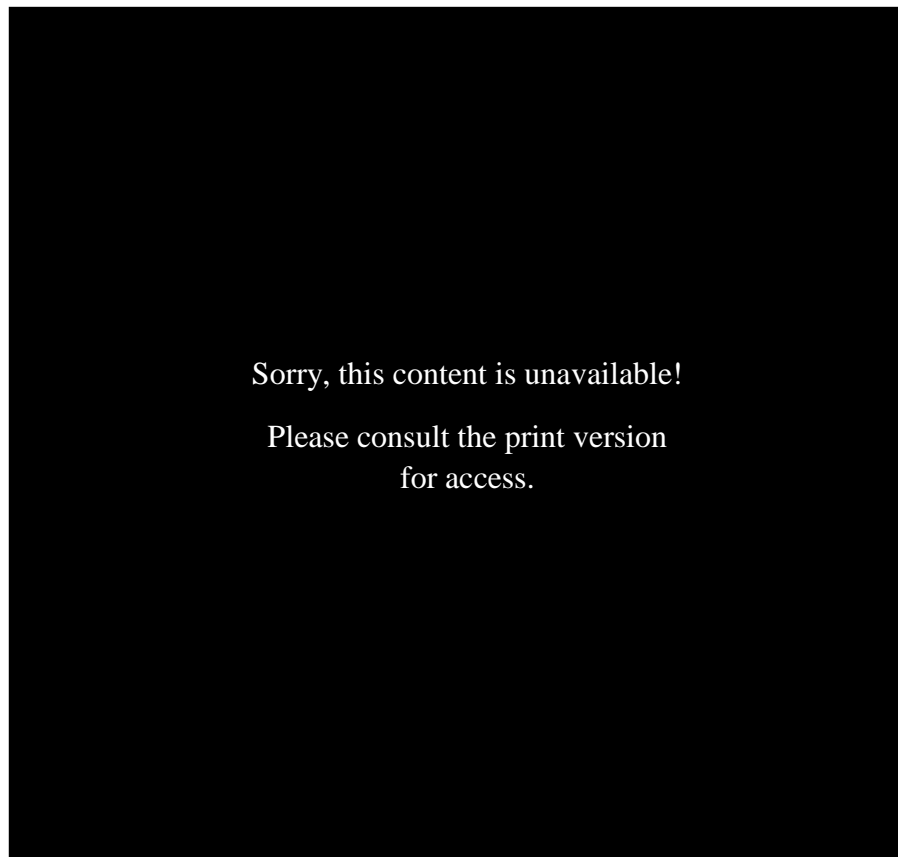


Figure 4: Chart from vol. seven of the *HxH* manga depicting the six nen types. Source: http://hxxh.wikia.com/wiki/File:Nen_type_hexagon_chart.png.

To briefly revisit and clarify the concept; *nen* refers to the technique of harnessing one's "aura" (life energy) in the *HxH* universe. Through knowledge and specialist training, one can manipulate their aura to perform certain functions: for example, *Ten* shrouds one's body with aura and can be used for defence against attacks, *Zetsu* nullifies one's aura to conceal the user's presence, *Ren* strengthens one's aura to a state where it can be used in combat. *Nen* is awakened by opening the body's "micropyles," which are (fictional) pores that release ones "aura." In the anime, *nen* appears as a translucent, gaseous substance which surrounds the characters' bodies and can change consistency and colour depending on what function the wielder wishes it to serve. Additionally, each person's inherent "*nen* type" falls into one of six categories:

“Enhancer,” “Conjuror,” “Transmuter,” “Manipulator,” “Emitter,” and “Specialist” (fig. 4). These categories refer to the method by which one is able to manifest their *nen*. For example, Hisoka and Killua are a Transmuters: Hisoka’s *nen* is manifest in his ability to transform his aura into a sticky and malleable substance he calls “Bungee Gum,” whereas Killua transforms his aura into electricity (fig. 5 and 6). Through intense training, one is able to develop their own personal form of *nen* subject to their type. As a result, the series’ inevitable battles are more focused on strategy and guess-work than outright brawn. In essence, *nen* serves as a way for *HxH*’s characters to cultivate their own unique superpowers.



Figure 5: Hisoka attaches his “Bungee Gum” to Gon’s cheek during battle

Figure 6: Killua develops his *nen* ability.

Regarding its characters, art style and story structure, *HxH* situates itself neatly in the realm of *shōnen* manga/anime; it exhibits a number of characteristics typical of a series targeted towards “boys and young men, aged from twelve to eighteen years” (Brenner, 31). For some context, the Japanese anime and manga industries divide their media output into four categories: *shōnen*, *shōjo*, *josei*, and *seinen*. These categories indicate both the gender and age of the product’s target audience: *shōnen* products are targeted towards teenage boys, where *shōjo*, *josei*, and *seinen*, are targeted towards teenage girls, women, and men, respectively (Denison, 24). In addition to differing art styles and content, Brenner lists a number of narrative and thematic conventions commonly found almost exclusively in *shōnen* manga and anime, notably “a concentration on action, battles and fighting, humour, honour, heroism, and family

or group obligations” (31). *HxH* exhibits all of these aspects to varying degrees. For example, most of the story arcs anticipate a climactic battle where either the protagonists or their allies must defeat one or more opponents. Additionally, heroism is a key theme which is questioned and challenged throughout the course of the series. Gon is sometimes faced with situations which offset his moral compass; due to his sheltered upbringing and simplistic outlook, he is unsure how to react when faced with injustice. The Chimera Ant Arc depicts him ostracising Killua and brutally murdering the character responsible for his mentor’s death, and the question of what makes a hero is posed: is this behaviour appropriate for a hero? Though Gon is the main protagonist, was his decision correct? Other characteristics Brenner mentions, such as “determination and teamwork” are displayed through the characters’ perseverance and desire to train and improve their *nen* abilities (31).

Where *HxH* differs from other *shōnen* series is primarily through its intriguing focus on character psychology and its realistic depictions of human fragility which outweigh themes of war and victory. Essentially, the series appears more concerned with internal battles than external ones. This narrative strategy is particularly evident in the Chimera Ant Arc where characters’ emotional states are spotlighted and the narrative is subject to unpredictable shifts due to their mood swings. Take Knov’s mental breakdown after encountering Shaiapouf’s aura in episode 106 “Knov x And x Morel” as an example. The series realistically depicts the incredible fear even one of the series’ strongest characters can exhibit, and refuses to paint Knov as a “failure” despite his subsequent withdrawal from the mission; he instead provides essential support and encouragement from the sidelines. The psychology-focused plot begs closer inspection of the characters, justifying this thesis’ methodology which necessitates close analysis of certain characters’ personas.

HxH also stands apart from other *shōnen* series due to its positive projection of gender subversion. While the target demographic of *shōnen* anime and manga is quite specific

(adolescent boys), *shōnen* texts tend to attract a much broader audience than that of *shōjo* (girls'), *josei* (womens') and *seinen* (mens') categories, gaining popularity with both adolescent boys and girls as well as adult men and women (Drummond-Mathews, 62). I posit *shōnen* texts often appear reluctant to challenge established norms (such as the gender-binary, heteronormativity and patriarchal structures) within their narratives so as to foster their already broad appeal: as Drummond-Mathews states, *shōnen* stories are crucially popular due to their “universal themes,” suggesting they promote mainstream, popular ideas (62). This thesis focuses on one area where *HxH* differs from many *shōnen* series: its unapologetic subversion of gender normativity which embraces homosexuality, the breakdown of patriarchal systems and acceptance of ambiguous gender identities. *Shōnen* anime generally shy away from issues of gender, though perhaps this idea is influenced by the comparative challenges *shōjo* texts pose to female readers; *shōjo* narratives are renowned for their progressivity, notably transgressing heteronormativity through the common trope of glamourized homoerotic relationships between male characters (Ogi, 246). *HxH* is similar to *shōjo* in this regard, and thus opposes some of the hegemonic realities present in other *shōnen* series.

This thesis primarily studies ten characters from the series, none of whom are in the main circle of protagonists (see fig. 3); on the contrary, many of them fall under the category of *antagonists*. According to a fan-translated interview with the author, Togashi intentionally created a simplistic protagonist so as not to restrict his creativity regarding the plot, instead shifting his focus towards more complex antagonists (Mittens_220). As a result, the antagonists are arguably more interesting to study; the characters I analyse are transgressive as they do not abide by the hegemonic rules of their gender. The text may appear progressive due to its exhibition of such behaviour, however the fact that these characters are antagonists and thus supposedly depicted as inherently “bad” demonstrates how this aspect warrants further analysis. Chapter Three assesses Hisoka and Shaiapouf, two male antagonists introduced at the

beginning of the series and in the Chimera Ant Arc, respectively. Both are highly capable *nen* wielders whose abilities surpass those of co-protagonists Gon and Killua. Chapter Four selects a variety of antagonists, protagonists and questionable allies who are scattered throughout the narrative. I contend choosing a mixture of (supposedly) “good” and “evil” women provides a broader scope for my analysis. The final chapter closely focuses on protagonist Alluka, who is introduced as Killua’s younger sibling in the final arc, and antagonist Neferpitou, who is introduced prior to Shaiapouf during the Chimera Ant Arc. These two characters play crucial roles in the events of the final story arc, with Neferpitou’s difficult death hospitalizing an emaciated Gon, and Alluka providing the supernatural healing necessary to revive Gon. Their importance in the narrative provides yet more reason to pay these gender-ambiguous characters due attention: despite their gender not being evident or confirmed, the series values and respects their possible gender-neutrality by not placing weight on the issue of their gender.

It is worth noting that author Togashi has a tendency to create characters with subversive gender traits: his two other anime-adapted works, *Yu Yu Hakusho* (1992-1994) and the satirical *Level E* (2011), exhibit transgender and transvestite characters. For example, episode 24 of *Yu Yu Hakusho*, “Terrifying Mighty Foes! The Senkish,” sees protagonist Yusuke engaging in hand-to-hand combat with demoness Miyuki. During their fight, Yusuke, suspicious of Miyuki’s gender identity, gropes her crotch, later explaining “the family Jewels have not been stolen.” There is no specific purpose or agenda behind Miyuki’s transgenderism, which can be seen as somewhat progressive; transgenderism is recognised, accepted and normalised within the narrative. The character Alluka, discussed in chapter Five, is a potential extension on this idea; Miyuki plays a very small role in *Yu Yu Hakusho*, however Alluka, who many fans speculate to be a transgender woman, plays a crucial role in *HxH*. Though not transgender, *Level E*’s protagonist Prince Baka, a highly androgynous man with long, blonde hair and feminine facial features, enjoys dressing as a woman and acting in a stereotypically

feminine manner. In episode seven, “Game Over...!?” Prince Baka disguises himself as “Princess Apparel” by dressing in a frilled, pink dress, high heels and make up. He appears to enjoy crossdressing as he does so of his own accord, and might remind one of the androgynous Hisoka or Pouf discussed in Chapter Three. Neither series has enjoyed quite the same level of popularity and praise as *HxH*, however; *HxH*’s transgressive characters have been received by a large, broad, audience due to its success.

Overall, *HxH* is a product which benefits from Madhouse’s prestige. The anime reboot has been revered by fans for its high production values; the consistent animation quality – which appears to improve over time – is not often, if ever, seen in a long-running *shōnen* anime series, and the story pacing is applauded in online discussions and fan-reviews. Additionally, the series has only two “filler” episodes: the 13th and 26th episodes are “catch ups” which recount the events of the previous 12 episodes, supposedly for new viewers. Other long-running *shōnen* manga adaptations (such as *Naruto* (2002-2007), *Case Closed* (1996-ongoing) and *Gin Tama* (2006-2017)) have dozens by comparison. *HxH*’s popularity is evident from the series’ repeat appearances on Japan’s weekly top ten rankings: according to the weekly “Japan’s Animation TV Ranking” tables located on *Anime News Network*, *HxH* featured 30 times between 26 September 2011 and 29 July 2013. Unofficial online anime polls see *HxH* predominantly occupying one of the top ten spaces; for example, as of May 2017, *MAL* has *HxH* ranked as the sixth highest rated series of all time with an average rating of 9.12/10. During much of its four-year run, the series was located in the third position. It currently has over 500,000 members on the *MAL* website and appears in almost 50,000 members’ “favourites” lists. On the legal streaming anime website *Crunchyroll* (operating since May 2006) it has an average five (out of five) star rating and is currently the tenth most popular series.

It is surprising – if slightly disheartening – to see such a universally acclaimed anime series receive so little attention in the Anglophone world. Only recently has Madhouse’s *HxH* been licensed in the U.S. with Viz Media announcing in early October 2015 via Twitter:

“ANIME ANNOUNCEMENT: Hunter x Hunter makes it to US home media! DVD, blu-ray and English dub! [#NYCC](#) [#VIZpanel](#)”

On 2 April of the following year it was announced that *HxH* would begin airing on the “Toonami” segment of the *Adult Swim* channel on 16 April 2016, premiering the first official English dub of the 2011 series; five years after the pilot episode broadcast in Japan. *HxH*’s first arc is now available as two volumes on blu ray and DVD, however plans for any future releases have not been announced. The series has yet to be released for Australian and New Zealand blu ray and DVD players, though note the likelihood of this occurring is uncertain. Thus the version of the series I utilise in my analysis is that which is available on *Crunchyroll* with English subtitles. In accordance with the lack of attention historically paid the 2011 series by western distributors, there is little, if any, information written on the series in English-language anime scholarship. This thesis attempts to rectify that fact, acknowledging it as a series worth studying not just due to its popularity, acclaim, and uniqueness with regard to other *shōnen series*, but its progressive attributes; notably its transgressive approach to gender normativity which challenges established norms and encourages conversation about LGBTQI identities. The following chapter begins this discussion, focusing on two of the series’ men and their subversive characteristics.

CHAPTER THREE: DEPICTIONS OF MASCULINITY

This chapter moves us into the analysis portion of the thesis, beginning with a study of *HxH*'s transgressive male characters who invade the boundary between Western masculinity and femininity. In this context, it is useful to take into account Henshall's warning regarding the risk involved in "apply[ing] the gender ideals of one culture to the interpretation of gender in others" (5). Henshall cites the Japanese "*bishōnen*" or "beautiful boy" – whose delicate feminine physical features and pure sensibilities are celebrated as the masculine ideal – as an example of the extent to which Western and Japanese notions of masculinity differ (5). While I agree with Henshall's point that one must proceed with caution when analysing gender representations in foreign media, I posit there is an exciting opportunity to greater understand and challenge Western gender norms *via* the study of foreign texts through our own cultural lens. By focusing on the portrayal of masculinity in Madhouse's *HxH*, this chapter illustrates the series' progressivity in its inadvertent rejection of Western masculine ideals. I argue *HxH* negotiates and paradoxically unifies aspects of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities (as defined shortly by Connell) by depicting them in tandem through prominent male characters; specifically, through the powerful antagonists Hisoka and Shaiapouf. A close analysis of Hisoka and Shaiapouf's character designs, relationships and supernatural abilities demonstrates how these antagonists engage in unique gender performances which subvert Western masculine norms; recall Butler's notion that gender is necessarily *performative* (177). Though this chapter focuses on how the characters appear in relation to Western notions of masculinity, I additionally detail how Hisoka and Shaiapouf align with *Japanese* gender norms to appropriately contextualise the extent of their gender transgressions.

To a Western layperson of Japanese pop culture, unaware of the cultural context in which *HxH* was created, Hisoka and Shaiapouf's masculine performances, which refute

heteronormativity and revel in effeminacy, undermine traditional masculine stereotypes. The antagonists appear deviant in their amalgamation of hegemonic and homosexual masculinities: alongside their feminine attributes and heteronormative disobedience, Hisoka and Shaiapouf harbour incredible strength, lust after power and assert their masculine dominance throughout the narrative. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the dominant masculine ideals in a given historical context which serve to hold patriarchal systems in place (77). In relation to this, Kupers states that current Western hegemonic masculinity dictates “a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, [and] homophobia” (716). Though Connell notes hegemonic masculinity is by nature constantly changing, this chapter interprets Kupers’ above assessment as currently accepted dominant masculine traits in the Western world; one might consider these traits stereotypically masculine, or traditional masculinity (76). A natural antithesis of hegemonic masculinity is homosexual masculinity, a subordinated masculinity which “in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity,” encompassing qualities such as emotional weakness and vulnerability through practices typically associated with women and femininity (Connell, 58). With Hisoka and Shaiapouf donning feminine attire, dramatically weeping over small issues or finding themselves attracted to other male characters, *HxH* appears radical in its refusal to paint these characters as ultimately weak, inferior or subordinate as hegemonic masculinity would dictate. On the contrary, Hisoka and Shaiapouf demonstrate their incredible combat skills during battle throughout the narrative, oftentimes discouraging or defeating opponents by simply exerting powerful bloodlust. As a result, these men create a unique masculine identity – a smorgasbord of hegemonic and homosexual masculine attributes – at odds with the established gender boundaries in Western society.

Though Western literature on masculinity – which draws a clear line between hegemonic and homosexual masculinity – would likely consider these characters radical, can they be considered as distinctive when an awareness of other Japanese texts are taken into account? Moreover, how does Japanese masculinity actually differ from Western notions of the ideal male? Returning to Henshall's discussion mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the *bishōnen* is considered the ideal form of masculinity in Japan; he is young, beautiful and pure, and “may appear to many Westerners as the classic soft type” (5). His feminine face and effeminate nature do not in any way detract from his manliness: he may be strong and dominant, displaying attributes such as “decisiveness, fortitude, and a selfless devotion to whatever cause he is fighting for,” while also being graceful and pretty (Henshall, 4). It is not unusual to liken such men to flowers: Japan's national rugby union team is known to fans as the “Cherry Blossoms,” a metaphor which Henshall notes would fall flat when associating such delicate, aesthetic objects to Western icons of masculinity such as John Wayne (4).

Iida Yumiko locates a more recent cause for the *bishōnen* phenomenon – what she identifies (and critiques) as the “feminization of masculinity” – in Japan: the encouragement of male self-scrutiny and beautification in pop culture media from at least the 1960s. According to Iida, the “emergence of fashionable maleness” occurred “within a popular, modern, and capitalist cultural phenomenon that exposes masculine bodies to full-scale commercialization where powerful inscription forces of media-constituted aesthetics are at work” (58). Media of the late 20th century onwards encouraged young men to scrutinize and improve their appearance by littering their pages and screens with photographs of idealised male bodies (Iida, 58). In doing so, Iida identifies an agenda which leads young men to believe proper care of their appearance might earn them careers in the idol industries in addition to gaining attention from women (59). Iida also recognises a new pedigree of male pop idols in the 1990s who “typically displayed delicate and beautiful ‘feminine’ faces with smooth skin, often accompanied by

flimsy eyebrows, eye makeup and coloured lips, as well as an androgynous body shape and somewhat ‘foreign’ images as if they came straight out of a girls’ fantasy comic book” (59). These men are described as “pioneers” through their deliberate rejection of traditional masculine ideals, instead creating a cult of beauty which emphasised characteristics typically associated with women. Inevitably, such depictions of maleness have infiltrated anime, most commonly in *shōjo* (girls’) anime where feminised men are a common – even necessary – trope.

The *bishōnen* ideal alone reflects the cultural differences between Japanese and Western notions of masculinity, however Henshall goes on to mention the *kōha*, the “hard school male,” a type of hegemonic masculinity in Japan derived from the samurai tradition. The *kōha* reflects the samurai’s qualities of “selfless *gaman* (endurance), *makoto* (sincerity), and *isshin* (single-minded commitment) in the carrying out of his duties” (Henshall, 2). Additionally, the samurai figure was “supposed to be a man of Zen-like austerity who endured hardship without complaint, a man of action not words or finer thoughts, a man who set about his duties without asking questions” (Henshall, 2). According to Henshall, he was a man indifferent to feelings of romance and considered women to be no more than functional vessels designed to breed the next generation (Henshall, 3). Women were not even considered “favoured partners for sexual pleasure, for homosexuality among samurai was – in the view of one specialist scholar – ‘not merely common but *normative*’” (3). Applying Henshall’s idea to Hisoka and Pouf, one could assume the antagonists’ suggested homosexual leanings do not detract from their subscription to Japanese hegemonic masculinity: Hisoka’s predatory attraction towards Gon and Shaiapouf’s adoration for his king (discussed in more detail later in this chapter) aligns with Henshall’s discussion of the samurai tradition. However the association of homosexuality with femininity in the West entirely undermines the masculine ideal. Thus, as I discuss in further detail, Hisoka and Shaiapouf challenge Western hegemonic

masculinity by incorporating both femininity and homosexuality into their powerful, “tough-guy” image.

Indeed, Western and Japanese masculine ideals appear to differ greatly based on what Connell and Kupers describe compared to Henshall and Iida’s observations. While *HxH* could be read as subversive due to the mingling of homosexual and hegemonic masculine attributes, this is a particularly Western interpretation. We can infer from Henshall and Iida’s writings that Western notions of a hegemonic binary between heterosexual and homosexual masculinities are not always applicable in non-Western environments, such as, but not limited to, modern day Japan and its historical tradition of Socratic boy love. *HxH* is a product of its Japanese context, and discussing how the characters in the series are constructed - embodying a cocktail of feminine and masculine traits - is an interesting reflection on Japanese masculine ideals. It is also an opportunity to assess how our Western ideals differ, and how the characters might appear to a Western audience as a result.

