

## A Short History of '*Hentai*'

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### Introduction

A Yahoo search for the Japanese loanword '*hentai*' produces over 7 million hits – more than twice that of better-known loanwords such as samurai, geisha or sushi. This astonishing number is evidence of the popularity of a genre of erotic manga and anime referred to as *hentai* or sometimes the abbreviation 'H' (pronounced *etchi* in Japanese) by western fans. However, despite the popularity of the genre and its massive presence on the internet, the category *hentai* is not discussed in English-language studies of manga and anime such as Poitras's *The Anime Companion*, Napier's *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, Allison's *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics and Censorship in Japan* or Buckley's *Encyclopedia of Japanese Popular Culture*.

Why is this so? The reason is not prudishness but rather the fact that use of the term *hentai* to refer to erotic or sexual manga and anime in general is not a Japanese but an English innovation. In Japanese *hentai* can reference sexual material but only of an extreme, 'abnormal' or 'perverse' kind; it is not a general category. The Japanese use of *hentai* refers to both same-sex and heterosexual activities which are considered unusual but also *extreme*. While both 'H'/*etchi* and *ero* can be used to refer to manga and anime with sexual content, *hentai* is only used to refer to unusual or perverse

sexual situations – this might be number of partners as in gang rape, or bizarre partners as in aliens or monsters or illicit partners as in children (*rorikon* and *shōtakon*). Hence in the Japanese case, *hentai* manga/anime is a subdivision of the much broader category of *ero* manga whereas in English *hentai* has come to signify the genre of *ero* manga as a whole.

Before looking in detail at how the term *hentai* developed in Japanese and eventually spread to the English-speaking world, let us look briefly at how the term *hentai* is actually used in western manga and anime fandom. *Hentai* and its abbreviation *H* are used interchangeably on English fan sites in a context in which *ero* (erotic) or *seinen* (adult) would be the more appropriate Japanese terms. That is, both *hentai* and *etchi* are used to describe anime or manga with strong sexual content. However, the use of the term *hentai*, which in English refers to a much broader range of sexual scenarios than it does in Japanese, cannot properly be said to be a ‘mistake’, as many fans are aware of the different uses of the term in Japanese and western manga and anime fandom; indeed as self-defining *otaku*, many fans pride themselves on just this kind of insider knowledge. [SLIDE 1] *Hentai* is, then, in the context of western manga and anime fandom, no longer a ‘Japanese’ word but has become a loanword with its own specific meaning and nuance, just like loanwords into Japanese such as *abekku* (from the French *avec*, meaning ‘with’ and in Japanese used to refer to a dating couple) or *arubaito* (from the German word for ‘work’, signifying in Japanese a part-time job).

### ***Hentai* in the Meiji and Taisho eras**

I would like to turn now to the history of the term *hentai* in Japanese. Current Japanese dictionary definitions of *hentai* offer three main meanings: 1/ change of form or shape; 2/ an abbreviation for ‘*hentai seiyoku*’; 3/ metamorphosis (as in the change from caterpillar to butterfly or in a chemical reaction). It is obviously the second definition – *hentai*’s use as an abbreviation for *hentai seiyoku* that is of most interest to us and to understand how this came about we need to look at the introduction of sexology to Japan in the Meiji (1857-1912) period.

Since the Meiji period the use of the term *hentai* has had a parallel history in both science and psychology but the sense that *hentai* communicates of something being unusual or abnormal comes from the latter. It was first used in the middle of the Meiji period in the context of the developing science of psychology to describe disorders such as hysteria as well as to refer to paranormal abilities such as telepathy and hypnosis (Saitō 2004: 46). It had the connotation of something outside or beyond the normal. Although the term originally circulated only among medical specialists, by 1917 it was being popularised via such journals such as *Hentai shinri* (Abnormal psychology). However it did not have any particular sexual connotations in this context. *Hentai*’s sexual reference was to come not through its connection with *hentai shinri* but through its juxtaposition with another, related term, *hentai seiyoku* or ‘abnormal sexual desires’.