HxH’s primary antagonist, Hisoka, poses a particularly interesting challenge to traditional Western hegemonic masculinity, and his entrance into the narrative illustrates his conflicting embodiment of traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Hisoka is introduced to the series when the Hunter Examination candidates gather for the first task in episode three, “Rivals x For x Survival.” He is addressed as “Hisoka the magician” and described as a psychopathic murderer by one of the exam’s applicants. Interestingly, in his first appearance, Hisoka dissolves a man’s arms into pink glowing flower petals for accidentally bumping his shoulder. Associating the antagonist with floral imagery is significant when reflecting on Henshall’s metaphor regarding the *bishōnen*; effeminate, androgynous young men often likened to flowers. Hisoka’s entrance into the story is a memorable statement, making clear his link to the Japanese *bishōnen* ideal. However, recall Henshall’s note that floral imagery presented in relation to Western masculine ideals (such as John Wayne) is comical at best; the

association of Hisoka with flowers – icons of *femininity* in the West – feminises Hisoka. Yet paradoxically, Hisoka marries hegemonic masculinity with femininity by demonstrating aggression toward his fellow candidate. Essentially, the flower petals are produced as a direct result of Hisoka's *violence* and *anger*, universal masculine traits. This character introduction powerfully demonstrates how Hisoka represents a challenge – albeit inadvertent – to traditional notions of Western masculinity which is built upon in the narrative via his androgynous character design and suggested homosexual leanings.

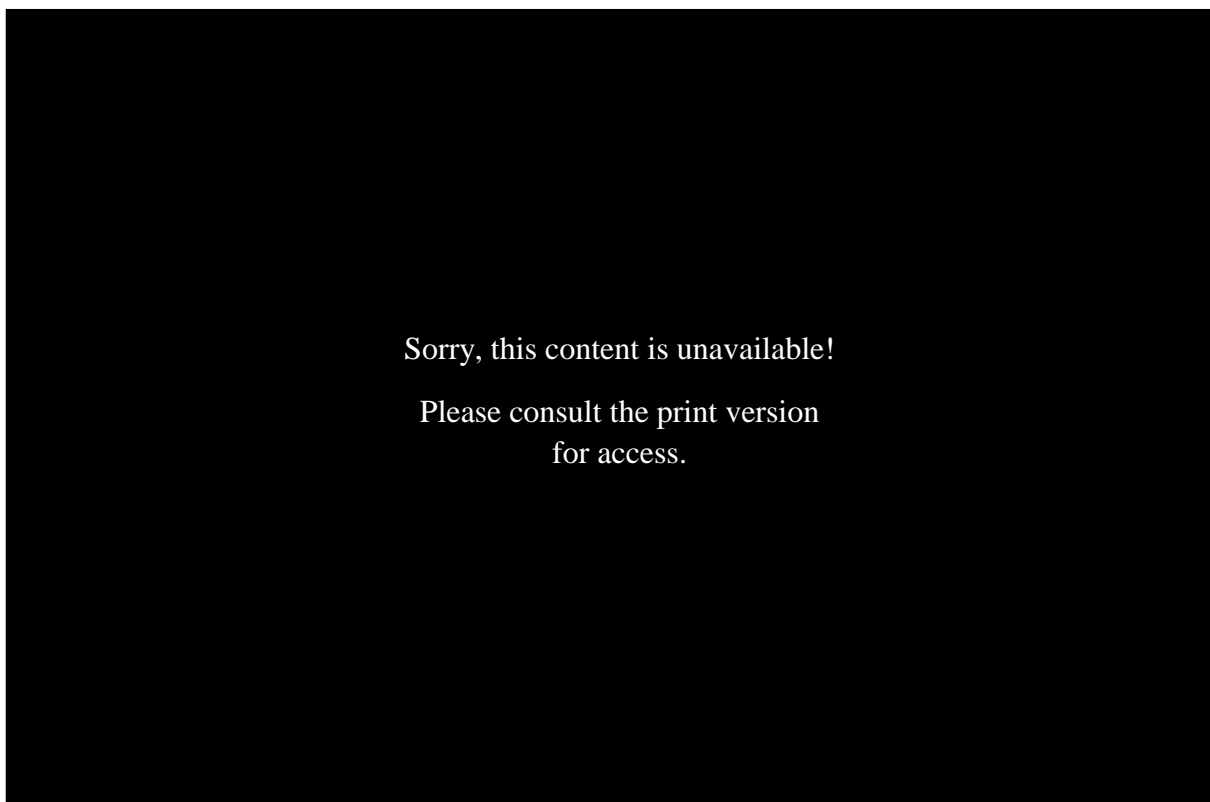


Figure 7: Hisoka's character design. Source: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/ae/b0/4c/aeb04c50a939515d43a4f80c1ad6ddbb.jpg>.

One's initial impression of Hisoka might place an emphasis on his androgynous appearance, as Hisoka's unique character design melds the masculine with the feminine. As pictured in the image above, Hisoka's eyes are narrow and heavily-lined with a bold, black outline which seemingly takes on the appearance of thick eyeliner. Though he has no eyelashes

– generally an indicator of the female sex – the outline of his eyelids extend past the corner of his eyes which *suggests* eyelashes. According to Brenner, such eyes are typical of anime villains and contrast with the protagonists’ large, doe-like eyes which suggest innocence and purity (42). The use of large eyes for naïve protagonists and narrow eyes for villains and antiheroes is so often used in anime and manga that one can typically judge a character’s personality based on the shape and size of their eyes (Brenner, 42). For example, the *shōnen* television anime adaptation of *Toradora!* (2008-2009) plays around with this trope and demonstrates its prominence in Japanese popular culture: the male protagonist Ryuuji Takasu, who is kind, diligent, and finds happiness in cleanliness, is misjudged as a delinquent by his classmates due to his narrow eyes and small irises. His physical appearance does not match his personality according to traditional anime (and manga) tropes, thus he has great difficulty in correcting his classmates’ preconceived ideas about him. Approaching *HxH* from a Western standpoint, however, Hisoka’s narrow, boldly-lined eyes might seem more appropriate on an animated *female* character; for example, Jessica Rabbit from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* or *The Little Mermaid*’s Ursula. Additionally, Hisoka’s heavy lids are topped with very narrow, arched eyebrows which seem to have been painstakingly plucked to perfection, indicating not just a consciousness of one’s appearance, but a need to comply with a certain standard of beauty generally only ascribed to women. Masculine meets feminine, however, in Hisoka’s facial structure: Hisoka’s male sex is evident from the sharp angle of his jawline and prominent Adam’s apple peeking through his collar. Brenner notes the importance of character design in anime and manga, stating that characters’ natures are “manifest in their appearance” (40). Essentially, Hisoka’s marriage of masculine and feminine qualities as discussed in the previous paragraph (and further analysed in following paragraphs) is visually represented through his somewhat androgynous face.

Brenner additionally notes that characters' natures are often conveyed through varying attire, accessories and hairstyles (40). Hisoka's androgynous wardrobe thus further accentuates his effeminate nature as his body essentially becomes a canvas on which his personality is visually expressed. Hisoka's clothes tend to be flattering to a shapely female frame and they dress Hisoka's body in such a way that he appears to have a feminine, hour-glass figure: the outfits he wears in virtually all of his appearances pulls in his waist and stomach while ballooning his hips, thighs and chest (fig. 7). He wears what appears to be a pale pink corset in his introductory scene over which he dons a cropped t-shirt that loosely drapes from his broad shoulders to cover the top half of his torso. His baggy, baby-blue capri pants, tied with a pastel yellow scarf, widen his hips and thighs, while his calves and ankles are tightly bound in yet more of the corset's elastic material. This elastic material is also used on the cuffs of his t-shirt and as accessories such as bracelets. In his later appearance, he dons drop earrings with heart-shaped beads balanced at the end. Hisoka sometimes wears high-heeled shoes, highly gendered and highly fetishized items of clothing, and below his eyes, Hisoka fashions a painted teardrop (left) and star (right) which sit in the middle of his sunken cheeks; needless to say, makeup is considered almost exclusively feminine in the West. His hair is a fright of fiery red and purple which is slicked back and gelled up to add a few inches to his height. To a Western viewer, the colour of Hisoka's clothes further emphasise his effeminate nature; pinks and reds are used excessively, with other colours such as blue, yellow and black used sparingly across the entirety of his wardrobe.

Not only does Hisoka wear what can be considered feminine attire, he is a character who puts effort into his appearance which highlights a self-conscious and self-critiquing factor traditionally associated with women. However as Green and Van Oort write, the past few decades have seen a rise in male self-consciousness: in response to the feminist movement in the 1980s, Green and Van Oort observe that commercial advertising has encouraged men to

scrutinise their appearance (698). Genz and Brabon observe a similar phenomenon, noting the various softer masculine identities which have emerged in the wake of 1980s feminism and as a result of “the popular media” (135). Green and Van Oort’s studies detect the presence of an inverted male gaze in commercial advertising which breeds insecurities about men’s physique and features; half-naked men in men’s magazines set the precedent with chiselled muscles, sculpted features and an aggressive stance (699). Green and Van Oort recognise that this degree of vanity in men is traditionally unusual and generally reserved for women (699). Connecting this to Hisoka, the antagonist seemingly embodies this post-feminism masculine “crisis” in his obvious attention towards his appearance: as discussed, he wears makeup, gels his hair and carefully selects and coordinates his outfits to feminise his physique. To acknowledge the Japanese cultural lens and situate Hisoka in relation to *HxH*’s socio-cultural context, Hisoka’s self-consciousness reflects Iida’s writings as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which emphasised from the 1960s a call for men to spend more time attending to their appearance. Where Green and Van Oort’s studies differ from Iida’s is the purpose of such self-scrutiny: the Western scholars identify this as a response to the Western crisis of post-feminist masculinity, whereas Iida identifies the converse in the feminisation of men in Japan. Hisoka’s character design overall reflects his self-scrutiny that, while at odds with traditional Western hegemonic masculinity which discourages feminine vanity, parallels aspects of Green and Van Oort’s observations of post-feminist masculinity.

In addition to his androgynous clothing and character design, Hisoka’s effeminate nature is suggested by the way he is sexualised via framing in certain scenes. In episode 68 “Pirates x And x Guesses,” for example, when Gon and his team encounter Hisoka bathing in a shallow, ankle-deep lake during the Greed Island Arc. Gon, Killua and friends transport themselves directly to Hisoka’s location, initially unaware of his being there. Hisoka is at first blanketed in a haze of mist, but as the fog clears, Gon’s group is presented with Hisoka’s nude

behind. The antagonist is virtually unrecognisable with his hair down and make-up removed. The scene is carried out in point of view shots interspersed between close-ups of the group: we first see Hisoka's nude form in a full, static shot, which is followed by a mid-angle tilt leisurely scaling Hisoka's behind – still shrouded in mist – from heel to head. This tilt objectifies Hisoka because it introduces him as a fetishized body before acknowledging his identity, exemplifying Green and Van Oort's inverted male gaze (698). This gaze is actively encouraged when the tilt repeats after Hisoka turns to face Gon and company; the viewer is given ample opportunity to inspect Hisoka's exaggeratingly chiselled figure (excluding genitalia) (fig. 8). This shot occurs twice within the same scene, spurring viewers to stare at the man's sculpted body and ogle his idealised physique. Due to the nature of limited animation, a realistic portrayal of the human male body is heavily restricted, however the exaggerated accents of Hisoka's physique – his protruding muscles and narrow waist – can encourage male viewers to compare it with their own and engage in self-scrutiny. This latter point reflects Green and Van Oort's ideas regarding post-feminist masculinity, but also places Hisoka in a role traditionally reserved for women; that of the object subject to the male gaze, embodying what Mulvey describes as "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (62). Though Hisoka serves as a pillar of masculinity via his physique, he becomes feminised through the method by which he is objectified.

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Figure 8: Hisoka's exposed torso.

Figure 9: Gon and Killua stare at Hisoka's crotch.

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Figure 10: Komatsu sees Melk in an onsen.

Figure 11: Gokudera spots Lal Mirch bathing.

This is a key scene which defines Hisoka's character through parody; to re-analyse this scene from a Japanese perspective, this "encountering a character bathing" scenario is very familiar to *HxH*'s *shōnen* target audience. The roles are typically reversed, however: the male protagonist becomes a voyeur when encountering an attractive, often voluptuous *woman* bathing. This titillating situation has been exhibited in many *shōnen* series popular in both Japan and the West: episode 55 of *Toriko* aptly titled "Hidden Truth! The First Melk Appears!" sees co-protagonist Komatsu stumble across Melk in an *onsen* (hot spring) and subsequently discover her sex (fig. 10); episode 75 of *Reborn!* titled "Secret Base" depicts Gokudera and Tsuna accidentally disrupting Lal Mirch by falling into the lake in which she is bathing (fig. 11). Fujimoto describes such moments as voyeuristic, when a male protagonist enters the private realm of women, allowing viewers to enjoy such instances vicariously and without consequence (95). The mechanics of this trope are played around with in Hisoka's situation: replacing a female character bathing with a *male* character bathing sends a certain message to an audience already aware of such *shōnen* conventions. This scenario associates Hisoka with femininity to underscore his effeminacy. Though this scene is comical and understood as parody, the way Hisoka's body is fetishized through the tilt shots discussed above provokes audiences to desire and want not necessarily the man, but the object: the body.

Hisoka's role in the narrative, particularly his relationship with Gon, adds another layer to his effeminacy: his suggested homosexual leanings. To continue with the example from

episode 68, as a nude Hisoka tells the young boys how they have matured and how “appetizing” they have become with each passing day, we are given a view of the two boys, somewhat shocked, staring at Hisoka’s crotch (fig. 9). Their eyes rise slightly, implied to be following Hisoka’s growing arousal at their presence as he lusts after their combat potential. It is not just their fighting abilities that Hisoka desires however; though this is often only suggested in jest, Hisoka does appear to have a genuine attraction towards the boys. For example, later in episode 68, after Hisoka joins Gon and Killua’s group, there is a short comical exchange between Hisoka and the two boys. After sensing Hisoka’s piercing stare directed towards their rears, the boys visibly cringe and hastily request Hisoka walk in front of them instead. The scene is carried out through close-ups and dissolves which openly display Hisoka’s intentions: a close-up of the boys’ rears dissolves into an extreme close-up of Hisoka’s narrowing eyes, followed by a zoom-out from extreme close-up to close-up of the boys’ faces reacting to Hisoka’s lustful intent. The scene’s pink hue and eerie music accompaniment gives the scene an appropriately disturbing tone: Hisoka clearly desires the prepubescent boys for reasons other than just their combat ability. His homosexuality is suggested to the viewer in these instances which crucially undermine Western hegemonic masculinity. Though this scene is intended for humour and is received as such by many viewers, there is a serious undertone here that acknowledges a problematic paedophilic aspect to Hisoka’s character. These deviant aspects in many ways discourage readings of the antagonist which celebrate his progressive homosexuality. Near the end of this chapter I discuss the impact Hisoka’s villainy potentially has on audience’s perception of this progressiveness, however note the link between homosexuality and deviant – almost criminal – behaviour here which persists in my later analysis of Shaiapouf and in the following discussion of Hisoka’s lust.

Hisoka’s fight with Gon in an earlier episode further implies the antagonist’s homosexual leanings. In episode 36, “A Big Debt x And x A Small Kick,” the long awaited

confrontation between Gon and Hisoka reaches a climax as the two battle in Heaven's Arena. Though Gon is focused and serious, Hisoka treats the fight as a sexual experience. The antagonist opens the fight by admitting (via internal dialogue) that he is "turned on" by Gon's determined stare. If this gave nothing away, the zoom out from Hisoka's crotch with "schwing" artfully oscillating around his glowing pelvis leaves little room for misinterpretation; Hisoka

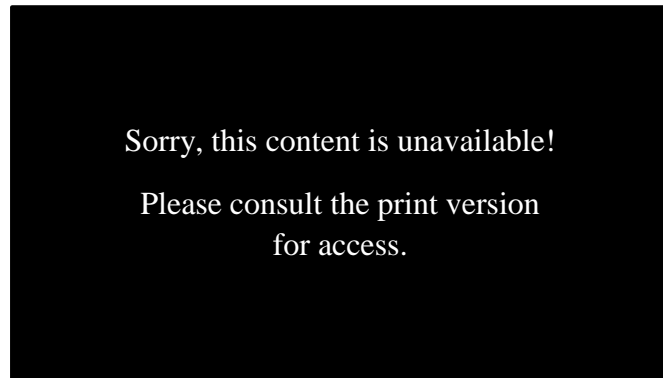


Figure 12: Hisoka's "Schwing."



Figure 13: Hisoka imagines "breaking" Gon.

is aroused by the idea of fighting Gon (fig. 12). During the fight, Hisoka clearly draws pleasure from attacking and accepting attacks from Gon. As blogger "Guardian Enzo" writes: "[Hisoka] gets off on the act of punishing and being punished by Gon and the thought of eventually "breaking him"" (fig. 13). Hisoka intentionally takes Gon's attacks head-on for the pleasure he derives from them.

As if the sexual undertones of this fight were not clear enough, phallic imagery is also introduced in the form of

Hisoka's supernatural nen ability. Mid-way through the characters' fight, Hisoka extends his finger, out from which he squirts his "Elastic Love" or "Bungee Gum" which carries strong connotations of ejaculation. Bungee Gum is a sticky pink substance which "can expand and contract" and "attach and detach" as Hisoka desires. Hisoka craftily attaches his Bungee Gum to Gon's cheek without the boy's knowledge. Perhaps in other circumstances the Bungee Gum might not have the sexual connotations I am attaching to it. However, in the context of this

fight, where there is so much subtext and sexual imagery, it seems appropriate, and no doubt intentional. Throughout the fight, Hisoka uses his Elastic Love to control Gon's movements, pulling him closer, dragging him around, and forcing contact with other objects (fig. 14). There is one particular shot which is angled such that it appears Hisoka is pulling Gon's face towards his crotch as he internally declares "you're so good" (fig. 15). This illustrates Hisoka's suggested homosexuality (with its paedophilic undertones), severing his ties to hegemonic masculinity in the Western world which necessitates heteronormativity. The fact that Hisoka easily defeats Gon in battle undermines this, however, as it reveals the antagonist's strength to be greater than that of the series' hero; the idea of conquest serves to emphasise Hisoka's dominance. Hisoka therefore mixes elements of hegemonic and homosexual masculinity to create his own gender identity – with questionable morality, however.

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Figure 14: Hisoka's "Elastic Love."

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Figure 15: Hisoka declares "you're so good."

Sexual imagery is a common thread throughout *HxH*; Shaiapouf, an antagonist from *HxH*'s Chimera Ant Arc, also participates in a scene which contains similar sexual suggestion to that involving Hisoka. Before diving further into this discussion, however, a description and analysis of Shaiapouf and his own lack of compliance with normative gender rules is necessary. Shaiapouf or "Pouf" (henceforth Pouf) is a chimera ant who was born into the role of the ant

king's royal guard. By default, Pouf worships and idolises the king (Meruem); his main task as a royal guard is to protect Meruem and aid in his pursuit of world domination. We understand that Pouf is an exceptionally powerful being due to the nature of his role as Meruem's advisor and protector; his combat abilities and strength are not often demonstrated but naturally assumed. Pouf is prone to theatrical, emotional outbursts, however, where he dramatically weeps and sobs, typically during moments when he fears his king's loyalties may lay elsewhere (which in itself tests the common notion that military men are necessarily tough and composed). Pouf's greatest enemy is the young blind girl Komugi, an undefeated master of the fictional board game Gungi. It is through Meruem's games with Komugi that the king discovers his humanity and questions his very existence as king, much to Pouf's dismay. While Pouf's hatred for Komugi is justified by the way she distracts Meruem from his ultimate mission, Pouf appears to have a deeper attraction to the king which is reinforced through sexual imagery exposed later on in the series.



Figure 16: "Ah, how I long to indulge in the delight of agonising."

Figure 17: Pouf showered with flowers.

Additionally, as with Hisoka's entrance into the narrative, floral imagery is often attached to Pouf's character. In episode 99, "Combination x And x Evolution," for example, Pouf is abstractly pictured within a frame of blooming flowers as he makes the melodramatic comment: "Ah, how I long to indulge myself in the delight of agonizing" (fig. 16). Furthermore

in episode 113, “An x Indebted x Insect,” Pouf is showered with flower petals as he tearfully questions the king’s actions through an internal monologue (fig. 17). The floral imagery symbolises his delicate, artistic nature, but also associates him with the *bishōnen* type; furthermore, this is a trope more commonly found in *shōjo* anime and manga than in the “tough guy” *shōnen* series which place an emphasis on action and conflict. Recall Henshall uses the example of flowers to demonstrate the differences between Western and Japanese masculine ideals; while in the West it would be absurd to associate masculine idols with flowers, Henshall discusses the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II who were likened to cherry blossoms as they, like the flowers, fell to the earth “while still fresh and beautiful” (5). Pouf’s likening to such men perhaps foreshadows his immanent death as he, too, is killed in his “youth” after sacrificing his strength to revive Meruem. From a Western perspective, however, Pouf’s attachment to floral imagery feminises him. This subsequently disassociates Pouf from hegemonic masculinity which, as Connell states, necessarily reaffirms patriarchal ideology and thus deplores that which undercuts male dominance (57).

To revisit Brenner’s discussion regarding the link between anime characters’ personalities and their physical appearance, Pouf’s feminine qualities are manifest in his androgynous character design (40). Pouf fits the profile of a classic *bishōnen* who values beauty and delicacy above ruggedness and brawn, challenging Western masculine ideals which celebrate toughness and aggression (Lester, 3). According to Brenner’s aforementioned observations, Pouf’s narrow, boldly-lined eyes – strikingly similar to Hisoka’s – denote his villainy (42). During his emotional outbursts, Pouf develops long eyelashes – notably feminine – typically wet with tears; an indicator of weakness and vulnerability, undesirable qualities in men according to both Japanese and Western masculine ideals (Kupers, 716; Pollack, 43; Henshall, 3). Resting atop Pouf’s eyes are a pair of narrow, shaped eyebrows which, similar to Hisoka’s, indicate a degree of vanity and self-consciousness. Pouf’s long face is framed by

feathery, blonde hair, cropped at the shoulders much like a woman's hairstyle. The ant's long and slender body is clad in a collared shirt with heavily frilled, ladylike cuffs and snug black trousers. Pouf's most prominent features are his antennae and the pair of butterfly wings which rest like a cape down his back; though predominantly humanlike, Pouf is a chimera ant who embodies the genetic material of a butterfly. When in flight, Pouf's wings reveal a colourful, attractive pattern reflecting the aesthetic nature of butterflies, which are easily likened to femininity due to their delicate outer beauty (fig. 18). Overall, Pouf's character design does not suggest he embodies an aggressive or brutish attitude, but rather reveals him to be delicate, well-groomed and reserved, firmly positioning him outside the bounds of Western hegemonic masculinity.

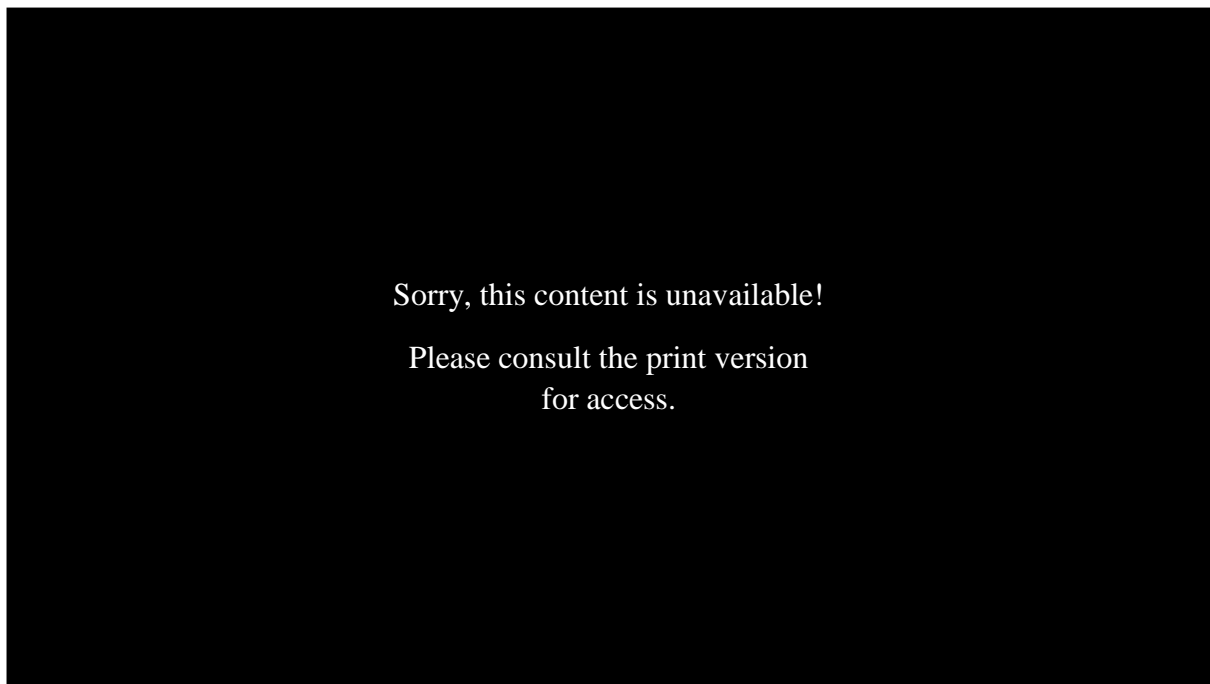


Figure 18: Pouf's "Spiritual Message."

While "real men" of the West are encouraged to stifle emotions – with the exception of anger – and maintain a "tough guy" exterior, Pouf falls short of such expectations by openly showcasing his vulnerability through theatrical emotional outbursts (Kupers, 716). Pouf is a highly sensitive, expressive character, especially on matters pertaining to the king. In episode

108, “Gungi x Of x Komugi,” for example, Pouf deliberates whether or not he should eliminate Komugi. As he menacingly stretches his hand towards the blind girl he is struck by the gravity of this act. He ponders the consequences of killing Komugi, entailing her to remain the undefeated Gungi champion and thus denying his king the opportunity to surpass her. At the realisation that Meruem would remain forever inferior to Komugi in this respect, Pouf theatrically breaks down into tears, shrieking loudly and clutching his head. He grabs his violin to console himself and proceeds to violently play the instrument surrounded by a cocoon of shimmering tears. He cannot handle his overwhelming sense of treachery at the thought of stealing Meruem’s chance to defeat Komugi and allows himself to react in an openly undignified manner. Traditional masculinity in both the Western world and Japan is rooted in the notion of strength; emotional, mental and physical strength (Henshall, 3). Pouf’s behaviour signals an involuntary rejection of these traits. It is notable that during a scene in episode 113, “An x Indebted x Insect,” the narrator states that Pouf’s emotions, which border on the fanatical, prevent him from thinking clearly during the protagonists’ invasion of the king’s palace. Essentially, Pouf’s emotions obstruct his “manly” duty as protector of the king; his masculinity is foiled as a direct result of his emotional sensitivity. Pouf stands in glaring contrast to the other royal guards, who loyally and honourably protect and defend the king regardless of his (or their) mental state as the Japanese masculine “kōha” tradition dictates (Henshall, 4). Pouf notably contrasts with Hisoka, who rarely allows himself to lose control of his emotions.

In addition to his emotional vulnerability, Pouf is highly contemplative and often broods or ruminates rather than take action. A key moment in episode 108 demonstrates Pouf’s tendency towards introspection: after the king reaffirms his divinity to the royal guards and resolves to kill Komugi, Pouf begins weeping about his lack of faith in the king. He feels remorse about his tendency to jump to conclusions and assume the king feels more for Komugi

than his mission of global domination. Pouf acknowledges his own tendency to worry by agreeing with his fellow royal guard Youpi's comment on the matter. Pollack states that according to Western stereotypes, "girls should be more emotionally expressive and (...) boys should be more emotionally constrained," considering anger the only emotion men should openly express and engage with (43). Ultimately, Pouf fails to live up to traditional Western masculinity through his passive tendency to ruminate, his inability to stifle his emotions, and his heightened awareness of his own and other's sensibilities. Pouf's incredible power, however, paradoxically demonstrates he has already succeeded at measuring up to certain hegemonic expectations of masculinity: using episode 106 as an example, Knov – among the strongest Hunters participating in the Chimera Ant Arc's palace invasion – suffers a mental breakdown after being traumatised by Pouf's terrifying aura. As the arc progresses, Knov loses his hair and visually ages beyond his years as a direct result of his trauma. Without lifting a finger or even sensing Knov's presence, Pouf's remarkable combat potential severely crippled his enemy. With this in mind, Pouf's masculine identity amalgamates aspects of hegemonic masculinity, which applauds physical strength and aggression, and subordinate masculinities, which encompass the offcuts of hegemonic masculinity such as emotional weakness, effeminacy, and homosexuality.

Regarding Pouf's sensitivity and tendency towards introspection, it perhaps makes sense that Pouf's primary *nen* ability – his specialised, supernatural skill – involves mind control. Referring back to *HxH*'s *nen* chart in the previous chapter (p. 25), Pouf is a manipulator capable of manipulating the minds of others as well as his own malleable body. In episode 114, "Divide x And x Conquer," Pouf demonstrates his "Spiritual Message" power which essentially involves him shedding scales from his butterfly wings to produce a drug of sorts effective in lulling masses of people into a trance (fig. 18). This particular type of ability – defeating opponents through psychological means rather than through brute force – is not a traditional

masculine idea; akin to poisoning, psychological manipulation could be considered the weapon of cowards and women. Pouf also uses psychological tricks to fool and defeat his enemies, demonstrating a keen understanding of the human psyche and ability to manipulate minds as he desires. For example, in episode 114, when protagonist Morel imprisons Pouf in his impenetrable cloud of *nen*-enhanced smoke, Pouf devises a way to trick Morel into clearing said smoke. He wraps himself into a cocoon to distract Morel as he secretly transports himself through the smoke one cell at a time.⁷ Out of uncertainty and impatience, Morel clears the smoke, unintentionally allowing Pouf to escape. By tricking Morel and escaping the situation rather than engaging in combat, Pouf acts in a cowardly manner. Such non-confrontation on Pouf's part emphasises this misalignment with Western hegemonic masculinity, and his apparent understanding of human psychology and emotions strengthens his link to femininity.

Additionally, Pouf's ability to deconstruct his body at the cellular level, – as demonstrated in the previous example – and furthermore *re*-construct his body into a different form, associates the antagonist with femininity. For example, in episode 130 “Magic x Of x Despair,” Pouf reconstructs his own face into that of Komugi's to trick one of his fellow royal guards, Neferpitou (fig. 19). Fetch discusses the link between gender performance and metamorphosis in her thesis, discussing the androgynous shape-shifter Envy and his ability to successfully perform as a male and female in *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. Fetch touches on the idea of shape-shifting as a feminine trait, identifying the value masculinity puts on “solidness, consistency and certainty,” where women are traditionally “unpredictable, dynamic and unbound” (Iida, 63; referenced in Fetch, 32). According to this theory, Pouf's ability to alter his appearance and take on forms both familiar and unfamiliar reflects his volatile nature.

⁷ Of interest, Pouf's cocoon formation produces maternal imagery which again links him with femininity. One is reminded of a mother's womb, which is host to and hosted by Pouf. While Pouf is cloaked in this cocoon, (...) he splits himself into *chibi* (miniature) versions of himself, each one a clone, quietly escaping from Morel's sight. In a sense, he becomes a new creation when exiting the cocoon, much like a newborn child.

This volatile nature in turn associates Pouf with femininity due to the perceived unpredictability of women, which additionally ties into Pouf's emotional instability that is as turbulent and volatile as his shape-shifting ability. However I would take Fetch's argument one step further and suggest Pouf's ability to alter his anatomy raises question about the very stability of the strict binary gender ideology prominent in the West; in a fictional world where one can easily

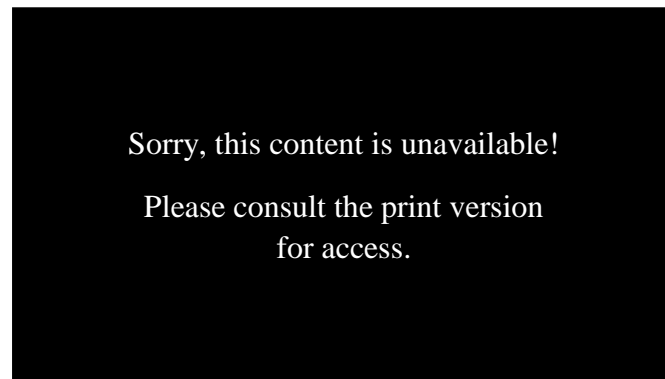


Figure 19: Pouf transforms his face into that of Komugi's.

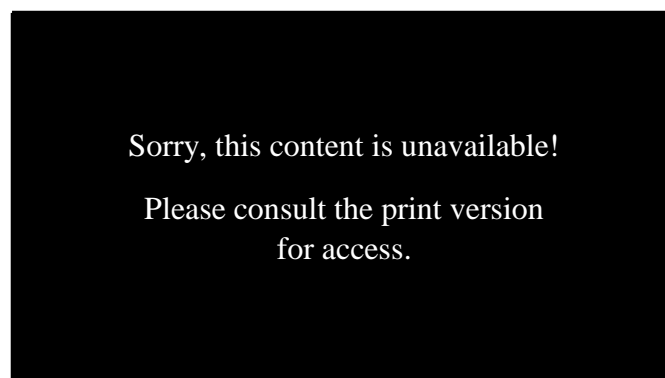


Figure 20: Pouf's façade corrodes.

cross the biological boundary between male and female, is the division between masculinity and femininity even necessary? I will discuss *HxH*'s rejection of the gender binary model in further detail in my final chapter. However regarding Fetch's argument, Pouf is a poor example of the "solidness" and "certainty" supposedly modelled by men, swaying instead in the direction of women's unbound nature, thereby failing to live up to the values instilled in Western men via hegemonic masculinity.

In addition to de- and re-constructing his appearance, Pouf's "true ant nature," what seems to be his natural form, is exposed in episode 127 "Hostility x And x Determination" when one side of his clone's face becomes that of an ant after sensing his king in danger (fig. 20). In a sense, Pouf's actual *bishōnen* face as described previously appears as some sort of mask where his ant nature literally and metaphorically bursts through, corroding the façade. Relating this to gender performance, Pouf's *bishōnen* face, angelic and delicate as it may be,

is just a cover-up, like that of make-up on a woman. His face is designed to be presentable and pleasant, but is subject to change and deformation when under strain. Traditional masculinity does not typically require one to alter their outer appearance beyond basic grooming to enhance attractiveness; note the previous discussion of men's solidarity and consistency, which would be undermined through the constant modification of one's physical appearance via makeup. Painting the face to cover imperfections is a very feminine practice, one that Pouf emulates to a certain degree. Additionally, recall the previous discussion about Hisoka's use of makeup; the antagonist dons painted icons below his eyes and demonstrates self-consciousness in the way he grooms, maintains his features and styles his hair. Like Hisoka, Pouf is clearly concerned about his physical appearance since he chooses to appear as a *bishōnen* despite having the ability to reconstruct his cells into any face of his choosing. Additionally, that Pouf uses this particular face to hide the imperfections which lie beneath demonstrates his desire to look presentable to society and his willingness to conceal his true nature in this resolve. Like Hisoka, who paints symbols on his face and chooses to wear eccentric clothing, Pouf takes pride in his appearance, and sees his appearance as malleable and under his own control. In this way, there is a defiance against Western norms, where rather than failing to live up to hegemonic expectations, Pouf rejects Western notions of masculinity.

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Figure 21: Pouf's clones dissolve.

Figure 22: The dissolved clones combine.

Returning to the scene mentioned at the beginning of Pouf's introduction, episode 128 – appropriately titled “Unparalleled Joy x and x Unconditional Love” – contains highly suggestive sexual imagery which underscores Pouf's manic adoration for the king. This demonstrates a separation from Western hegemonic masculinity through his suggested homosexual leanings. Just prior to the climax of the Chimera Ant arc, when the near invincible Meruem is blown to pieces by the “Miniature Rose,” – an atomic bomb which leaves a rose-shaped mushroom cloud – Pouf desperately searches for a method to revive his king. In what could be the anime's most bizarre incident, Pouf decides to feed himself

to the king: in *chibi* form, Pouf slowly dissolves his miniature clones into a wispy stream which enters the king's mouth. The image (fig. 21 and 22) of these individual clones dissolving into a greater mass connotes fertilisation, where the tadpole-shaped clones – the “sperm” – dive towards

the swarming mass of substance – the “egg.” After Pouf's clones enter Meruem's body, the king, in an almost euphoric state, comments that he is “breathing the air of paradise” as his strength slowly returns. An overwhelmed Pouf cannot contain his emotions over such praise; he imagines himself in a heaven-esque cloudscape with crashing waves surrounded by classical Roman pillars, floating naked and without abandon as he screams “*Ou*” (“King”) several times (fig. 23 and 24). He makes the comment that he has been taken “to the heights of heaven's

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Figure 23: Pouf overwhelmed by the king's praise.

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Figure 24: Pouf screams “*Ou*.”

bliss” as a result of the king’s praise. To Pouf, it is an “orgasmic” experience, to be consumed by the king and praised as a result.

Yet similar to Hisoka’s situation, Pouf’s homosexuality is underscored with a streak of deviance. To revisit the scene from episode 108, where Pouf briefly debates killing Komugi, his motive for doing so is clearly his affection for the king. It is his suggested homosexual desire, as is indicated in episode 128, that provokes his jealousy and nearly causes him to murder Komugi. There is a link between crime and homosexuality in this scenario which mirrors Hisoka’s paedophilic attraction: in both cases, their homosexuality is clouded by the criminal aspect of their desires. This feeds into my next point: the evident connection between non-conformity and villainy.

It is clear that Hisoka and Pouf do not conform to the current expectations of Western hegemonic masculinity and reject certain Japanese notions of masculinity. The characters are both bold anarchists who ignore the boundaries of their gender and perform according to their own idea of masculinity rather than that imposed on them by society; they meld elements of subordinated (notably homosexual) and hegemonic masculinities according to Western stereotypes. However, one glaring commonality the two share possibly undermines *HxH*’s potential as being a transgressive text in this regard: Pouf and Hisoka are both *antagonists*. They are foes of *HxH*’s brave and likable heroes and their goal to kill said heroes opposes the audience’s desire to see these protagonists grow and succeed in their goals. On the topic of *shōnen* anime and manga conventions, Brenner makes reference to the stereotypical enemy of any *shōnen* protagonist: “[he] is usually older, leaner, dressed in a more elaborate way, wears jewellery, and has narrow eyes fixed in a menacing glare” (28). Pouf and Hisoka fit Brenner’s description almost exactly. This raises questions regarding *HxH*’s presentation of non-conformity. Though Hisoka and Pouf are transgressive in their androgyny, suggested homosexuality, and feminine persona, the fact that they are inherently “bad” suggests that non-

conformity, too, is “bad,” or considered an undesirable aberration. Yet I would argue that despite Hisoka and Pouf’s status as “enemies,” these antagonists do not fit the stereotypical mould in many ways, and it is through their lack of villainous qualities that *HxH*’s so-called “villians” are redeemed, as is their unique approach to masculinity.

One way in which the viewer understands the complexity of these antagonists’ roles in the narrative is through their lack of hatred and hostility towards the protagonists. I argue that this in turn undercuts the notion that these characters’ subversive qualities cannot be admired or respected by the audience due to their status as “villains.” For example, where it is the objective of many Disney villains to intentionally bring harm to their foe (such as *Aladdin*’s Jafar or Scar from *The Lion King*), Pouf and Hisoka seemingly lack such motives. In fact, the two exhibit surprisingly honourable qualities: Pouf’s sole desire is to protect his king and it is only through such devotion that he feels the need to engage in combat with the protagonists who threaten the king’s supremacy. His battle with Morel demonstrates this as, once removing the protagonist’s weapon, Pouf displays little interest in harming him further. Similarly, though Hisoka wishes to battle and defeat adult Gon to satisfy his lust for combat, this drives him to *protect* Gon in his youth, quietly watching over him and even saving him when need be. Hisoka is essentially Gon’s *ally* until the boy matures into a worthy opponent. Hisoka additionally demonstrates loyalty – despite describing himself as fickle – when the so-called antagonist joins Gon’s party during the Greed Island arc, helping the young boy defeat Razor during their *nen*-enhanced dodgeball match. It is clear during his fight with Gon that he holds great respect for the young boy, enough to even *train* him at times, and in turn Gon respects Hisoka, stating on more than one occasion that he enjoys the times he and Hisoka battle. Hisoka and Pouf therefore blur the line between “good” and “evil”; though antagonists, the two are not inherently evil. This in turn allows one to assume their gender performance is not “bad,” but

rather a trait embodied by two men on opposing sides to the protagonist. Essentially, their being antagonists does not necessarily discourage the legitimacy of their subversive traits.

Brenner draws an important distinction between “enemies” and “villains” in Japanese media products. He makes the point that “enemies” are simply heroes fighting for the opposing team; they share the same goal as the protagonist, but just happen to be his/her opponent (47). If the story were told from the enemy’s point of view, they would be the protagonist (Brenner, 47). For example, the popular sports anime *Haikyuu!!* (2014) exhibits a range of these “enemies” who are literally fighting for the opposing team – the opposing *volleyball* team – despite enjoying friendships off-court. They are not inherently evil, they are necessary opponents who aid the protagonists in bettering their skills through their games. By contrast Brenner describes “villains” as “vicious, sadistic, dishonourable and excessively violent,” stating that “their actions make them monstrous rather than just an opposing force” (47). Dio from *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure* (2012) neatly fits this description: he feigns friendship with protagonist and step-brother Joseph Jostar in order to gain trust, yet later kills their father and becomes corrupt with power upon discovering the mystery of the Stone Mask. Pouf and Hisoka arguably fit into neither category Brenner describes; though they lack the morality necessary for the classic *shōnen* hero archetype, I would not describe them as “dishonourable” or “monstrous” in the same class as Dio. Instead, much like their approach to masculinity, Pouf and Hisoka embody a mixture of qualities which render them even more difficult to categorise. Their lack of inherent evilness therefore allows the assumption that non-conformity with regard to gender is not necessarily depicted as an undesirable or “evil” quality, despite being projected onto the series’ *antagonists*.