The technical term *seiyoku* or ‘sexual desire’ was introduced into Japanese via German sexology which began to be translated by medical doctors such as the army physician and novelist Mori Ōgai from the middle of the Meiji period (Yokota-Murakami 1998). The notion of *hentai seiyoku* or perverse or abnormal sexual desire

was popularized via the 1894 translation of German sexologist Krafft-Ebing's text *Psychopathia Sexualis* which was given the Japanese title *Hentai seiyoku shinrigaku* (The psychology of perverse sexual desires). Although the term *seiyoku* at first only circulated among medical specialists, its wider dissemination was accelerated by the use of the term in fiction by writers such as Ōgai, as well as others associated with the naturalist school; indeed, Ōgai's 1909 novel *Vita Sexualis* is clearly in debt to Krafft-Ebing for its title.

The elaboration of a psychological realm of sexual desire in medical texts as well as literature led to the designation of normal (*seijō*) and perverse (*ijō*) forms of sexuality and, accordingly, people. Indeed, from the end of the Meiji period, drawing upon theorists such as Freud, discussions of 'perverse' or 'queer' desire (*hentai seiyoku*) began to circulate in popular magazines that advocated the improvement of public morals in pursuit of 'civilization and enlightenment'—a popular slogan of the period and *hentai seiyoku* continued to be discussed in the early years of the Taisho period via popular sexology works such as Habuto Eiji and Sawada Junjiro's best-selling *Hentai seiyokuron* (Matsuzawa 1997: 54–5).

This interest in perverse sexuality continued into the 1920s and is often summed up in the phrase *ero-guro-nansensu* or 'erotic, grotesque nonsense'. During the early Showa period (1926–89), Japan developed a significant publications industry devoted to the discussion of perverse sexuality—in the 1920s at least ten journals were founded that focused, in particular, upon *hentai seiyoku*. These included *Hentai shiryō* (Perverse material, 1926), *Kāma shasutora* (*Kāma shastra*, 1927), *Kisho* (Strange book, 1928) and *Gurotesuku* (Grotesque, 1928). [SLIDES 2, 3] These journals specializing in

sexual knowledge, as well as articles and advice pages contributed to newspapers and magazines by a newly emerging class of sexual ‘experts,’ frequently discussed ‘perverse sexuality,’ which included many categories that were particular to Japan, such as *shinjū* or ‘love suicides’. While (particularly female) homosexuals were considered liable to commit dual suicide, killing oneself over a lover was itself considered to be *hentai* even if the partner was of the other sex. For instance, in 1919 an article about the death of one of Japan’s first actresses, Matsui Sumako, was entitled ‘*Sumako no jisatsu wa hentai seiyoku*’ (Sumako’s suicide was perverse desire) (Onna no Sekai 1919).

The experts who wrote these articles and analyzed the perverse desires of their correspondents did so in a popular medium that appealed to a readership far wider than the medical community. As Fruhstuck points out, by the middle of the Taisho period rising literacy rates and the proliferation of cheap newspapers and magazines meant that reading had become a favorite leisure activity of the working classes, allowing a ‘low scientific culture’ to develop (2003: 103). The result was that *hentai*, signifying sexual interests that were understood to be ‘queer’ or ‘perverse,’ became a widely recognized term and popular culture was swept by what Matsuzawa describes as a ‘*hentai boom*’ (1997: 55), the first of several explosions of interest in perverse sexuality that were to occur in the Japanese media over the next half-century (McLelland 2005).

Yet, despite the fact that *hentai* (perverse) was often invoked as the opposite of *jōtai* (normal)—it was perversion, not normality, that was obsessively enumerated in popular sexology texts, thus giving ‘the impression not only that “perversion” was

ubiquitous, but that the connotations of the term were not entirely negative’ (Pflugfelder 1999: 287). Public interest in perversity fed demand for increasingly detailed and lurid descriptions, and ‘what started out as prescriptive literature quickly lost the blessings of educators and police and thus descended into the underground culture’ (Roden 1990: 46). Naturally, with the increase in censorship by the state as Japan geared up for war in the 1930s, this genre came under increased scrutiny and publication was largely suspended from about 1933 due to paper rationing.

### **The re-emergence of *hentai* in the postwar era**

The immediate postwar years saw the development of a *kasutori* (low-grade, pulp culture) – *kasutori* is literally a poor-quality alcohol distilled from sake lees and drinkers were supposed to collapse after only three glasses—just as these magazines tended to fold after their third issue. The Japanese press was now free to dispense with the ‘wholesome’ preoccupations of wartime literature and instead explore more ‘decadent’ themes (Rubin 1985: 72–3), including a whole genre of ‘carnal literature’ (*nikutai bungaku*) in which the physicality of the body was emphasized over more ideological concerns (Igarashi 2000: 55–61). As Igarashi points out, for many survivors, their bodies were the only possession they had managed to preserve from the destruction of the war; Japan’s burned-out cities became sites for celebration of the ‘raw, erotic energy of Japanese bodies’ (2000: 48). [SLIDES 4,5,6].