To reassert Butler’s notion regarding gender performativity, I argue Hisoka and Pouf perform counter to the Western expectations placed on their gender. Hisoka deviates from the Western masculine ideal through his androgynous appearance, while Pouf fails to live up to

the “tough guy” persona expected of Western men. Both are heavily suggested to have homosexual leanings and exhibit feminine qualities. These points naturally place them in contention with hegemonic masculinity which encourages homophobia and lambasts effeminacy (Kupers, 716). However both men paradoxically exhibit a number of hegemonic masculine attributes, notably their incredible strength and combat potential, which reasserts their masculine dominance. The two men thus meld aspects of femininity with hegemonic masculinity, creating a unique masculine identity which amalgamates hegemonic and subordinate masculine attributes. Though Pouf’s *nen* ability is coded as feminine and Hisoka’s serves to emphasise his suggested homosexual leanings, both antagonists are recognized within the narrative as incredibly strong and able men whose power likely surpasses that of the series’ four primary protagonists.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEPICTIONS OF FEMININITY

Following on from my discussion about *HxH*'s portrayal of masculinity, this chapter analyses the depiction of femininity in the series. This chapter examines the extent to which the series' female characters (mis)align with traditional Western femininity but also investigates the series' own cultural context, ascertaining the degree to which these characters reflect or reject the somewhat outdated stereotypes of women still prominent in much of contemporary Japanese society. Though the previous chapter emphasised the depiction of masculinity in relation to *Western* masculine ideals, revealing the text to be particularly transgressive from a Western perspective through its blending of masculine and feminine traits, I posit that the women in this series are especially subversive when knowledge of *Japan's* social climate is taken into account. An understanding of Japanese female stereotypes is thus called for and detailed throughout this chapter alongside traditional Western femininity. This chapter additionally compares *HxH*'s female characters with those in other *shōnen* series to determine if such depictions of femininity are necessarily unique. Much like Chapter Three, this chapter is ultimately interested in assessing the degree to which *HxH* rejects gender normativity from a Western and Japanese perspective through its characters, observing how gender performativity operates in this animated fictional text and whether this is consistent with other comparative *shōnen* texts.

Though Chapter Three primarily focused on just two of the series' male characters, I expand my scope in this chapter and study several of the series' women: Menchi, the "Gourmet Hunter," who serves as an examiner during the hunter exam; Machi and Shizuku, the antagonists who wield domestic objects as dangerous weapons; Biscuit Krueger, the 57-year-old hulk woman who disguises herself as a young girl; Palm, the woman whose romantic delusions halt the series' narrative; and Cheadle, a female politician. While these women have fairly important roles in the story, in a cast of well over 200 male characters and fewer than

100 female characters – none of whom are in the main circle of protagonists – *HxH* is somewhat lacking with regard to gender diversity. Yet I argue that though women have little place in the phallogentric *shōnen* world of *HxH*, the few that are included perform as equals to men both in terms of physical prowess, mental stability and general intelligence. Whether they are villains or protagonists, each woman earns the respect of the series’ male characters and viewers. This is done without the need of fan service (as I define shortly) or romantic subplots, which are so often employed in *shōnen* anime that one would struggle to find another series without such conventions. The following paragraphs outline Western and Japanese feminine stereotypes and assess *shōnen* anime’s alignment with such clichés. Following this, I locate *HxH*’s divergence from such conventions and contrast the series against Western and Japanese traditions.

Lester notes that traditional Western stereotypes consider women “passive, weak, deferential, soft-spoken, emotional, and nurturing,” a big contrast to the aggressive, strong and domineering traits traditional masculinity boasts as discussed in the previous chapter (3). With regard to how women have been painted in Western media, Mulvey’s influential “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” discusses Hollywood’s objectification of the female subject, illustrating how a woman’s primary function in classical Hollywood narratives is her “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (62). As Penley notes with regard to Mulvey’s idea, “the woman is a passive recipient of the aggressive male look,” reflecting women’s passive, submissive roles according to traditional femininity as described by Lester above (7). Mulvey furthermore observes that historically, women in mainstream cinema have little importance in the narrative beyond their eroticism which appeals exclusively to the heterosexual male spectator; essentially, women are largely expendable and placed in narratives for the sole reason of holding the male gaze (837). Due to her narrow focus on exclusively heterosexual male viewers (omitting homosexual males and films targeted towards a female audience), Mulvey’s theories regarding the “male gaze” have been widely criticised. However, I argue Mulvey’s ideas offer valuable insight into the

way *shōnen* media potentially projects women and femininity: unlike Hollywood films which are primarily categorised by genre, anime series are divided and categorised by the age and gender of a perceived target audience *regardless* of genre. The cultural medium openly acknowledges and advertises its target demographic and creates texts – of all genres – which best appeal to their defined market. *Shōnen* series such as *HxH* cater to the demographic Mulvey suggests most (if not all) classical Hollywood films appeal to and, in line with Mulvey's ideas, *shōnen* texts generally contain female characters who function within their narratives much like those in classical Hollywood films. In anime, the eroticism of female characters is referred to as “fan service,” which I define shortly.

I also acknowledge that Mulvey's writings have been revised since their original publication and she refers to *classical* Hollywood films in her analysis which were created in different social and historical contexts to today's Hollywood. In recent years, some contemporary Western films have made efforts to counter traditional stereotypes of femininity. Take *Moana* (2016) for example: female protagonist Moana defies feminine stereotypes by exuding independence, embodying a desire for adventure, refusing to submit to the wishes of her father, and being the hero of her own story (without a romantic interest). With Disney films historically propagating oppressive stereotypes through their damsel-in-distress narratives, – recall Cinderella who only escapes a life of domestic slavery when wed to a wealthy prince, for example – recent releases of pro-feminist stories such as *Moana* signal a promising move away from gender inequality in Western media. However this chapter primarily focuses on applying the feminine stereotypes epitomised through Mulvey's analyses to *HxH*. Despite feminist achievements which prompt the release of films such as *Moana*, Western society's patriarchal system still prevails as evidenced by the prominent gender wage gap: according to OECD Data, as of 2015 there was an 18.9 per cent difference between the average wage for men and women in the United states, an 18.6 per cent gap in Canada, and a 16.9 per cent gap

in the United Kingdom. This data suggests the West still has room for improvement with regard to gender egalitarianism.

This is also true for Japan which concedes to the notion that, put bluntly, men are society's breadwinners while women are merely child bearers; gender inequality is prevalent in Japan. The 2016 "Global Gender Gap Report," for example, ranks Japan in 111th place out of 144 countries with regard to women's empowerment (political and opportunity-wise), a disturbing statistic when considering the majority of industrial, developed countries (such as the U.S.) rank much higher. With Japan being at the forefront of technological innovation, priding itself on its forward-thinking, this information is problematic as it reflects an outdated, misogynist view of women. On the topic of a woman's "place" in society, David Chiavacci discerns that "in sharp contrast to other advanced industrial societies, the chances of finding regular employment [in Japan] are, astonishingly, smaller for women with higher education" (111). According to Chiavacci, the reason for this enigma is likely located in the attitudes Japanese men *and* women place on child-rearing, as the two genders consider it a woman's duty. These attitudes can be seen through the depiction of women in certain anime series which stand in stark contrast to recent Hollywood films such as *Moana* and appear more in line with the classical narratives Mulvey discusses.

However, Saito conversely argues for anime's *departure* from reality with regard to Japanese women and their animated representations (143). She specifically refers to the magical girl genre – which notably fits in the *shōjo* category targeted towards young women but has enjoyed popularity with men – as a major contributor to the contradictory images of powerful and influential women which have propagated in Japanese pop culture (144). In light of her findings, Saito suggests academics revise traditional methods of analysing "interpretive links between female characters and women" due to the discrepancy between Japanese women and their animated representations (143). I would posit, however, that while the magical girl

genre offers separation from reality, other anime genres present a very different view of women which better aligns with contemporary Japanese views, thereby validating these traditional methods of analysis. *Shōnen* anime has a history of marginalising and sexualising female characters much like Mulvey's observations of texts from Hollywood's classical era. In her writings on 1980s *shōnen* manga, Shiokawa identifies female characters' shift from "mere accessories of boy heroes" to aggressive, sexualised "co-workers" (114). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, I argue women rarely graduated from the role of "romantic interest" and/or "fan service" despite gaining greater roles. In the 21st century, though female characters play much larger roles than in the previous decades, they have yet to escape the categorisation of "romantic interest" or "fan service" historically cemented through *shōnen* narratives.

As Fujimoto discerns, "(...) the very fact that there is such a clear distinction between manga for men and manga for women illustrates the extent to which men and women have different value systems and occupy separate worlds in Japanese culture" (78). As briefly mentioned in this thesis' introduction, manga and anime are intrinsically linked as most narratives can be found in both formats; a large majority of anime series are manga adaptations which tend to have a cinematic aesthetic perfect for adaptation (as is the case with *HxH*), and popular original anime series are sometimes adapted into manga format (such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*). Like anime, manga are demographically categorised, meaning as Fujimoto states, there is a clear divide in Japanese pop culture between men and women's entertainment. Where *shōjo* (young women's) stories are often described as transgressive – a fantastical outlet for women who may feel like second class citizens to practice equality – the *shōnen* (young men's) world is generally conservative and notoriously phallogentric, reinforcing through its narratives that men play the dominant role in patriarchal society (Behr, 8). As a result, women commonly receive less attention and character expansion in *shōnen* series, and the male gaze is generally ubiquitous based on the presumed heterosexual male target audience's interests.

Amidst epic fight scenes, training montages and heated rivalries, women often occupy small or insignificant roles in *shōnen* anime and manga typically of the action/adventure variety *HxH* falls into. If women do have a prominent role, they will likely be used to satisfy “the lustful eyes of the male voyeur” via “fan service” (Kotani, 167). This is perhaps best illustrated by the male protagonist Natsuki Subaru of the recent *shōnen* anime *Re:Zero –Starting Life in Another World* (2016), who, in the middle of a heated battle, proclaims “men are about guts, and women are about beauty!” flawlessly summarising the different roles men and women play in *shōnen* anime. Naturally there are exceptions to this rule which can be exemplified by series such as *InuYasha* (2000-2004), which stars Kagome Higurashi, a non-sexualised female protagonist who ventures back to Japan’s Sengoku period by falling through the well at her family’s shrine (and, as Brenner notes, appeals equally to girls and boys), and *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* (2009-2010) which incorporates female soldiers and female leaders of equal or superior mental and physical strength (without an expectation that they will become love interests or nurturing/mothering figures), notably General Armstrong and Izumi Curtis (9). Note these two series were written by women for the *shōnen* demographic. Yet these progressive narratives are outweighed by the majority of popular *shōnen* titles which reduce or hyper-sexualise the role of girls and women in their narratives.

The primary means by which this hyper-sexualisation occurs is through “fan service”; a tradition which exists “only to gratify the wishes of fans” via the overt sexualisation and objectification of fictional characters in anime, manga and other Japanese media (Brenner, 88). *Shōnen* series are renowned for the inclusion of fan service into their narratives, where girls in “various states of undress” or “position[s] displaying [their] charms” litter multiple frames and pages (Brenner, 88). The “encountering a woman bathing” scenario mentioned in the previous chapter is a classic example of fan service. Additionally, as these female characters are fictional and entirely at the mercy of their creator’s imagination, they can be drawn with unrealistic,

idealised bodies which amplify their sexuality: exaggeratedly large breasts, impossibly narrow waists and accentuated round hips abound in *shōnen* series. The level of fan service varies depending on the target audience's demographic with the explicitness increasing with age; *shōnen* texts, which are aimed at teens, rarely explore beyond lifted skirts, while *seinen* texts, aimed at adult men, depict more explicit content. Fan service is a means by which a woman's part in the narrative is somewhat undercut; if she is a particularly strong individual and risks emasculating the men surrounding her, she may be subject to fan service in order to remind one of her role as "eye candy;" as object over person. Applying Mulvey's theories to this situation, fan service operates in *shōnen* texts to encourage the male gaze and women's "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (62)

Fan service is a regular occurrence in popular *shōnen*. Take *Code Geass*' (2006-2007) third episode, "The False Classmate," for example: Kallen of the rebel forces is shown taking a shower after a bottle of champagne spills on her head. The audience is given ample opportunity to ogle her beautified naked figure during an unnecessary tilting shot which leisurely scans her animated form from behind. Later, when the protagonist Lelouch enters the bathroom to give her new clothes, the audience is additionally treated to the vicarious experience of being interrogated by an entirely exposed Kallen. *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* (2012-2013) takes this idea one step further by initiating a battle around Lisa Lisa's bath in episode 18 "Von Stroheim's Revenge." Though Lisa Lisa offers aid, she is left standing in the bathroom with nothing but a small towel covering her while Ceaser and Jojo fight the possessed Suzie Q around her. This is just one of many "bath scenes" in *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* which intentionally objectifies its deliberately well-endowed female characters by depicting them in the nude. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is also known for its impressive amount of fan service, introducing leading lady Asuka as a temperamental but strong fighter, only to undermine her success by bombarding viewers with shots of her scantily clad or nude form, turning her into

an object of desire rather than an inspiring heroine (fig. 25). Each of these examples involve strong female characters whose triumphs have been overshadowed by their physical attributes in order to satisfy the male audience's desires. As I will discuss in further detail shortly, *HxH* is one exception to *shōnen*'s fascination with fan service; the series' strong women have important roles in the narrative which are not undermined by overt sexualisation and objectification.

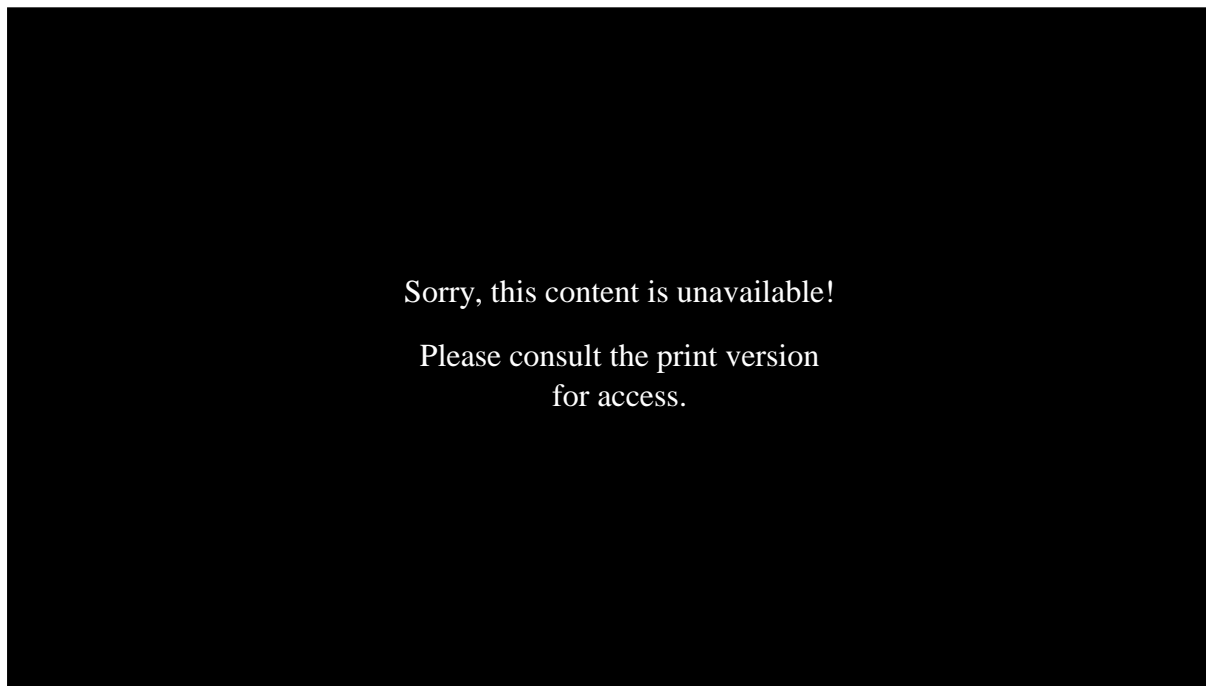


Figure 25: Fan service featuring Asuka in the film *Evangelion 2.22: You Can (Not) Advance* (2009).

In addition to fan service, the attachment of romance to female characters is another *shōnen* trope which serves to suppress women's roles. Fujimoto, Flores, Nagaike and Orbaugh's 2013 discussion of *Naruto*'s (2002-2007)⁸ conservative image of women offers insight into how women are depicted in wider *shōnen* narratives, for example. The scholars write how *Naruto*'s women are "molded on a surprisingly outdated stereotype" as demonstrated by their prioritisation of love and romance above all else (Fujimoto et al, 175). The women's focus is

⁸ Like *HxH*, *Naruto* is a popular *shōnen* series which was originally published in *WSJ* and adapted into a long-running anime television series.

not on growth through training, but rather on “what the object of their adoration may think about them” (Fujimoto et al, 176). This can be seen in episode 10, “The Forest of Chakra:” Despite outdoing Naruto and Sasuke in the task of tree-climbing using *chakra*, Sakura is quickly surpassed by the competitive and determined boys. She remains unfazed by this arrangement, however, instead preferring to support her love interest Sasuke than take pride in her own accomplishments. Additionally, in episode 14, “The Number One Hyperactive, Knucklehead Ninja Joins the Fight!!” Sasuke and Naruto are introduced during the episode’s opening segment as warriors, while Sakura is introduced as the girl of Naruto’s affections; her identity in the narrative rests on her relationship with the male protagonist – anything else is apparently irrelevant.

Though perhaps not to *Naruto*’s extent, other series targeted towards the *shōnen* demographic present a similar conservative approach to female characters. *Sword Art Online*’s (SAO) (2012) male protagonist charms virtually every girl who crosses his path – even his younger sister – eventually settling with Asuna, whom he must rescue in a classic damsel-in-distress scenario during the latter half of season one. Like Sakura from *Naruto*, the majority of female characters portrayed in SAO have romance at the forefront of their mind. Similarly, Mizuno’s identity is framed around her infatuation with the protagonist in *Zatch Bell* (2003-2006); many of her appearances in the narrative are motivated by her desire to aid or impress her love interest Kiyomaro. Rem’s role in *Re:Zero* revolves around her infatuation with protagonist Subaru, while *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*’s (2007) primary female characters predictably serve as either romantic interests or lovers. Overall, these examples outline the restricted role women play in phallogentric *shōnen* worlds, where often their only purpose is to provide a touch of romance to an otherwise action-packed series. While this is, of course, not the case for all series (see, for example, Fujimoto et al’s discussion of *One Piece* (1999-ongoing), it does seem to hold true for the majority of *shōnen* narratives. *HxH* is arguably one

of these exceptions, as the series depicts interesting and dynamic female characters who for the most part refuse association with romance or fan service.

The following section of analysis highlights *HxH*'s acknowledgement of traditional femininity via the attachment of domesticity to certain female characters (Menchi, Machi and Shizuku), but its ultimate rejection of such conservative ideas expressed through characters' use of domestic objects and spaces as dangerous weapons. For example, episode 6, "A x Surprising x Challenge," introduces the female examiner for the Hunter Exam's second phase; Menchi. She is a *Gourmet* Hunter who risks her life seeking out new tastes, and her assignment for the applicants involves catching a wild, carnivorous pig and preparing a meal from the meat. She is initially mocked for her profession by a number of applicants, and later scorned for spitefully failing every contestant due in part to the levity with which they approached the assignment. The interchange between her and a male applicant following this event is worth noting; the applicant belittles the assignment and refuses to accept his failing grade, claiming his desire to be a Blacklist Hunter would not require such menial skills as cooking. There is a clear conflict in this scene which is dictated by traditional gender roles. The male applicant assumes no responsibility over domestic activities such as cooking while the woman – Menchi – is in her "rightful place;" the kitchen. The conflict stems from the woman, who is in the authoritative position, asking men to enter her domain. Note that according to David Chiavacci's study, it goes unquestioned in Japan that child rearing is the *mother's* duty, not the father's (123). The female caregiver is indisputably sentenced to a life of domestic solitude while the male provider is the primary breadwinner. With this in mind, Menchi's profession as a Gourmet Hunter reflects women's relationship to domesticity in wider Japan. Thus her attempt to judge the male applicants on their success at performing domestic tasks is met with laughter and condescendence; the men refuse to trespass on the domestic space, mirroring the division between men's roles and women's roles.

Yet as we later discover there is more to Menchi's profession than cooking; she is a highly qualified Hunter, having learnt the necessary combat skills to take on such a dangerous career, and her job as a Gourmet Hunter requires incredible skill and bravery. We see this when Menchi retakes the exam and asks applicants to follow her lead by jumping into a seemingly bottomless ravine to retrieve an egg, relying solely on the valley's updraft to lift her safely back onto the cliff's edge (fig. 26). A large portion of the applicants back out in fear and a few even



Figure 26: Menchi jumps into a ravine to retrieve an egg.



Figure 27: Menchi wields her kitchen knives.

die attempting the task (of course, our four enthusiastic protagonists are the first to take the leap after Menchi touches down, perfectly recreating her performance). The applicant who had earlier criticised Menchi bows apologetically stating he was entirely outclassed; too afraid to attempt the second task, he accepts his failing grade. Through this example, the series in a sense rejects traditional views of femininity by first acknowledging them via the conflict between Menchi and the male applicants in the first task, and

rejecting them as demonstrated through the second task, where the men concede defeat and Menchi gains their respect. This is subversive when considering the Japanese social context; despite the clear separation of male and female roles, *HxH* challenges misogynistic ideologies through Menchi's connection to domesticity (her profession) which exists only due to her incredible capabilities as a Hunter; a highly skilled individual whose strength and bravery

exceeds that of ordinary people, male or female. Admittedly, with regard to fan service, Menchi's scantily clad animated figure and accentuated curves encourages objectification on the part of the heterosexual male viewer. Her "Daisy Dukes" and bra – very visible through her sheer, cropped t-shirt – leave little to the imagination. At one point, she is even subjected to the leer of the Hunter Association's aging president Netero, who, along with the viewers, participate in objectifying Menchi's existence in the narrative; the close-up of her breasts, as seen in a POV shot from Netero, forces viewers to eye the animated woman's near-exposed chest. Yet the way Menchi skilfully wields her chef's knives as weapons tells one she is not a woman to be crossed (fig. 27).

Machi and Shizuku of the villainous Phantom Troupe – a group of murderous thieves – also use domestic objects as highly destructive weapons, but to a much greater extent than Menchi. Their *nen* ability manifests in the form of a vacuum cleaner (Shizuku) and a needle and thread (Machi), two very distinctive domestic objects which materialise at Machi and Shizuku's command. These iconic items, so closely attached to domesticity (and subsequently women), wreak havoc in the hands of these antagonists. As with Menchi, there is an acknowledgement of the existence of traditional femininity through this attachment of domesticity to the two women, yet there is active rebellion against such ideologies through the use of such objects as lethal weapons; a picture of the two women fighting traditional gender roles symbolically with these domestic objects is painted.

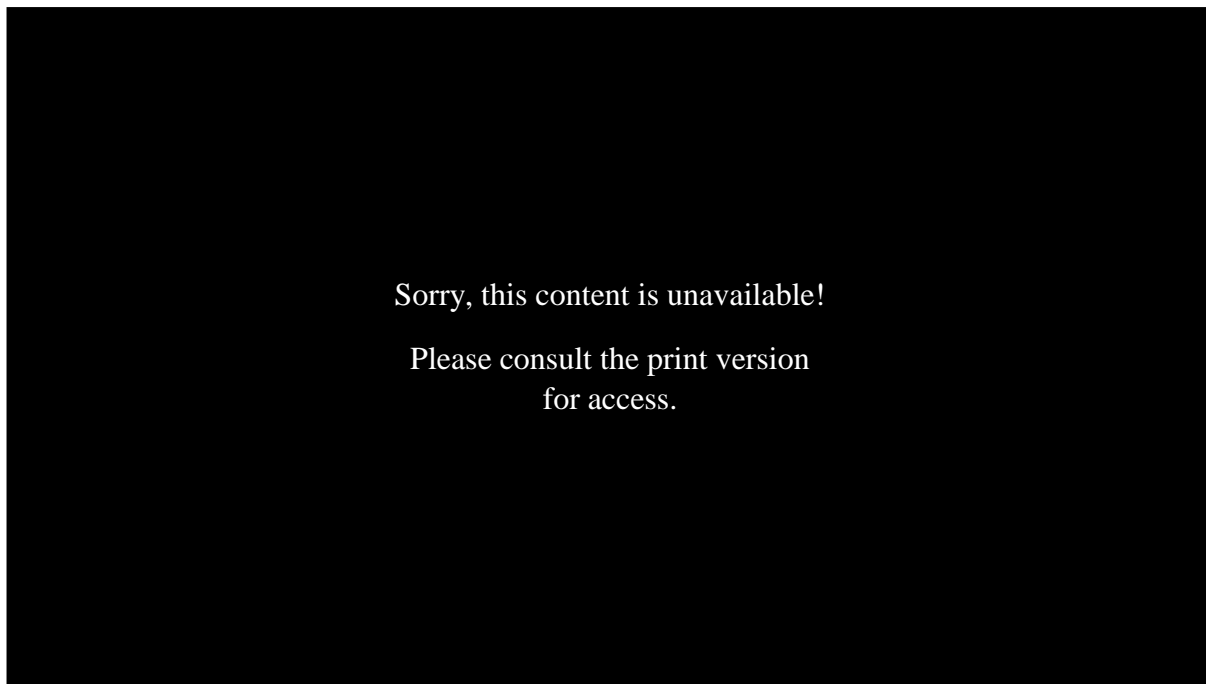


Figure 28: Machi preparing to reconnect Hisoka's severed forearm.

For example, Machi is first introduced to the series in episode 32 “A x Surprising x Win,” when she is hired by Hisoka after his battle with Castro to sew his arms back onto his body using her “*nen* stitches” (fig. 28). Her ability essentially allows her to reconnect each severed vein, torn muscle and broken bone to a point where each component functions correctly and seamlessly. She performs this task in mere seconds; her arms animated as a blur. As with Menchi, one would be forgiven for thinking Machi’s ability, when compared to those of the central male cast,⁹ is reflective of her “inferior status” as a woman. Sewing is a highly gendered task, and to incorporate a female character whose supernatural ability manifests through a *needle and thread* speaks volumes about the depiction of women in this series. Her tending to Hisoka additionally reflects women’s roles as healers and caregivers (alluding to more gendered jobs such as nurses and mothers) rather than fighters and leaders. In episode 51 “A x

⁹ Gon’s *nen* ability enhances his strength through his super punch “*Jajanken*,” Leorio’s appears to allow him to transport his fist to punch his target, Kurapika’s *nen* is manifest in his ability to conjure chains (when his eyes glow red, he becomes a specialist with full capacity over each of the six *nen* types), and Killua uses electricity to electrocute his victims and enhance his speed to that of lightening.

Brutal x Battlefield,” however, viewers are confronted with the full power of Machi’s “*nen* stiches” during the Phantom Troupe’s massacre: the antagonist hangs multiple people at once by the strength of her thread and the speed of her needle (fig. 29). She then manipulates her victims like puppets, using them to shoot other citizens (fig. 30). In a somewhat ironic twist, Machi lynches traditional femininity – which demands passivity and delicateness alongside domestic imprisonment – through the way she wields her needle

and thread – a symbol for traditional femininity – to murder her victims. Just like Menchi and her paradoxically dangerous “cooking” profession, Machi’s *nen* ability emphasises her rejection of outdated notions of femininity.

Shizuku’s use of a vacuum cleaner as a murderous weapon holds a similarly transgressive undertone. Shizuku is a fellow member of the Phantom Troupe and, like Machi, is able to materialise a domestic object with *nen*. Shizuku conjures a vacuum cleaner which can kill through a variety of methods. Shizuku enters the series in episode 42, “Defend x And x Attack,” and notably takes a metaphorical stab at patriarchal structures in her very first scene when she arm wrestles Gon. Though Shizuku loses, an unsurprising turnout when considering Gon’s immense strength, we later learn that she did not use her dominant hand; had she used it, we are led to understand that she would have emerged victorious. Already the audience is

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Figure 29: Machi uses her nen to lynch citizens.

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Figure 30: Machi puppeteers people to shoot citizens.

given a picture of a strong (if slightly daft) young woman, which is later cemented when she is shown in battle with her vacuum cleaner “Blinky.” Shizuku easily kills Kurapika’s coworker during the Yorknew City Arc by hitting her in the head with the vacuum cleaner’s foot, yet it is not until the Chimera Ant Arc that we truly see her in action.

In episode 97, “Carnage x And x Devastation,” Shizuku battles the spider-like ant “Pike” and wins. Shizuku showcases her ingenuity and skill through the way she escapes Pike’s web and proceeds to literally drain his body of blood with her vacuum cleaner. We learn that Blinky has the ability to suck and consume any non-living thing regardless of its size, weight or texture. However it is the mechanics of this scene which hint at a far greater battle taking place than simply that of Shizuku and Pike; in the most general sense, there is a battle of the sexes at play. Pike’s primary attack is the web which he propels from his anus to imprison

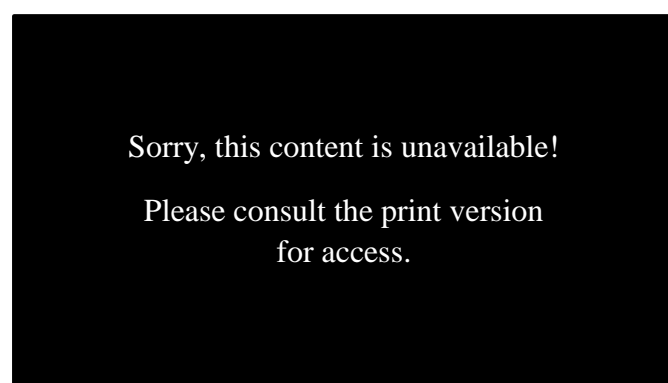


Figure 31: Pike imprisons Shizuku in his web cage.

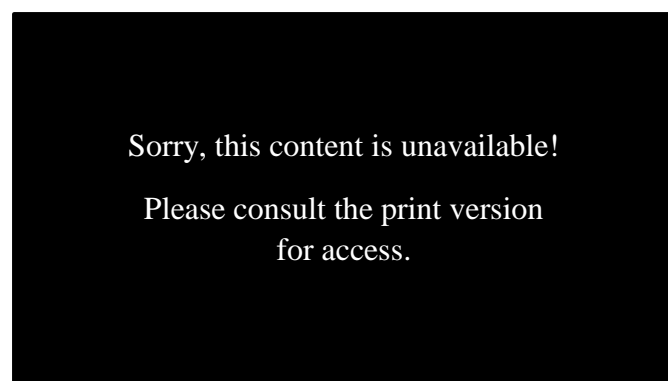


Figure 32: Shizuku escapes the cage with her vacuum cleaner Blinky.

Shizuku in a cage-like structure (fig. 31).

If we understand this to be symbolic of ejaculation – which is strongly suggested through the way Pike refers to his web as his “Love Shower” (recall Hisoka’s “Elastic Love” which I also argue symbolised semen) – then Shizuku, imprisoned in this “web,” can be understood as metaphorically trapped and oppressed via Pike’s male dominance. However, the method upon which Shizuku escapes – discarding her clothes which are left attached to the substance – and drains the spider of his

blood through a vacuum cleaner illustrates a victory for femininity (fig. 32). Shizuku uses the very object which symbolises domestic oppression to literally “clean” the insect of the offending mucus. If we also take a closer look at Shizuku’s weapon of choice, the vacuum cleaner has lips, a tongue, and a vicious, dentate “mouth” reminiscent of the *vagina dentate* which bites and castrates (fig. 33). By draining Pike of his fluids, the vacuum evokes allusions of sexual intercourse, castrating – and thus emasculating – Pike through the provocative act of sucking. Though Shizuku’s partial nudity in this scene should leave her vulnerable and subject to man’s predatory gaze, on the contrary it empowers her in her rejection and defeat of Pike and his “Love Shower.”

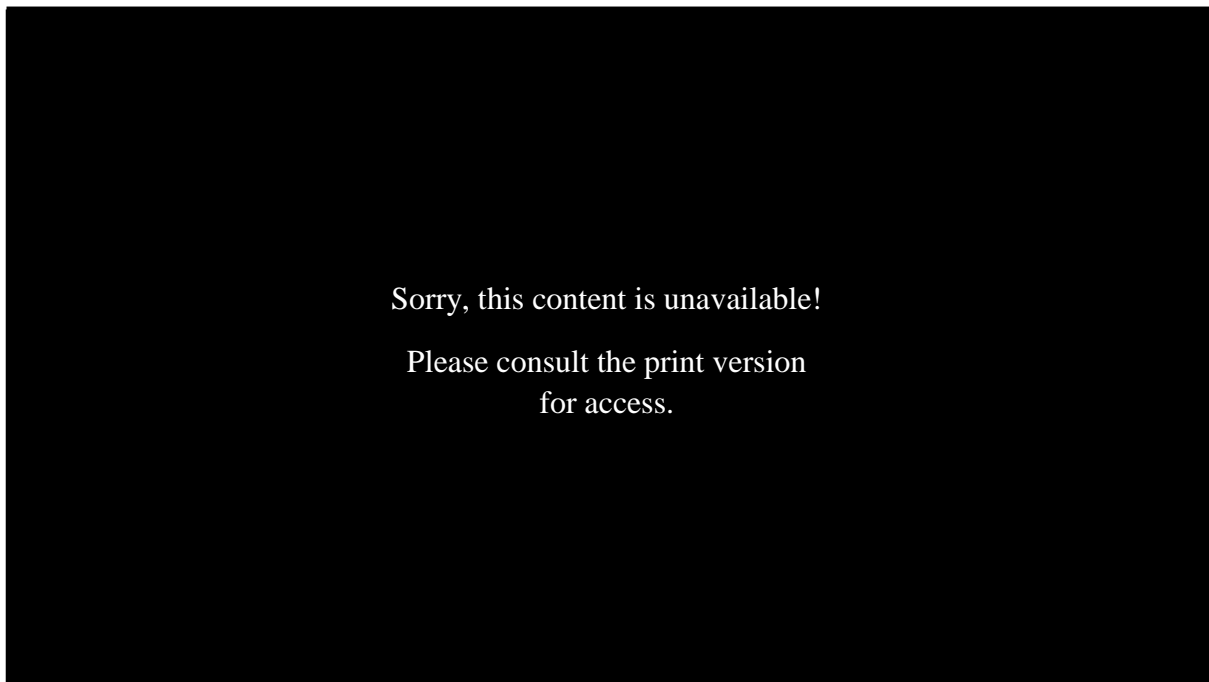


Figure 33: Shizuku and Blinky after defeating Pike.

For clarity, it is key to note, especially in light of the previous chapter, that though Shizuku and Machi are both antagonists, they – like Hisoka and Pouf – are not depicted as purely evil; they are not villains by traditional definitions per se. Recall Pouf demonstrated honourable qualities such as loyalty and devotion towards the king, which complicated his villainous status. Comparatively, Machi and Shizuku harbour feelings of loyalty and trust

towards the members in their troupe, specifically its leader Chrollo. This can be seen in episode 57 “Initiative x And x Law” where both Machi and Shizuku decide to follow Kurapika’s demands and protect Chrollo (who has been taken hostage by the protagonist) rather than allow their boss to die to protect the Troupe’s survival. Additionally, where Hisoka sometimes aided the protagonists in various missions and was greatly invested in Gon’s survival, Machi and Shizuku indirectly aid the protagonists during the Chimera Ant Arc by defeating their mutual enemy: the ants who are attempting to overtake mankind and dominate earth. Therefore Machi and Shizuku’s rejection of traditional femininity is not suggested to be irresponsible or abnormal due to their villainy, but somewhat revolutionary. This is strengthened through the way certain female *protagonists* also reject gender inequality. While Shizuku and Machi rebel through the attachment of violence and combat strength to domestic objects – traditional symbols of femininity – Biscuit Krueger (“Bisky”) and Palm reject traditional femininity through their physical appearance and general “failure” at femininity, which I argue reflects a victory for egalitarianism.

Our first sight of Bisky in the anime occurs during the series’ Greed Island Arc opening credit sequence where she appears to be a little girl – about the age of Gon and Killua – with large eyes, curly blonde pigtails, a pink dress, and a paradoxically aggressive attitude as indicated by her boisterous entry: during the opening credits, she pulls various martial arts moves and keeps a stern expression on her face. At first glance, one might assume her to be a potential romantic interest for Gon and Killua (considering the popular association of women and romance in *shōnen* anime as described), someone to upset the dynamic between the boys’ friendship. Bisky officially enters the story when Gon and Killua audition for a spot in the highly expensive *nen*-infused Greed Island computer game¹⁰ which is available to only a

¹⁰ For some narrative context, Greed Island is a computer game which allows one to physically enter its world. The purpose of the game is to collect certain cards which can turn into special items (and vice versa, one can turn certain items into cards) or perform a function. One is only able to leave the game by using the “Leave” card (a

limited number of highly skilled *nen* wielders. That Bisky passes the audition alongside Gon, Killua, and a select few tough-looking characters suggests she is more powerful than one would assume based solely on her appearance. When in Greed Island, she takes an interest in Gon and Killua and begins watching them from the shadows (she does this after initially introducing herself and asking to join them, however Killua bluntly refuses her request by telling her she would be a nuisance). She provides critical commentary via internal dialogue for the benefit of the viewer when the boys struggle to fight the in-game monsters, and shortly after gives herself a proper introduction to the sceptical boys in episode 62 “Reality x And x Raw.” As it turns out, Bisky, or Biscuit Krueger, is a highly experienced Hunter with four decades of training behind her (note Bisky is a beneficiary of the animation medium which allows aspects such as the natural consequences of age to transcend realistic bounds).

Bisky is an interesting character to study in regards to the representation of femininity as she contradicts the common stereotype of women in *shōnen* manga and anime. She is neither sexualised nor romanticised; she hides under her pretty pink dress and pampered exterior a monstrously muscular body (as first seen in episode 73 which I discuss in detail shortly) which rivals many of the series’ powerful men. She plays a crucial role in cultivating the protagonists’ abilities as, after her introduction, Bisky volunteers to be the boys’ personal trainer during their time in Greed Island after acknowledging their combat potential. It is only due to Bisky’s training and aid that the boys are able to win the game and defeat the “Bomber;” a powerful player who chases victory using villainous and murderous means.

relatively rare card), or by winning the game (collecting every necessary card). If one dies in the game, they die in reality. At the time Gon and Killua enter the game, it has been running for years and many have given up on winning the game or ever returning home, creating a life for themselves within Greed Island.

Bisky's unique ability works as a sort of inverted magical girl transformation where rather than transform into a "*bishōjo*" or "beautiful girl" (as epitomised in the *shōjo* classic *Sailor Moon* (1992-1997) where the young Usagi frequently undergoes a transformation which heightens her beauty and equips her with magical powers via a wand), Bisky turns into a muscular giant. Rather than utilize newfound magical abilities through a magical staff or wand to defeat her foe, Bisky develops brute strength and uses her own body to knock out her opponents. Essentially, where magical girls represent highly feminine power (their magical abilities come not from their own body or strength, but from a magical staff; in this way, their cuteness is maintained as they are divorced from the phallic power of the transformation wands), Bisky undergoes masculinisation (she develops bulging muscles and grows in height) and uses her newfound physical strength to defeat enemies in physical combat. Saito

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Figure 34: Bisky pre-transformation

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Figure 35: Bisky post-transformation

describes the magical girl anime as "an active site of contesting ideas surrounding gender roles and identity," seeing it as a transgressive genre as mentioned previously (145). Magical girls are highly independent, strong, liberated women who combat the restrictions placed on women according to traditional mindsets regarding gender. Yet magical girls are also necessarily attractive, feminine, and physically weak; this is emphasised during their magical transformation when the women undergo a makeover of sorts. Returning to the *Sailor Moon*

example, after her transformation, Usagi dons a stylish (and quite revealing) outfit, emphasising her feminine curves, with matching accessories to contrast her plainer every day look (fig. 36). This raises question as to whether these women actually encourage transgression as they seem to strictly align with the beauty standards endorsed by traditional femininity. The magical girl transformation sequence empowers women by equipping them with magical abilities which exceed man's capabilities. The beautification aspect of these transformations, however, project the idea that women who embody such traditionally masculine power must compensate by heightening their femininity; their "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey, 62) This is not to say that one cannot be strong and beautiful; rather, it is the necessity of the "heightened beauty" aspect and its intrinsic link to enhanced ability which contradict the very transgression these women supposedly project according to Saito.

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Figure 36: Usagi post-transformation as seen in Sailor Moon Crystal (2014).

Figure 37: Bisky post-transformation.

Linking magical girls to Bisky is important as this comparison emphasises what the seasoned Hunter is not; young, beautiful and delicate. Bisky represents a rebellion, a refreshing change from these traditional anime heroines who are inherently beautiful and subsequently attract the attention of male viewers; note that while magical girl anime fall under the *shōjo* category for young women, Saito makes the point that they have attracted a large male following (152). Yet Bisky also calls on the emancipation these magical girls enjoy; this divergence from reality where women fight and defeat the evils of the world. Bisky cites such subversion by parodying the magical girl "transformation" aspect: in episode 73 "Insanity x

And x Sanity” Bisky transforms from a young girl in a pink dress into a muscular giant as depicted through silhouette. The irony of such a hulk-like woman wearing a small pink dress – one which would be more fitting on a magical girl post-transformation – is not lost on viewers. Where the liberated women of magical girl series enjoy a “makeover” during their transformation which heightens their feminine appeal, Bisky’s post-transformation appearance is quite the reverse as described. Essentially, Bisky embodies a very different image of women in anime: she is masculine in appearance, physically and mentally strong, and demands and gains respect from those around her. She is also not subject to fan service or associated with romance. She is a liberated women who makes a place for herself in the phallogentric *shōnen* world without being conventionally attractive for male viewers or fellow characters. She is valued for her strength, courage and battle experience, not for her physical appearance.