One had only to glance at the covers of the *kasutori* press to understand that there had been a radical break from the past. Women’s bodies were prominently displayed in a manner that would have been inconceivable before the war. Public sexuality was

suddenly visible and acceptable in a manner not seen prior to the war's end, and 'petting' (*pettingu*) couples were conspicuous features of parks and shrine precincts (*Hyakuman nin no yoru* 1963: 152–3). The new postwar environment saw a greater emphasis placed on fulfilling the emotional and sexual needs of the couple, which resulted in a demand for information about sexual practice and pleasure—a market to which the *kasutori* magazines catered [SLIDE 7].

What happened to *hentai* in the context of this new sexual culture? Given the new popularity of English in postwar Japan, *hentai* was occasionally written in *rōmaji* and it seems that very early on 'H' or *etchi* came to stand in for the word as a whole. As early as 1952, a report in *Shukan asahi* mentioned a riot in a local cinema where a woman who had just been accosted by a *chikan* (groper) shouted out 'ara *etchi* yo' (Saitō 2004: 51). Here, *etchi* is being used in the sense of excessive or inappropriate sexual activity with much the same sense as *iyarashii* or *sukebei* (lascivious or lewd) and the abbreviation *etchi* was from this time to follow a different trajectory from the term *hentai* which maintained a strong connection with sexual abnormality or perversity. By the mid 1960s *etchi* was being used, particularly in the new burgeoning youth culture, to refer to sex in general – a 1965 newspaper reported that even children in the fifth grade knew about *etchina kotoba* or 'sexy words' and by the 1980s *etchi* was being used to mean 'sex' as in *etchi wo shitai* or 'I want to have sex' (Saitō 2004: 53-4). So in this sense the contemporary English use of *etchi* to refer to Japanese manga with pornographic contents is not incorrect. However, what of the development of *hentai*?

While the new pulp magazines certainly contributed to the dissemination and popularization of new modes of heterosexual interaction and behavior – resulting in a new proliferation of heterosexualities, by the early 1950s a subgenre had developed focusing on *hentai seiyoku* or ‘perverse desire’ which included both male and female homosexuality as well as a range of fetishistic behaviors including characteristically Japanese obsessions such as love suicides and disembowelment (*seppuku*). This genre had much in common with the 1920s fad for publications specializing in erotic, grotesque nonsense. These magazines included titles such as *Ningen tankyū* (Human research; 1950-53), *Amatoria* (1951-55), *Fūzoku kagaku* (Sex-customs science; 1953-55), *Fūzoku zōshi* (Sex-customs storybook; 1953-55), *Ura mado* (Rear window; 1956-65) and *Kitan kurabu* (Strange-talk club; 1952-1975). [SLIDES 8,9,10].

The genre was characterised by the lively exchange which took place between specialist researchers, amateur hobbyists and readers themselves. The magazines frequently featured roundtable talks where medical doctors, writers, readers and editors came together to discuss specific issues such as male homosexuality, female same-sex desire, sadomasochism or a range of fetishes. In these discussions, the discourse of modern medicine which rendered some sexual desires ‘abnormal’ was represented alongside reports from actual people who self-defined as *abu* (or abnormal). Hence, this was a genre characterized by its hybridity (Ishida et al. in press). Various levels of discourse were blended – ‘expert’ diagnoses stood alongside personal testimonies which at times modified or contradicted the opinions of the experts. Importantly, *hentai* magazines such as *Kitan kurabu* created readers’ columns to stimulate the critique of articles and encourage exchange of ideas between readers. These readers’ columns not only functioned as



personal advertisements which accorded people with the same interests opportunities to meet, but they also enabled the sharing of various sexual fantasies. [SLIDES 11,12,13,14].

The *hentai seiyoku* genre of the postwar period was characterized by the tendency to seek out relations between a wide range of non-normative sexual fantasies and desires. In this sense it has many parallels with contemporary ‘queer studies’ in which a wide range of individuals whose sexual and gender identities are not sanctioned by the mainstream culture, come together in a variety of forums to consider the dynamics at play in the construction of some desires as normal and others as perverse (Ishida et al. in press).

There was also a sharing of fantasies between groups who experienced different sexual desires. For instance, many articles in the magazines focused on *seppuku* or the ritual disembowelment once practiced by samurai. One requirement of the ritual was the wearing of a loincloth which tightly wrapped both stomach and groin (to stop the intestines spilling out). A ‘male disembowelment maniac’ (*Fūzoku kagaku* 1955) recognized that articles and illustrations depicting his own sexual fetish were also appropriated by readers who were ‘loincloth maniacs’ and ‘lovers of youths.’ In short, readers who experienced a range of perverse sexual desires treated the *hentai* magazines as broad resources for their sexual fantasies and this encouraged a sense of identification and solidarity beyond narrow identity categories.

This was particularly the case with the treatment of the ‘love of Lesbos.’ An unsigned article in *Fūzoku zōshi* for instance, entitled ‘Various phases of Lesbos love,’ mentioned that ‘*resubosu*’ (Lesbos) ranged from such ‘insignificant’ things as the exchange of love letters between schoolgirls to more serious matters ‘which would

make men blush,’ going on to describe the various ways in which women had historically pleased themselves and each other, deriving examples from ancient Greece, Muromachi period Japan (1333-1568) and colonial Africa (*Fūzoku zōshi* 1953). [slides 15,16,17,18]

However as the *hentai* press developed throughout the 1960s, it became more heterosexual in orientation and stories about both male homosexuality and male cross-dressing, which had been major concerns in the 1950s magazines, dropped from its pages (McLelland 2005). The emphasis moved more toward sadomasochism and lesbianism – the latter understood as a genre of pornography about women but made by and for men. While in English, equivalent terms of *hentai* such as queer or perverse tended to connote homosexuality, *hentai* in Japanese had a much stronger heterosexual nuance, although it could still be used to denote a range of same-sex sexual activities.

### **More recent appropriations of *hentai***

Following the late 1960s ‘sexual revolution’ Japan saw another publishing boom in material of a sexual nature, including practices considered to be *hentai*. [SLIDE 19]. While the insults ‘queer’ or ‘pervert’ were extremely harsh in English, *hentai* did not designate such a stigma in Japanese, as we can see in Akiyama Masami’s 1970 *Hentai gaku nyūmon* (Introduction to *hentai* studies) which includes a ‘*hentai* test’ to find out just how perverted you are. Although primarily heterosexual in focus, Akiyama’s book maintains the hybridity of earlier literature and discusses a range of ‘perverse’ behaviours including male cross-dressing and lesbianism, although the latter is very

much situated as a fantasy trope for men [SLIDE 20]. Dan Kiroku's (1972) book *Inka shokubutsugun* (Shady flowers group) is similar in tone, again asking on the cover 'Are you abnormal?' [SLIDE 21] and including a wide range of perverse activities, albeit within a primarily SM framework. This genre has continued through to today with the popular *Bessatsu Takarajima* series releasing its *Hentai-san ga iku* (There goes Mr/Ms Pervert) collections in 1991 and again in 2000. [SLIDE 22]

I am suggesting that in Japanese the term *hentai* has never had the same pejorative force that 'queer' or 'pervert' have in English. For a start, actions considered *hentai* such as sex between men or male and female cross-dressing have never been criminal offenses in Japan – whereas both were illegal in most western countries until very recently. (Sex between men was only legalized here in Victoria in 1981). Also, while queer and pervert have had a primarily homosexual nuance in English, *hentai* in Japanese has had a mainly heterosexual nuance.

Despite this heterosexual nuance, recently *hentai* was appropriated by Fushimi Noriaki, one of Japan's leading gay writers and critics, for the title of a collection on gay salarymen—'*Hentai suru sarariiman*'—(salarymen doing queer; 2000). In 2003 Fushimi went on to release a collection of interviews with a wide range of sex and gender nonconformists entitled *Hentai (kuia) nyūmon* (A *hentai* [queer] introduction), where he uses the terms interchangeably. [SLIDES 23, 24] In this text, Fushimi reverses the bias in mainstream *hentai* discussion which favours heterosexual perversion and refers instead to a wide range of same-sex perverse practices and identities. Whether this innovation will be taken up by the wider lesbian and gay community in Japan, however, remains to be seen.

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