In the same way to the characters discussed previously - Menchi, Machi and Shizuku – who acknowledge traditional femininity through their association with domestic objects, Bisky also recognises the existence of set gender roles through her choice to disguise herself as a pampered, weak and fragile little girl. I postulate that Bisky’s status as a Hunter reflects her embracing her situation, however after Bisky’s transformation in episode 73 she admits that she despises her masculine appearance. Additionally, when Bisky first introduces herself to Gon and Killua in episode 61, she does so in such a way that suggests she is helpless, requiring the protection of the two boys (hence Killua’s stern rejection). The fact that the ageing Hunter chooses to take the form of a “loli” (a common colloquialism amongst anime fans meaning a cute, young girl, derived from the term “Lolita”) is also significant as it heightens her supposed helplessness and separates her further from what she identifies as her actual, physical form. Bisky clearly values beauty not just in the way she disguises her “unattractive” masculine features but also through her *nen* ability which materialises in the form of a young women who provides healing and aids relaxation; essentially, she delivers a “makeover” of sorts to needy

patients. Like Menchi, Machi and Shizuku, Bisky has a notably gendered ability. However, where Menchi, Machi and Shizuku are redeemed from their sexist roles via their attachment of violence to domestic objects, Bisky hides her actual form in order to comply with hegemonic femininity, rejecting the unconventionality of her muscular body. Bisky subsequently represents the reality of many *shōnen* series: anime women are designed to be attractive while men are built to be courageous. Despite naturally not conforming through her unconventional body type, Bisky feels the need to hide this from the majority of those around her, suggesting a victory for phallogocentrism. By using her body to destroy enemies despite her obvious self-consciousness, however, I argue Bisky has come to terms with her situation. Deciding to take up a career that utilizes her immense strength additionally signals a quiet rebellion on Bisky's part. Bisky therefore illustrates that despite not being conventionally attractive or "feminine" she is able to use this to her advantage and proves useful in her unconventionality.

Another notable point about Bisky is the lacking attachment of romance to her character. This also applies to the other three women I analysed in this chapter; Menchi, Machi and Shizuku do not exhibit any romantic interest towards any of the series' characters, nor have they been recipients of romantic interest within the narrative. As previously noted, *HxH* is somewhat unique in this regard as romance is a common trope in *shōnen* series (not all series, of course, but a significant majority). Yet there is one woman – Palm Siberia – whose hopeless search for love defines her role in *HxH*'s narrative. Though her early appearances in the series are notable due to her desperate preoccupation with romantic love, I argue Palm grows into a strong, independent character whose romantic interests become irrelevant. Palm Siberia enjoys a memorable introduction in episode 86 "Promise x And x Reunion" where she surprises Gon and Killua while they check a public notice board. She is introduced in sections which focus on different parts of her body, beginning with a close-up of her cracked, purple lips (the extra detail heightens the grotesque element), her shaky, grey hands which clutch at her creased

dress, one of her blood-shot eyes topped with a heavy, purple lid, and finally her entire face which is partially hidden by greasy streaks of long, unkempt black hair (fig.38). Other indicators, such as the suspenseful music, the lighting on her face which engulfs some of her features in shadow, and the purple “aura” which surrounds her person (a common trope used in anime to highlight one’s intensity) point to her being a strange and unattractive character.



Figure 38: Palm’s introduction.



Figure 39: Coffee trickles down Palm’s chin.

She is introduced as grotesque, a theme which comically contrasts against her preoccupation with love and romance. For example, while at a café with Gon and Killua shortly after her introduction, Palm prattles on about her admiration for fellow Hunter Knov while spooning mountains of sugar into her coffee, allowing drips of the caffeine syrup to trickle down her chin in a disturbing manner (fig. 39). The gulf between her abnormal behaviour and her delicate romantic notions is very clear. Where conversely *shōjo* anime depicts the

purity of love through floral imagery and delicate emotional scenes, Palm parodies this convention by associating romance with the grotesque. By all accounts, Palm is not a character one would typically associate with love, and it is this very point which the series appears to make; if love is a central aspect of women in *shōnen* anime, *HxH* defies that through parody, further stressing the need for women to not be defined by their romantic affiliations.

This need is demonstrated through the way Palm's preoccupation with love hampers herself and others from carrying out their mission; only when Palm places less importance on romance is she able to aid the characters. For example, continuing with the café scene, Killua interrupts Palm's ramblings multiple times to clarify her part in their operation, only to be met with yet more ranting about her "admiration" for Knov. She is easily distracted by her feelings which prevents the exchange of necessary information. Additionally, later when Gon agrees to go on a date with Palm, Killua, who is protecting the *nen*-impaired Gon from the shadows, runs into a chimera ant and is almost killed in the process. Once again, it is Palm's desire for romance that recklessly causes such an event; had the date not taken place, the confrontation would not have happened. It is only when she is separated from the object of her affection that she becomes a useful tool in the fight against the chimera ants during the Chimera Ant Arc. While infiltrating the chimera ant king's palace, Palm is caught by the royal guard and transformed into a soldier ant. She is able to retain much of her humanity in the aftermath, but she is also a part of the ant collective. She later joins forces with Killua during the palace invasion, and unsurprisingly, romance is not on her mind. She appears to be a different character entirely as a result – not just because she has become an ant. She is calm, offers useful advice, and ultimately aids in defeating the ants. This is a great leap from her usual volatile self, and demonstrates what this woman can accomplish when not focused on romance.

Essentially, *HxH* demonstrates through parody that women are capable of functioning as characters in *shōnen* series without an association with romance; Palm becomes an essential player in the fight against the chimera ants only when her thoughts are unoccupied with love. This paves the way for women in other anime: Saito reflects on the idea that certain anime (particularly of the magical girl genre as discussed) "reinforce fixed gender roles functioning in actual society" by moulding young girls' aspirations and encouraging them to envision and desire marriage and domesticity after adolescence (Saito, 145). Though Saito refers to the

magical girl genre, Fujimoto et al's (previously mentioned) discussion regarding *Naruto*'s depiction of women aligns with Saito's ideas; recall Sakura's self-sacrificial love for Sasuke and identification as "the girl Naruto likes," thus projecting outdated feminine stereotypes. I argue it is not just magical girl series which teach young girls about traditional gender roles, but other anime – such as that of the *shōnen* category – which depict women with a similar attitude. Linking Palm to Saito's findings, *HxH* rejects the notion that girls should aspire to be housewives after adolescence as it encourages young girls via Palm that success lies not in wait of romance and domesticity; on the contrary, such distractions are seen to infringe on women's capabilities thereby preventing them from reaching their full potential. In other words, Palm demonstrates that women are capable of succeeding without romantic attachments, contrary to what other *shōnen* anime apparently teach.

The idea that women are able to succeed without romantic attachments is further illustrated through Cheadle, the woman who eventually succeeds Netero as chairperson of the Hunter Association during the final Chairman Election Arc. This challenges actual Japanese society where women are greatly underrepresented in government and make up only a tiny percentage of managerial roles. That *HxH* places a woman in such a powerful position is somewhat radical when considering the cultural context from which the series was created. Henshall writes that as of 1999, women in Japan made up less than five per cent of Diet seats and occupied a mere one or two cabinet positions (25). More recent statistics indicate a move towards gender equality in government as according to Aoki's article in *The Japan Times*, women now make up 11.5 per cent of Diet seats. However both Henshall and Aoki note that the percentage of female Diet members is considerably lower than that of most other developed countries. Henshall additionally points out that "the number of women elected to the Diet is a reflection not only of the preferences of male voters, but also of female," signalling that "both sexes are still influenced by traditional attitudes towards gender roles" (25).

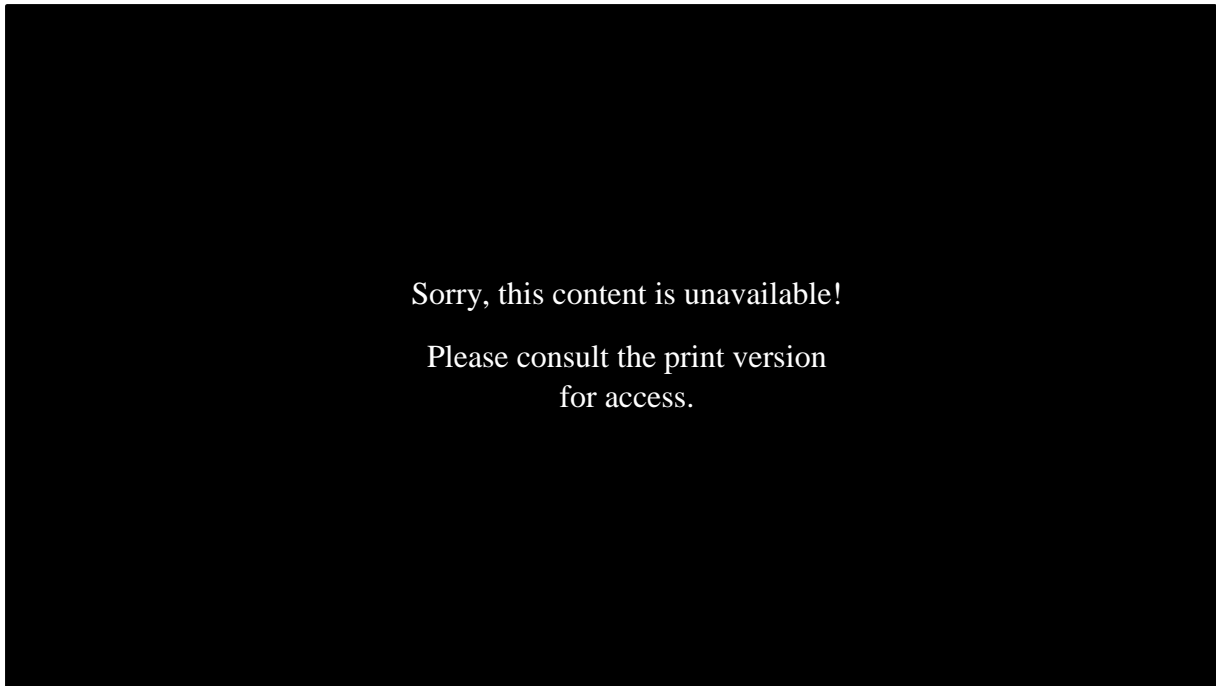


Figure 40: Cheadle as she appears in episode 144 “Approval x And x Coalition” —

Out of this context enters *HxH*’s fictional character Cheadle who is a favourable candidate for the role as chairperson of the Hunter Association. Not only is Cheadle portrayed as an intelligent (indicated by the incorporation of glasses into her character design – an iconic motif in animation), capable woman, but she stands in stark contrast to her main opponent, the manipulative and conniving Pariston who is ill-suited for the job despite his popularity. However Cheadle’s victory is somewhat soured by the fact that she was only chosen for chairperson after the elected Pariston stepped down shortly after results were announced. Though Cheadle’s high-profile career is somewhat revolutionary when contrasted against contemporary Japanese society, the method by which she reached her presidency suggests there is still work to be done to completely alter ideas regarding women in government positions.

Cheadle does, however, defy traditional gender roles through her disassociation with domesticity; we only ever see her in a professional, office-like setting. Unlike Menchi, Machi and Shizuku who are closely associated with domesticity to heighten their defiance of misogynistic ideologies, Cheadle is entirely disassociated from domestic life. Additionally, not

only is Cheadle's career one which entails her to make key decisions for such an important and prestigious institute as the Hunter Association, she does so without objectification or romantic involvement: her high-collared, calf-length dress covers her shapeless body leaving no skin exposed, and not once is she suggested to have interest in romance. One might compare her to a nun, taking into account the cross-shaped brooch attached to her collar (fig. 40). She symbolises the Japanese feminist movement from the 1970s, where women put off or rejected marriage and childbearing so as to seriously pursue a career without the expectations placed on motherhood (Napier, 202). Like Bisky who challenges ideas about feminine beauty, and Palm who proves useful only when not distracted by romance, Cheadle confronts philosophies regarding women's cinematic "*to-be-looked-at-ness*," demonstrating the immense capability of women beyond strictly imposed gender boundaries (Mulvey, 62). Furthermore, Cheadle *rejects* traditional gender roles in the way she stubbornly competes against other men for the chairmanship; in patriarchal societies, such an act defies the norm. Cheadle, like the other women mentioned in this chapter, offers women an alternative to domesticity: a career and success in a high-up profession dominated in reality by men.

Through the six characters discussed, this chapter has aimed to demonstrate how *HxH* presents an image of women quite different from that prevalent in Japanese society and (to a lesser extent) the West. Menchi, Machi and Shizuku actively reject misogynist views by reinscribing domestic objects and spaces as inherently violent and dangerous. Bisky challenges the problematic notion that strong women in anime necessarily require beautification to outweigh their "masculine" strength or abilities, while Palm parodies the necessary attachment of women to romance in many *shōnen* narratives. Cheadle directly confronts the Japanese notion that women's roles in society are restricted to the household and nursery by taking on a career which is typically dominated by men. The final chapter in this thesis carries the idea of gender transgression even further by focusing on how *HxH* challenges gender stereotypes by

incorporating characters whose genders are left unconfirmed; gender fluidity is teased within the narrative, demonstrating the progressive nature of this series' approach to gender normativity.

CHAPTER FIVE: DEPICTIONS OF GENDER AMBIGUITY

The previous two chapters take into account the assumption that the binary gender model is unquestionably fixed and established; that there are no alternatives to the categories “male” and “female.” Chapter Three and Chapter Four assessed characters’ gender subversion within this binary model, asserting that the embodiment of stereotypical masculine and feminine attributes are not necessarily predetermined by a character’s given gender. *HxH* poses a challenge to the very legitimacy of these binary categories, however, by incorporating characters who potentially fit into neither category. These “gender ambiguous” characters are the focus of this final chapter, which explores how *HxH* encourages the liberal possibility of understanding gender *and* sex as a continuum rather than separate binary categories. I postulate this is a progression on the previous two chapters, which acknowledge that “masculine” and “feminine” traits can be embodied by characters of the opposite gender, as this chapter questions the very nature and necessity of these two gendered categories. This chapter suggests the idea of gender as a biological prescription can be understood as a social construction rather than a natural fact; by reassessing our understanding of the relationship between sex and gender, the stereotypes associated with the dual categories also require reassessment. Thus I posit through this chapter that *HxH* challenges viewers to question the gender binary and furthermore encourages debate around normative ideas of sex and gender in the West.

A common thread woven through Togashi’s various works is the idea that individuals are unique and not easily categorised. This theme is observed in *HxH* through the philosophy of *nen* which allows one to essentially develop their own unique superpower. Though this is insofar as their “*nen* type” dictates, one can learn abilities which utilise skills across a range of types; in short, one’s potential is not mapped out at birth. Gender is approached with the same attitude: as elaborated on in the previous two chapters, certain characters in the series assume traits not traditionally associated with their gender. The pinnacle of *HxH*’s gender

transgression, however, is demonstrated through characters whose genders are never revealed, challenging the importance of the gender binary model. By deliberately creating ambiguity around Neferpitou and Alluka's gender, author Togashi and director Koujina encourage viewers to not interpellate the characters based on their assumed biology, but rather understand them outside our traditional frame of reference. As *HxH* is a fictional animated text, biological sex is not a necessity for these characters; viewers must interpret them without the usual stereotypes associated with a "recognisable" sex. If *HxH* were a live action text, one could base their assessment of the characters' gender (and by extension sex, debatably) on that of the performer; however, the animation medium exceeds such restrictions, allowing absolute ambiguity. *HxH* demonstrates the problem of slotting individuals into two separate gender categorisations – what happens to those who fit into neither category? This points to a greater problem, that being how these two categories are perhaps too restrictive seeing as they naturally omit people who fit outside these socially constructed moulds, such as, for example, those who are intersex.

Whatever the reason, it is clear the creators of the series pointedly created ambiguity around certain characters' genders, as I elaborate on shortly. However rather than undermine this notion and simply assess the characters according to masculine and feminine stereotypes, this chapter primarily focuses on the reactions of viewers to such ambiguity, questioning how viewers in the West interpret these characters and what influences may have encouraged "fan theories" regarding the characters' gender and suggested sex. This analysis is performed by collecting and studying a number of key comments found on popular forums such as the online anime database *MAL*, *Reddit* and *Fandom powered by Wikia* (henceforth *Fandom*). I draw upon Western literature which discusses sex assignment and gender (mis)identity to understand these comments and locate them in today's Western social context. In shifting the focus of this chapter to fan discourse, I spotlight the *result* of *HxH*'s gender transgression which dictates my

discussion on the method by which such subversion is presented. In the process, I determine how *HxH* draws attention to our desire to categorise and label regarding gender identity, and challenges viewers to recognise these characters exempt of their gender. I argue that the gender ambiguous characters – Alluka and Neferpitou – represent non-binary possibilities, which in turn underpins the rejection of male/female stereotypes discussed in the previous chapters.

Brady's article on the lesser known idea of Butler's gender performance theory articulates how one's "sex" refers to a socially constructed framework which omits subjects who do not comply, rendering them unrecognisable. In other words, those who do not fit into a very specific mould with regard to gender are considered unrecognisable despite clear indicators i.e. genitalia. Brady cites the recent example of athlete Castor Semenya to demonstrate this idea; despite Semenya having the combination of official documentation of her sex (birth certificate) and female genitals, she was still controversially forced to undergo a series of tests (the type of which were not disclosed) to correctly place her in either of the two gender categories: male or female. Her genitals and documentation were not enough to convince supposed "experts" that she truly was female. Even after confirmation, Brady notes that Semenya was still subject to scepticism online, illustrating how sex is not simply determined by one's biology but by how well one fits into the category determined by their biology (6). This challenges the traditional gender-binary model as it suggests having two categories of sex which align with one's biology is too simplistic.

Alluka and Neferpitou have, like Semenya, been put on trial by fans who are adamant to categorise the two characters. I would argue that this need to categorise, the need to fit subjects into a "recognisable mould," undermines the very point Butler and Brady make: with categorisation comes exclusion at the cost of those who do not comply with the norms, either by choice or otherwise. I suggest fans' need to categorise similarly undermines the potential intent of the series' authors who deliberately create ambiguity around the characters' gender.

The comments referenced in this chapter demonstrate the West's current, incessant need to label and stereotype, which counters the very point these fans often tend to promote: that people are *unique* and may not comply with gender normativity or be easily categorised. The comments are additionally shrouded by an underlying assumption that one's gender is crucial to understanding one's character, a mentality that only reinforces the need for stereotyping which inevitably leads to exclusion.

Paradoxically, however, the comments also demonstrate how *HxH* opens a dialogue where fans are able to discuss various issues surrounding gender. The characters encourage viewers to think and share their opinions and potentially educate those less knowledgeable. Though the discussions I cite reflect a desire to stereotype, they also become a site where one can openly discuss and raise awareness about minority groups such as those with transgender or gender-queer identities. In this way, the comments act as a double-edged sword of sorts. This chapter primarily takes the stance that these comments have the potential to be beneficial and spark educational debate, however one cannot fully enquire as to how much impact they may or may not have. Regardless, this chapter aims to flesh out these comments, understand how one can interpret them in today's social climate, and assess how the series encourages these debates.

The comments compiled for this chapter are taken from various discussion forums such as the online anime database *MAL* which provides Anglophone users a space to discuss any anime-related topic. The comments from this website are from pages which exclusively discuss the characters in question. The discussion website *Reddit* has also become a popular place for fans to open dialogs about certain topics. I refer to threads which specifically question Alluka and Neferpitou's gender. Comments are also taken from the fan-powered website *Fandom* which offers a space for fans to create their own source of information – essentially an encyclopaedia – regarding the subject of their fandom. As a result, there is often debate

regarding misinformation and webpages are constantly in need of revision due to outdated information. The pages I focus on are those dedicated to raising concern regarding Alluka and Neferpitou's gender ambiguity. Before analysing the comments themselves, however, an outline of the gender ambiguous characters is crucial.

The confusion regarding Alluka Zoldyck's biological sex and gender identity stems from the contradictory array of personal pronouns given Alluka and the lack of explanation behind them. This is demonstrated primarily by members of Alluka's family: Alluka is referred to by Killua as his "*imouto*" or "little sister," whereas other key members of the Zoldyck family refer to Alluka using masculine or gender neutral pronouns. For example, Milluki Zoldyck (Killua and Alluka's older brother) mentions to an intruder in

episode 139 "Alluka x And x

Something" that he is taking Alluka, his "*otouto*" (little brother), for a walk around their residence. Additionally, the series' narrator, the "voice of God," whose non-diegetic existence surpasses bias, refers to Alluka as male which suggests this to be fact. At one point, even Killua refers to Alluka as his *otouto* when on the phone to Morel in episode 142, "Needles x And x Debt," however this contradicts his earlier statement in episode 140 "Join Battle x And x Open

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Figure 41: Alluka's shrine-maiden outfit.

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Figure 42: Alluka reunites with Killua.

Battle” where he brashly remarks to Gotoh, the family butler, that Alluka is a girl (*onnanoko*) and thus requires the company of other women in their journey away from home.

When taking Alluka’s appearance into account, one would naturally assume the character to be female: Alluka wears a traditional shrine-maiden’s outfit, has long, styled hair decorated with various ornaments and headbands, and speaks with a very high pitched voice (unlike Killua who is still supposedly prepubescent and confirmed male) (fig. 41 and 42). However to say a character’s appearance in *HxH* delineates their gender would entirely undermine the previous two chapters in this thesis; in a universe where men wear makeup and jewellery (recall Hisoka’s character design, for example) and women can be more muscular than most of the series’ men (notably Bisky whose actual appearance is somewhat Hulk-like), it would not be surprising if Alluka, despite looking and dressing like a girl, might actually be a boy. This uncertainty is aided by the fact that Alluka is a child; the obvious indicators of the male and female sex in the animation medium (such as the Adam’s apple for men and breasts for women) have not yet “grown,” meaning Alluka’s character design is androgynous by default.

Naturally it is at this point where heated debates arise in online discussions between fans teasing the possibility of Alluka’s potential transgenderism or androgyny, which I discuss shortly. At no point in the anime is Alluka’s sex or gender confirmed, nor are the combination of masculine and feminine pronouns explained. Unsurprisingly, in light of the lack of attention given such ambiguity within the narrative itself, fans have proposed their own theories on *HxH* forums and related websites. These debates regarding Alluka’s gender have come to dominate fan discourse about Alluka despite the character’s dangerous and powerful ability of wish granting which would alone be enough to rouse discussion. The narrow focus of fans on such a rudimentary aspect of this unique and interesting character speaks volumes about the West’s need to categorise and label despite post-modern efforts to quell stereotypes and bigotry.

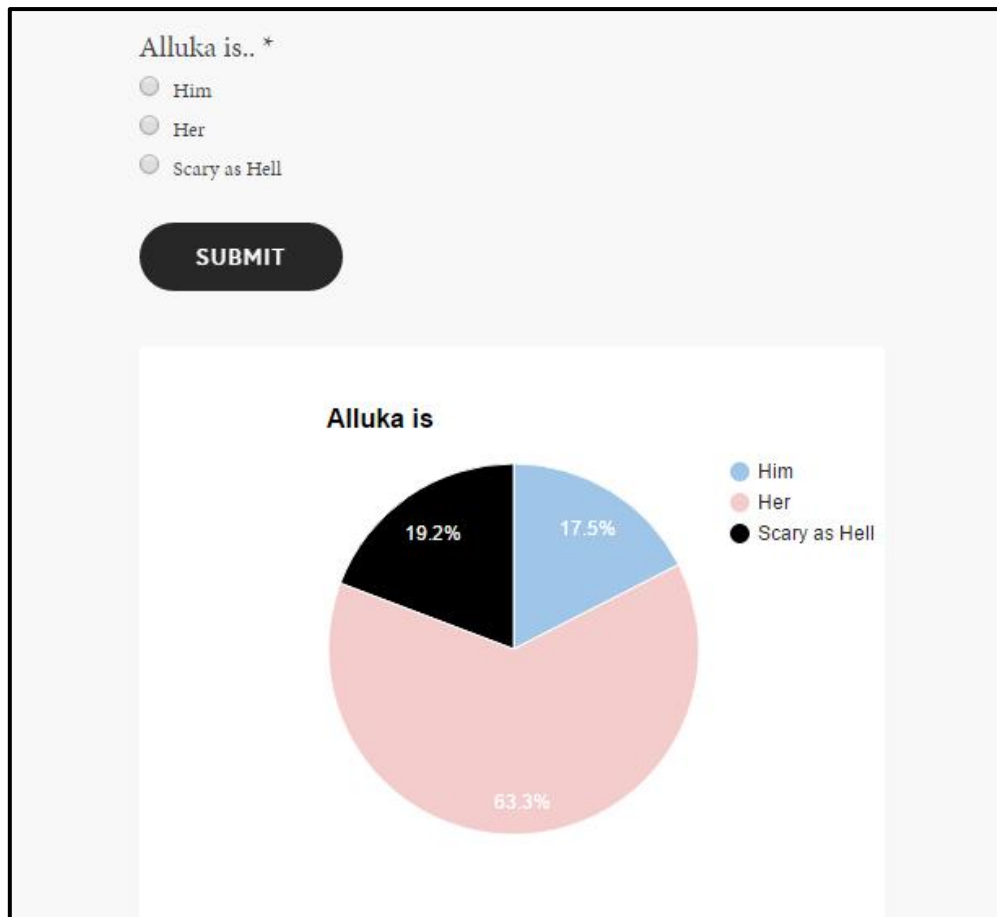


Figure 43: Poll results for Alluka's gender. Source: <http://www.shortpause.com/blog/2014/8/1/is-alluka-a-boy-or-a-girl>.

Before jumping into the fan discussions, the pie-graph pictured above gives a general idea of the way fans are divided in their opinion: the majority of voters believe Alluka to be female, followed by the neutral “scary as Hell”¹¹ option, and lastly “male” at 17.5 per cent. However, whether or not these categories refer to Alluka's biological sex or gender identity is not clarified, meaning those who believe Alluka to be a transwoman have likely voted for the “female” option along with those who also believe Alluka to be biologically female. The inclusion of the “scary as Hell” category – which assumedly refers to her powerful wish-granting ability – is interesting as it gives fans another option should they refuse to believe (or

¹¹ “Scary as Hell” refers to Alluka's terrifying wish granting ability. With the capacity to murder hundreds of people should her requests not be fulfilled, Alluka can indeed be “scary as Hell.”

refuse to care) that Alluka does not actually fit into either of the other two categories (this is also the “I do not know” option). Almost 20 per cent of voters chose this category, more than those who assume Alluka to be male. The results generally reflect the disagreement in the *HxH* fan community about Alluka’s gender, however we cannot completely gauge the most popular opinion as the distinction between Alluka’s sex and gender is not clarified to voters here. For more detailed explanations on fan opinions, it is useful to see what fans have written in comments left on various forums.

The *Fandom* webpage titled “Alluka’s Gender,” which is solely dedicated to debate regarding Alluka’s gender, demonstrates fans’ desire for categorisation; not only does the very existence of the page highlight such an idea, but the comments themselves reflect a need to categorise despite the lack of information given viewers about Alluka’s sex and gender. The webpage for Alluka opens with a general comment stating:

“I’m still not over this. I personally think that Alluka is, indeed, female and the reason why she is called as a “he” is because the family does not acknowledge her as family or human.” – Fairyflare, 1 Jan. 2015.

User Fairyflare identifies Alluka’s gender ambiguity as a result of abuse. The user therefore believes Alluka’s gender identity matches their biological sex and performs accordingly. Regarding Fairyflare’s reasoning, scepticism over the reliability of the Zoldycks’ reference to Alluka as male has arisen in fan discourse due to the Zoldycks’ broken relationship with Alluka; it has been posited by many that the Zoldycks refer to Alluka as male (or as “it”) as a form of abuse. The Zoldyck family (Killua excluded) prefer to keep Alluka imprisoned in a room behind multiple bolted doors due to the dangerous nature of Alluka’s wish-granting ability, which can result in the deaths of multiple people should Alluka’s own difficult requests not be fulfilled prior. Thus the abuse theory is supported by the Zoldycks’ already abusive relationship. Killua is the only Zoldyck family member who cares for Alluka, which is

demonstrated when he rescues Alluka from their family and how he is identified as the only person who knows the true nature of Alluka's power. For this reason, it is believed that he identifies Alluka as a girl at Alluka's own request (note Alluka never explicitly requests this in the anime or manga, it is simply assumed), which may be due to Alluka's sex being female (as user Fairyflare believes) or due to potential transgender leanings, meaning Alluka would have male reproductive organs.

This latter idea is raised by another user in the same *Fandom* discussion board:

"Alluka is a trans girl. The only people who even call her a boy are the villians [sic] in the show. Stop making up excuses to try and erase the fact that alluka is a girl. Stop with the cissexism and transphobia. Alluka says that she is a girl, so you need to leave it at that. Stop trying to figure out what a little girls genetalia [sic] is, its [sic] weird. Respect the fact that trans people have an inkling of representation." – Coolkid420, 8 April 2015.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this comment by Coolkid420 is the assumption that this theory is fact and not mere speculation. Whether this is due to misinformation or a strong desire for representation (as suggested in their closing statement), one can certainly see the potential Alluka has for raising awareness about transgenderism in the *HxH* fan community. Broadening the scope, however, Coolkid420's comment reflects a growing need for positive representation of transgender people in general Western media, something this particular commenter suggests is lacking. McInroy and Craig note with regard to LGBTQ youths that "media representations may have a significant impact on young people's identity development and presentation," noting that young people often mould their identities off what they see depicted in fictional narratives (35). However their findings reveal that these fictional characters tend to lack variety or dimension, with interviewees noting that transgender and other LGBTQ characters' sexual OR gender identity encompassed their entire role in the narrative; they are subjected to "one-dimensional stereotypes" (40). This is concerning as this

suggests impressionable youths might base their identities off a very narrow understandings of what it means to live as an LGBTQI youth. Furthermore, participants noted the invisibility of specifically transgender characters in these narratives, noting such representations are rare when compared to the amount of texts that approach the topic of homosexuality (40). With this in mind, Coolkid420 is entirely justified in their desire to see Alluka – whose gender identity is significantly NOT the extent of their character (the series' notable omission of Alluka's gender identity reflects the lack of centrality this aspect has to Alluka's character) – as a representative for transgenderism; a minority groups which certainly lacks representation as the commenter states.

The theory that Alluka is transgender is one which is favoured by members on other related forums, and like Coolkid420's comment, the theory is often interpreted as fact by those that suggest it. The archived *Reddit* thread "Is alluka a boy or girl" is very one-sided with regard to this: the majority of the comments, in addition to the most popular comments, are ones which regard Alluka's transgenderism as fact. For example:

"Alluka is male by biological sex, but female by gender. Female pronouns are more appropriate to use for her since that's what she more identifies with and prefers." – nipplelightpride.

Nipplelightpride received 30 points for this comment, much more than any other comment on the thread. Note that, as with Coolkid420's comment, there is an overarching assumption that this is fact, not necessarily due to author confirmation but perhaps due, again, to a desire for representation. A potential flaw in this theory is that, as mentioned, Alluka never specifically states their gender preference, thus Killua is not necessarily referring to Alluka by Alluka's preferred gender, but may be doing so for other unknown reasons open to speculation. Later in the thread, user Vertraumte makes a similar point to nipplelightpride's:

“All the Zoldyck [sic] children are boys. However, the distinction is that Kalluto is a cross-dresser (is biologically male, identifies self as a male, but dresses like a female for certain reasons) and Alluka is transgendered (is biologically male, but identifies self as a female and dresses as such because of it). Killua, respecting and understanding Alluka's wish to be treated as a girl, treats him like so.” – Vertraumte.

Vertraumte received 13 points for this comment. To address the first point, the idea that all the Zoldyck children are male is possibly due to a potential mistranslation in episode 22 “A x Dangerous x Watchdog,” where instead of correctly stating in their introduction that there are five Zoldyck *siblings* (*kyoudai*), some unofficial translations of the series may interpret this use of *kyoudai* as “brothers.” Mistranslations in the original manga could also be at fault as the word *kyoudai* is most commonly written with the characters for older and younger brother, even when referring to male and female, or just female siblings. *Kyoudai* can be written using the characters for older and younger *sister*, but this is not common. The creators of *HxH* are careful to preserve the ambiguity clouding Alluka’s sex, something which was perhaps lost in certain (unofficial) translations.

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Figure 44: “Nanika” or “Something.”

Figure 45: Something grants Killua’s wish.

Recall Togashi’s previous depiction of transgenderism mentioned in Chapter Two: transwoman Miyuki of *Yu Yu Hakusho* illustrates Togashi’s interest in the subject, suggesting Alluka may be an extension on the limited role Miyuki played in the series’ narrative. With

this in mind, there is good reason for why the transgender theory is popular in online forums: not only does it explain the Zoldycks' use of male pronouns and justify Killua's contrary use of female pronouns, it also neatly aligns with Alluka's mysterious wish-granting ability. Alluka is essentially host to two beings, one being Alluka Zoldyck, the other being "*Nanika*," translated directly as "Something" to describe the mystery shrouding this entity. To simplify a complex idea with rules and particulars, Something, according to the Zoldycks, only appears after three of Alluka's requests are fulfilled, and it is Something who holds the power to grant any one subsequent wish (such as Killua's wish to restore Gon's health, fig. 45). Something appears as a mask of sorts with black holes for the mouth and eyes, temporarily transforming Alluka's face immediately after the final request is fulfilled (fig. 44). This neatly ties in with the transgender theory as Alluka and Something potentially act as a metaphor of sorts for gender dysphoria: having two different entities existing in one body is not unlike the confusion that comes from identifying with a gender counter to what one's body and conservative society dictates. Additionally, Alluka's association with wish granting might allude to Alluka's personal desire to change sexes to better align with their potential gender identity; note that perhaps Alluka has already wished for a sex change, something the Zoldycks might refuse to accept, reflecting their rejection of Something specifically.

While the transgender theory is the most popular and perhaps most likely explanation for Alluka's circumstance, I must again stress that it is not confirmed at any point in the anime and is therefore not canonical to the 2011 television series (nor to the manga at this point in time). Another potential theory posted on Alluka's *Fandom* discussion page is notably tossed aside immediately by the very user who first mentions it:

"Knowing Togashi, Alluka probably has both male and female reproductive organs. I speculate the other Zoldyck children (excluding Killua & Milluki) are the same.

Jokes aside, I think that Alluka is male, but is very feminine.” – DinoTaur, 1 Jan. 1 2015.

The “jokes aside” comment unfortunately undermines the legitimacy of the possibility that Alluka could indeed be intersex, discouraging any potential spark for debate. This possibility is discarded in favour of the theory that Alluka is biologically male but highly feminine (this would assume Alluka cross-dresses due to their distinctly feminine wardrobe, a valid theory). I highlight this point as it suggests the idea of an intersex character is almost laughable to certain fans – a trait the original author could only include as a means to confuse or trick his audience (suggested by the “knowing Togashi” statement) rather than (as with the transgender theory) potentially encourage representation of a very marginalised group of people.

According to Anna Fausto-Sterling’s research, 1.7% of the world’s population is intersex in some (potentially broad) manner, meaning approximately 17 out of every 1000 newborns do not fall into society’s strict definition of “male” or “female,” more than enough people to warrant representation of some form in post-modern light entertainment media (Sax, 174). Davis’ writing suggests that such a move is happening, albeit slowly, in the modern era; for example, in 2014 MTV *Faking It*’s Lauren raised intersex awareness by revealing that she, herself, was intersex in the series which, according to Davis, had a following of over one million people (150). This in turn prompted online discussions about intersex and encouraged viewers to learn more about the condition. This is an improvement on the previous decade where, as Koyama and Weasel’s 2002 report points out, even some university institutions struggled to avoid damaging stigmatisation via a lack of proper teaching (173). However Georgiann Davis notes in her conclusion that despite recent efforts, “too much shame, secrecy and stigma remain associated with intersex traits,” a point which is suggested in DinoTaur’s comment *and* potentially the lack of discussion around the possibility of Alluka being intersex;

intersex is still framed as a biological disorder and stigmatisation of such subjects is normalised (156).

If Alluka *were* intersex, the existence of Something would perhaps metaphorise the misconception that intersex people are anomalies in need of correction; Something is misunderstood and rejected by those who call Alluka either “him” or “it,” whereas Killua understands that Something is a complex being who has thoughts, emotions and desires, and accepts Something as a person in their own right. Protagonist Killua represents the growing need for acceptance of the intersex community, while the (somewhat) villainous Zoldycks reflect the conservative opposing stance that intersex people are unrecognisable human beings in need of correction.

Regarding evidence for the theory in the narrative itself, the lawsuit filed by Pamela and John Mark Crawford regarding their adoptive son “MC’s” controversial surgery constructs a scenario not unlike what one might suspect of Alluka should Alluka be intersex. According to Davis’ investigation of the case, MC was born with an intersex trait which gave him both male and female genitalia: he was born with hermaphroditism (153). At 16-months old, the foster child was given unnecessary, “irreversible, invasive, and painful sex assignment surgery” by medical providers, as supported by social service employees, “for the purpose of “assigning” the child the female gender” (Davis, 153). Since an early age, however, MC has identified as male which reflects the unethical nature of performing sex-assignment surgery on a child not old enough to make decisions of their own. In short, MC was assigned the female gender despite self-identifying as male.

Might Alluka’s situation somewhat reflect this if Alluka was intersex? Perhaps Alluka’s family decided Alluka’s gender at birth, only to later discover Alluka’s preference otherwise. Yet due to their broken relationship at the discovery of Alluka’s incredible power, reference to

Alluka as male became an abusive tactic, not supported by Killua who either refers to Alluka by their preferred gender or rebels against his family's abuse by using the female gender. This theory may require a stretch of the imagination, but, like other theories, there is little to suggest this is *not* valid; there are endless possibilities available when the author is so carefully and intentionally ambiguous, and when the medium in which the story is presented is the virtually limitless animation medium. There is an argument for Alluka being intersex, but what I aim to emphasise is not the theory itself but the lack of attention such a theory has received in online fan discussions, reflecting a lack of knowledge about the condition.

I return to the idea of intersex characters in the following section on Neferpitou. However as a last point regarding Alluka, there are other possible theories fans have notably not brought up: for instance, what if Alluka is non-binary and identifies with more than one gender? Or perhaps they are gender-fluid and their identity shifts between genders? As Alluka does not seem bothered by their family's use of varying personal pronouns (when Milluki refers to Alluka as his "brother" in episode 139 as previously mentioned, Alluka makes no attempt to correct him nor seems offended by his words), perhaps they are not necessarily *wrong*. What if Alluka subscribes to a more ambiguous notion of gender which is neither static nor certain? Or maybe male and female pronouns are used in the series to reflect Alluka identifying with both the male *and* female gender? The lack of hypotheses regarding these identities suggests the West as a whole is still far from understanding and accepting non-binary and gender-fluid identities. The possibility of such identities being incorporated into *HxH*'s open-ended narrative ultimately demonstrates a potentially progressive agenda underlying the series which encourages non-binary explorations.

Contrary to Alluka who is called both male and female, Neferpitou (henceforth Pitou), one of the chimera ant king's three royal guards (alongside Pouf from chapter three), is only ever given gender-neutral pronouns by other characters. Though Pitou uses traditionally

masculine personal pronouns in Japanese (*boku* meaning “I,” which is predominantly used by boys and young men, however can be used by women as an alternative to the hyper-feminine *atashi*), Pitou’s distinctive character design on the contrary points to Pitou being female (assuming the gender binary applies here). As already mentioned, discerning a character’s gender via their appearance in *HxH* is arguably futile. Yet it is worth noting that Pitou’s character design is particularly feminine, perhaps more so than even some of the series’ confirmed women: from a tellingly rounded chest and narrow waist, to large eyes lined with long eyelashes, it would be a stretch to call Pitou male even considering *HxH*’s tendency towards androgyny and gender norm subversion. The usual physical markers of the male sex are also absent from Pitou’s adult form; recall Alluka’s prepubescence justified their androgynous body. Additionally, fans often cite a comment made by Killua in episode 116 “Revenge x And x Recovery” as evidence which favours a female Pitou: Killua likens Pitou to a mother guarding her child during the palace infiltration when attempting to explain (via internal dialogue) why Pitou is protecting Komugi from Gon’s wrath. The association of Pitou with maternal imagery is enough evidence (in addition to the above description) to convince some fans that Pitou is female.

Yet other viewers are quick to retaliate that Pitou is supposedly listed as male in the official “Hunter x Hunter Character and World Data Book,” which serves as a companion and guide for the manga series. Fans state that this is the only official recognition of Pitou’s gender, however without access to a Japanese copy of the book, I cannot confirm the viability of this argument myself. The *Fandom* page on Pitou titled “Neferpitou” states that the book “refers to Neferpitou using the pronoun “彼” (*kare*), which is usually translated to “he”.” Regardless of this book’s statement, it was released in 2004 and does not account for the

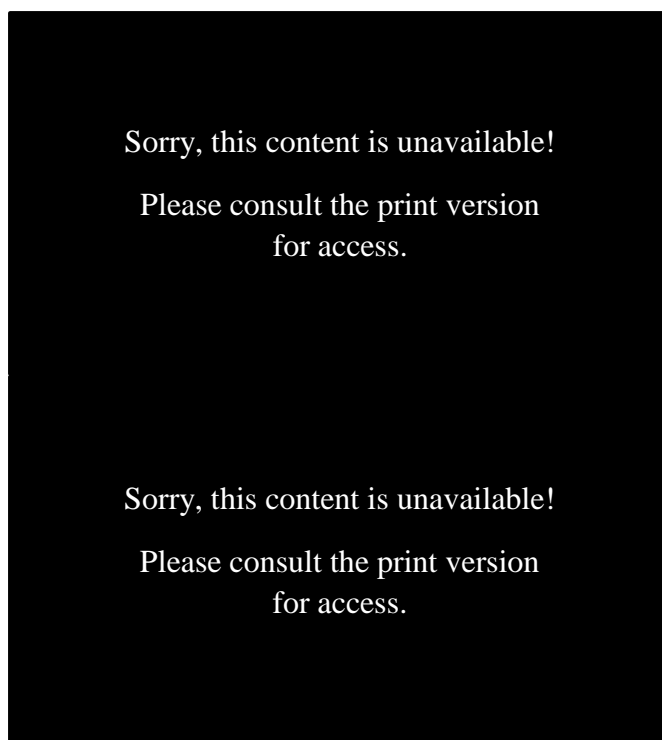


Figure 46: Comparison of Pitou in the manga (above) versus the 2011 anime (below). Source: http://hunterxhunter.wikia.com/wiki/File:Naked_Pitou_manga_vs_anime.png.

recent alterations to the character designs in the 2011 anime. As (fig. 46) reveals, Pitou has been subject to some major changes in terms of their body, as described previously. Whether the Pitou of Yoshihiro Togashi's manga and the Pitou of director Hiroshi Koujina's anime differ with regard to gender, the creators have neither confirmed nor denied the situation. Regardless of any supposed "official" confirmation in the 2004 data book, the fact that Pitou is omitted overt gender recognition in the anime (and manga) via the use of

gender-neutral pronouns is enough to validate the idea that Pitou's gender is intentionally ambiguous to some fans. This has in turn evoked discussion in online forums.

Perhaps a more relevant argument for the male Pitou theory, as suggested by user xmaikokoro on the *MAL* thread "Neferpitou: Male or Female?" (posted 25 May, 2014), is that which is brought up in episode 91 "The Strong x And x The Weak" where Knov (an ally of the protagonists), upon being questioned if chimera ants can reproduce, states it is possible only if they copulate with *female* members of *other* species, suggesting that *all* chimera ant soldiers are therefore male. Though I would postulate that this could also suggest female ants are unable to reproduce. Xmaikokoro's idea is challenged within the narrative, however, by the amount of distinctively feminine chimera ants who refer to themselves as female. For example, Zazan is clearly intended to be female: in a rare moment of fan service, the scantily clad character

drawn with large breasts refers to themselves as an ant “queen” when fighting Feitan (a member of the villainous Phantom Troupe) in episode 97 “Carnage x And x Devastation.” Zazan is not androgynous like other characters mentioned in this thesis, and this is more than a case of Zazan identifying as female but being male in sex; Zazan is very clearly intended to have female genitalia as suggested by the character’s highly feminine shape which is clothed in such a way that leaves little to the imagination. Additionally, Hina, another chimera ant who identifies as female, takes on the appearance of a pregnant woman when using their *nen* ability. In short, Hina is a “nen exorcist” able to remove curses inflicted by *nen* abilities, and does so by seemingly incubating them in Hina’s “womb” (assuming Hina has one). The imagery here is unmistakably maternal, therefore alluding to Hina’s female sex. Overall, though there is clear evidence to suggest all ants are male, there is strong evidence which counters this – enough, at least, for most fans to assume the fictional chimera ants can have varying sexes (and, in turn, genders). However this additional ambiguity yet again signifies the series’ break from normative notions of sex and gender, revealing a breakdown of binary gender categories. This brings us back to Pitou who, unlike Zazan and Hina, does not appear to identify with either of the two categories in the gender binary.

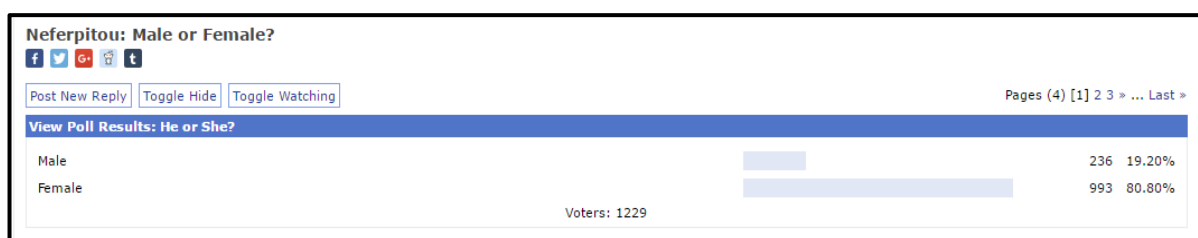


Figure 47: Poll results for Pitou’s gender. Male: 236 (19.2 per cent), Female: 993 (80.8 per cent).

With regard to online fan discourse regarding Pitou’s gender, viewers of the series tend to be more conservative with their theories in comparison to Alluka: while the use of conflicting personal pronouns raised question about Alluka’s potential gender dysphoria, Pitou’s lack of gender-specific pronouns seems to discourage fans from truly exploring the myriad of

possibilities, which in itself is an interesting observation. The majority of comments left in forums regarding Pitou's gender consist of fans merely stating their opinion and expressing their preference as to whether Pitou is male (using the Data Book as evidence) or female (generally using their own attraction to the character as evidence). For example, the thread on *MAL* titled "Neferpitou: Male or Female?" provides fans with a space to discuss such an issue, but the poll at the top of the page suggests the general consensus (fig. 47). What I want to draw attention to regarding this poll is the fact that there is no category for "other"; within this poll, Pitou is either male or female, there is no room for categories such as "genderless" or "intersex," categories which I discuss later in this section. This differs slightly from Alluka's poll referenced previously (fig. 43), where the option "scary as Hell" at least allowed voters a choice to protest against the idea that Alluka fits into either male or female category (even if in jest). In Pitou's case, however, as the majority (slightly more than 80 per cent of the over 1200 voters) have voted female, most viewers are likely basing their judgement on Pitou's physical appearance in the anime. The theory follows: since Pitou looks feminine and is voiced by a female *seiyuu* (voice actor), Pitou, in turn, must be female.

The other main theory (not included in the poll but very present in the *MAL* discussion board) is that Pitou is "genderless," a broad category which is rarely fleshed out by those who propose it. This is of interest as it shows how Pitou's character encourages some fans to reject the gender binary and side with the possibility that Pitou does not fit into either category. However, as mentioned, the debate typically stops here as fans do not explore or explain what a genderless character is nor what this might mean with regard to our understanding of gender. Perhaps this is because Pitou is not entirely human; user jordancharacter raises such a point in a post on a *Crunchyroll* forum:

“Well...Neferpitou is not human, so gender probably does not apply here.

Many animals (especially insects) can change their gender^[12] when needed, so it is entirely plausible that Neferpitou is simply genderless.” – jordancharakter, 29 May 2014.

Essentially, Pitou’s genetic structure is called into question here; Pitou is a chimera ant with the genetic material of various different species, humans being just one (but notably a very dominant species seeing as Pitou is sentient, intelligent, articulate and bipedal). While it is valid to say Pitou might have the ability to change sexes – an idea which is supported by the fact that Pitou’s fellow royal guards Pouf and Youpi are able to transform their appearance (recall my discussion about Pouf’s transformation ability in Chapter Three) – at no point in the anime does Pitou manipulate their own appearance, suggesting it is an unlikely possibility. Kite, however, is a much stronger candidate for this theory as he changes sexes after reincarnation: essentially, after Kite’s death, he is mysteriously reborn as a female chimera ant (identified as a “girl” by Gon in episode 146 “Chairman x And x Release,” which again supports the theory that ants can indeed be female) but appears to retain

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Figure 48: Pitou shortly after their birth

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Figure 49: Pitou greeting Youpi after his birth

¹² I interpret “gender” as “sex” here assuming the user refers to animals who are able to change their biological sex (sequential hermaphroditism).

his male identity. A character who inhabits both a male and female body is thus possible in the narrative. Yet to say gender “probably does not apply” to Pitou, justified by the fact that Pitou is *not human*, is disregarding the fact that the chimera ants do in fact *have* genders (and most likely different sexes as Zazan, Hina and Kite demonstrate), which is apparent in the way other ants are referred to and refer to themselves with gender specific pronouns (Pitou exempt, of course). This furthermore brings up an interesting issue: jordancharacter justifies Pitou’s genderless-ness to the fact that Pitou is of an alien species, suggesting any deviation from the norm can only be explained by the fact that the character themselves is not “normal.” This idea is shared by a variety of other fans who similarly attribute Pitou’s gender ambiguity to Pitou’s non-human disposition, such as this post on Pitou’s *MAL* thread:

“Neither "HE" nor "SHE", i think "IT" would make more sense.

Neferpitou is one of my favorite characters in all anime and manga, but i can accept the fact that it's just a monster that was born to serve the king.

It doesn't need a gender, besides all the chimera ants are made of mixed human/animal bodies so there's a possibility that Neferpitou is made of male and female bodies.” – DiabloMask, 2 Aug. 2013.

Breaking down DiabloMask’s comment, the user, though clearly fond of the character, makes the point of dehumanising Pitou in order to mould the character into one who would assumedly fit the genderless archetype. Essentially, by this user’s justification, Pitou does not need a gender because the character is made up of a combination of genders and species. Though a plausible assumption, note again the idea of a genderless character is situated within an already abnormal, inhuman, even *monstrous* framework. Comments such as this contribute to and reflect the stigma that those with an ambiguous or fluid gender identity can be written off as abnormal from the outset; in other words, the idea of Pitou being genderless is easily accepted as Pitou is not entirely human. This evokes the question: if Pitou were human in the

narrative, would fans be as open to a genderless character and accept the ambiguity which follows such a statement?

From a Western standpoint the idea of a genderless character might provoke controversial discussions. However, taking Japan's contemporary social context into account, notably the existence of "genderless *kei*" (genderless "style") street fashion, one gets the idea that a genderless category has slowly become more normalised. This explains why a genderless character in *HxH* might be more plausible and accepted within the text's cultural context. Rich discusses a growing subculture in Japan of men who identify as "genderless *danshi*" (genderless young men) in *The New York Times* article "With Manicures and Makeup, Japan's 'Genderless' Blur Line Between Pink and Blue." Rich writes how pop idols and models such as Toman Sasaki have shaped their career around their androgynous style. "Toman" explains that for him, the idea of gender "isn't really necessary," and though he identifies as a man, he prefers a wardrobe which might belong to that of a preadolescent girl, in Rich's observations (np). Rich cites Professor Jennifer Robertson's comment that the genderless *danshi* are all about "blurring the boundaries that have defined pink and blue masculinity and femininity," and makes an interesting point that while in the Western world one typically associates cross-dressing with sexuality, in Japan "it is mostly about fashion" (np). Applying this to Pitou and the genderless theory, one can understand how open Japanese society potentially is to such identities, heightening the plausibility of such a situation occurring within the narrative.

Like Alluka, the idea that Pitou could be intersex has only been touched upon by a small amount of viewers, and similar to the genderless theory, fans rarely explore how or why the character might be intersex. Take KramXD's comment from Pitou's *MAL* thread for example:

"Alluka = trans
Kalluto = cross dresser
Kurapika = female
Neferpitou = intersex" – KramXD, 28 Aug. 2015.

In addition, the first part of WeiBo1337's *Reddit* post reads:

“One of my Biggest Critics [sic] on HxH is the Lack Of Female Characters. Nearly all the "Female" Characters are either Dudes with really high estrogen levels (Kurapika), Crossdresser (Kalluto), Intersex (Pitou) or Transgender (Alluka). [...]" – WeiBo1337 (retrieved 24 Feb, 2017).

Putting aside KramXD's idea that Kurapika is female (there is no evidence to suggest this as the androgynous character identifies as male, is identified as male by those around him, and embodies no visual indicator of the female sex), neither viewer gives any reasoning to justify their opinion on any of the characters. Thus, in lieu of these comments' lack of explanation, I assume the theory about Pitou's intersex status is primarily explained via the gender-neutral pronouns: perhaps Pitou is not loyal to either gender, but rather falls in between, preferring to therefore be addressed as such. Additionally, to align with the other theories mentioned in this section, no doubt Pitou's genetic structure would again prompt one to imagine Pitou's genitalia are a result of their genetic mixture. What strikes me about these comments is the assumption that, once again, these theories are factual despite having no official confirmation.

Dissecting WeiBo1337's comment, this fan is disappointed about that fact that there are too few female characters in the series, and proceeds to suggest that certain female-*looking* characters are somehow used as female substitutes. Recall in the previous chapter I mentioned how women were underrepresented in *HxH*; while unfortunate, I did note that the few women who *were* in the series made enough of an impact to situate themselves as equals alongside the male characters. In comparison, the gender ambiguous characters are the subject of this chapter specifically because they are so unusual in *shōnen* anime and spark conversation about underrepresented minority groups. It is worrying that WeiBo1337 considers it unfair that

female characters supposedly have *less* presence than those that are supposedly intersex, transgender or androgynous. This speaks volumes about the current situation for minority LGBTQI groups in the West in that, according to Weibo1337's comment, such people require or deserve less representation than women. Though this user likely means well in expressing their desire to see women take on greater roles in the narrative, this is at the cost of further marginalising other underrepresented and clearly misunderstood groups. However, focusing specifically on Pitou, the idea that Pitou is considered a female substitute by this user and is furthermore allocated, as an (assumed) intersex character, more representation than deserved is problematic when considering the already concerning stigma around intersex people in the West, as I touched upon in my discussion about Alluka.

Koyama and Weasel define intersex as a “group of medical conditions” in which intersex people are “born with physical conditions that result in atypical internal or external reproduction anatomies or chromosomal anomalies” (169). The tendency to see intersex as a *disorder* is problematized in Davis' book *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis*, where the use of the term *DSD* (standing for Disorder of Sex Developments), often used interchangeably with “intersex,” is called into question. Koyama, Weasel and Davis all agree that a major issue facing intersex people today is the authority medical professionals have over their supposedly “abnormal” bodies. The acknowledgment of intersex traits as disorders aids medical practitioners in gaining jurisdiction over intersex bodies, a major issue when considering Davis' point that “many medical providers hold essentialist understandings of sex, gender and sexuality,” considering them “biologically prescribed and, in many cases, neatly correlated” (145). This attitude often leads such professionals to perform damaging corrective surgery on intersex patients before they have even left their infancy. The MC case mentioned previously is just one of many where intersex patients have encountered irreversible psychological and physiological consequences as a result of medical intervention artificially

“naturalising” their bodies to fit society’s harsh definition of “normal” with regard to biological sex. Though these scholars acknowledge attitudes and stigmas have improved somewhat in recent years, comments such as that of Weibo1337’s suggest there is still much to be done in order to transform the general public’s mindset regarding intersex.

Within the sea of contesting opinions regarding Pitou’s gender identity and reproductive organs, I acknowledge that there are those who explicitly state their distaste with such arguments. For example, MrAm’s comment left on Pitou’s *MAL* thread notes:

“The arguments about this will never end, and as long as Pitou's gender never becomes relevant to the story, does it matter what people choose to call him/her?” – MrAm, 13 Feb. 2014.

This is encouraging as it suggests some viewers are growing more accustomed to the idea that these characters cannot necessarily be categorised according to traditional definitions of gender. MrAm believes Pitou’s gender should not be the defining point of their character in fan discourse seeing as knowledge of Pitou’s gender is not necessary to the story. Guessing their gender is a futile task as there is so little information to aid us in categorising Pitou; and to what end? MrAm’s dismissal of such arguments, however, also ignores the impact these discussions can have on viewers’ opinion; as this chapter has demonstrated, fan discussions about these gender ambiguous characters opens up a space where fans can spread awareness of minority groups and potentially educate others about the issues members of such groups face (such as a lack of positive representation, ignorance regarding their situation, social stigmas and so on). Such discussions are highly beneficial as a result, despite reflecting an underlying desire for categorisation which potentially aids in segregating those who differ from the established norm.

CONCLUSION:

HxH pushes the boundaries of gender normativity and challenges traditional conceptualisations regarding binary gender categories. By analysing certain male, female and gender ambiguous characters in relation to Japanese and Western gender norms, this thesis has constructed an argument which highlights *HxH*'s projection of gender transgression. I also argue the series encourages criticism of the notion that gender is a biological prescription and necessarily determines one's sexuality. Chapter Three shed light on how Hisoka and Pouf negotiate masculine and feminine attributes and exhibit homosexual leanings, creating unique masculine identities which oppose traditional Western models of "manliness." Though their subversive gender traits are somewhat demoralised by their status as "villains," suggesting their gender subversion directly ties in with their penchant for evil and wrongdoing, I argue their function in the narrative is more complex than traditional villains. The two men display noble qualities and lack an evil agenda to harm the protagonists for inherently villainous reasons. These honourable qualities ultimately complicate readings which undermine the legitimacy of Hisoka and Pouf's gender subversion due to their "evil" disposition. On the contrary, I argue Hisoka and Pouf pave the way for more progressive depictions of masculinity. Though "manliness" in popular *shōnen* series is typically measured by male characters' alignment with heteronormative ideals, Hisoka and Pouf unapologetically flaunt their differences and encourage viewers to subscribe to a more inclusive notion of masculinity which celebrates effeminacy, androgyny and homosexuality.

In a similar vein, Chapter Four identified how six of the series' women reject traditional feminine stereotypes through their aggression, masculine appearance and/or personality traits. Progressive female characterisation strengthens the notion that *HxH* rejects gender stereotypes by melding elements of both genders (in the gender-binary). In the typically phallogentric universe of *shōnen* media, these women stand in stark contrast to those of other similar

narratives who are often objectified and fetishized through popular conventions such as fan service and romantic subplots. Menchi, Machi and Shizuku create a strong connection between domesticity and violence, which demonstrates a rejection of misogynist ideas prevalent in Japanese and (to a lesser extent) Western society. These women take a metaphorical stab at patriarchal dominance in their implementation of such weapons, engaging male opponents in battle and emerging triumphant in their feat. Bisky and Palm embody images of stereotypical femininity at the same time as qualities of hyper-masculinity, signalling a victory for egalitarianism. Though these women are bound by societal visions of traditional femininity – Palm entertains romantic notions and Bisky dons a *loli* disguise – they reconcile their feminine “failings” and gain respect from male characters only when disassociated from feminine stereotypes. The inclusion of Cheadle’s succession as Chairperson of the Hunter Association in the series’ final arc is particularly interesting when considering Japan’s outdated views regarding female politicians. Overall, *HxH* advocates gender equality through these strong female characters which sends a powerful message to Japanese audiences regarding Japan’s concerning, outmoded views of women and their contribution to society.

The final chapter took a particular interest in blurred gender boundaries, focusing on Western interpretations by using Western fan discourse to observe the various debates *HxH*’s gender ambiguous characters Alluka and Pitou elicited. Chapter Five ultimately proposed that *HxH*’s narrative exists on a liberal plane where gender is not restricted to dual categorisations but rather, operates as a spectrum. The sheer variety of fan theories demonstrates that identifying as male or female does not determine the personality and appearance of a character, nor influence their course of action. Though the men and women discussed in Chapter Three and Four are not gender fluid but certain in their identity, they test the boundaries of gender norms, requiring the viewer to reassess societal ideas regarding gender. Behaviours associated with a specific gender do not define that gender nor determine one’s gender identity. While

this thesis focused on a small group of male, female and gender ambiguous characters, *HxH*'s gender transgression is not limited to just these players. Tsubone (mentioned in the introduction), Kurapika, Illumi, Kite, Kalluto, Baise and Canary – to name only a few prominent examples – reinforce the idea that gender is perceived as both variant and fluid in *HxH*. Essentially, these characters ignore gender stereotypes and perform without the assumption that one's biological sex should dictate their actions.

Further research on gender portrayal in *HxH* could expand on exactly how the series could be interpreted without the restriction of pre-conceived ideas regarding the binary gender system. As these pre-conceived ideas were the focus of my study, perhaps a more direct discussion focusing on how Alluka and Pitou potentially signpost an era where genderless and sexless characters can be understood *without* presumptions about dual gender categories might be useful. This would raise questions such as what exactly “genderless” could mean in the virtually limitless world of animation. Where characters have the ability to exist without genitalia, how might gender be depicted entirely free of biological limitations? What variety of personality types would crop up without the stereotypes associated with men and women? How might these non-binary identities impact romance narratives? The character Kite requires further discussion. Kite experiences life both as a man, then as a woman when he is reincarnated after his death in the Chimera Ant Arc. His change in sex elicits a myriad of questions regarding how he performs as both genders and whether this involuntary gender change impacts his personality, seeing as he does retain his memories from his past life. Exploring outside the realm of *shōnen* anime would also prove interesting. As mentioned, *shōjo* anime is generally more transgressive in its portrayal of gender; homosexual or effeminate men are commonly depicted across a range of *shōjo* narratives. Could *shōnen* anime move in a similar direction? If not, why? How might ambiguous identities appear in *josei* or *seinen* narratives which target adult audiences?

Anime is still a largely unexplored field in Anglophone scholarship – specifically from the angle that emphasises textual analysis – which requires more attention as the popularity of the Japanese animated medium continues to grow in the west. This thesis has sought to contribute to one's understanding of anime's potential impact on western viewers, using my analysis of *HxH* as an indicator of the different perspectives present in these foreign texts. With the steady influx of Japanese media carrying different ideological perspectives to western shores through their narratives, I argue this calls for Western viewers to better understand these texts in relation to our own cultural background. *HxH* highlights the similarities and differences between Japanese and Western gender norms, challenging western perspectives with its progressive portrayal of non-normative gender identities.

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