Boy Exorcist: Ghosts of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun*

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"Hey, Did You Know?"[7]

Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun is a supernatural shōnen first published in 2014 by Japanese writer/artist duo, AidaIro. Set in the fictional Kamome School, against a backdrop of ghosts and monsters, the manga explores the mysteries and regrets that continue to haunt its halls.

One Kamome denizen is Kou Minamoto, a third-year junior high student and aspiring exorcist. Although he is *JSHK*'s tritagonist, he interestingly possesses several traits conventional to the action shōnen hero archetype. His status as the only *JSHK* character with so many shōnen-coded traits highlights his connection to these genre conventions and his subversions of them. His arc sees his masculinity going in an unorthodox direction, gaining power through empathy and fulfillment via homointimacy, while never losing his original shōnen attributes. With this, the series deconstructs masculinity. Through a post-structuralist lens, I will explore the manga's blurring of gender dichotomies, as well as how Kou's navigations and interrogations of masculinity challenge the traditional shōnen manga masculinity model.

At the time of writing, *JSHK* is an ongoing manga series. I will cover Kou's character and development up until Chapter 125. I will also look at AidaIro's canonical spin-off series, *Hōkago Shōnen Hanako-kun* (2019–current), and the official art books, *AidaIro Illustrations: Jibaku Shōnen Hanako-kun* (2019–current).

Masculinity in Shōnen

Anime and manga are usually marketed and sold in one of four editorial categories: shōnen (少年; boys'), shōjo (少女; girls'), seinen (青年; young men's), and josei (女性; ladies') manga. Each category has its own unique literary and visual conventions, and they may even be considered genres in their own right. While shōnen literally means "young person" in Japanese, speakers usually

[7] This is the first line in the series, as well as a recurring line.

understand and translate it as "boy." Publishers target shōnen manga at adolescent and teenage boys (approximately ages 12–17), although the readership extends beyond this target group to a wide range of ages and genders. The genre's thematic orientation concerns friendship, action, adventure, and/or overcoming the forces of evil, and its subgenres include romance, comedy, mystery, or sports (among other topics). Nevertheless, action narratives dominate this category to the extent that some publishers list certain manga as shōnen not because of their ostensible target demographic but because they prominently feature action and adventure (Levi 9, 163). Evidently, the action subgenre hugely influences shōnen, and we see traces of these influences in some shōnen conventions and archetypes.

In "Straddling the Line: How Female Authors Are Pushing the Boundaries of Gender Representation in Japanese Shōnen Manga," Daniel Flis presents what he calls the "shōnen framework": archetypal depictions of gender performance and expression in shōnen media. He defines the shōnen framework as containing simplistic heteronormative narratives, legitimizations of men's dominant social position, exploited/powerless representations of women, and male protagonists embodying hegemonic manliness (*passim*). Shōnen protagonists, who are majority male-identifying, prominently possess the traits of optimism, compassion, hot-bloodedness, heterosexuality, academic unintelligence, a strong sense of justice, and a predisposition toward physical combat. Heroes, especially within the battle and sports subgenres, have an ambition to "become the very best," whether it is *One Piece*'s Monkey D. Luffy aspiring to become the Pirate King or *Haikyū*'s Hinata Shōyō dreaming of winning volleyball nationals. We observe these traits in many shōnen heroes, especially in prolific series that have codified and/or propagated the shōnen hero archetype.[8] While these conventions have been challenged and subverted—especially in recent years, with shōnen heroes displaying more nuanced relationships to masculinity—they are still highly influential to and emblematic of the genre.

As a genre written for (and usually about) young boys, it is important to consider how shōnen constructs and exhibits masculinity and boyhood. Many of the aforementioned shōnen traits—particularly female characters' diminished importance, heroes' drive to "be the very best," and the action subgenre's valorization of boys who can physically overpower enemies or who push

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[8] Examples include Naruto Uzumaki from *Naruto*, Hikaru Shindō from *Hikaru no Go*, and Yūji Itadori from *Jujutsu Kaisen.*

themselves beyond their limits for self-improvement—overlap with the four themes I paraphrase from Robert Brannon's Male Sex Role theory:

1. "No Sissy Stuff," where stigma is attached to feminine characteristics;
2. "The Big Wheel," where men are driven by the need for success and/or status;
3. "The Sturdy Oak," where men are expected to possess toughness, confidence, and self-reliance, especially in crisis events; and
4. "Give 'em Hell," where violence, aggression, and daring are typically accepted—and even expected—in men. (Chapters 1–4)

These themes uphold hegemonic notions of masculinity — what modern Japanese and Western societies may consider natural or acceptable male traits. The quantity of such themes in shōnen highlights the genre's promotion/propagation of such masculinities. However, these masculinities are not always toxic; traditionally masculine traits (such as impulsivity or physical strength) often combine with or find outlets in motivations of self-betterment or friendship, or in a desire to protect the innocent, the weak, and heroes' loved ones.

I define the standardization of such gendered behaviors—their continued presence within an archetypal, hypermasculine genre—as a genre-specific construction that I call "shōnen masculinity." The specific masculinities and narrative conventions I will discuss are the ones primarily found in action/battle shōnen, the most popular and prolific shōnen subgenre.

JSHK is written by Japanese creators and primarily aimed at a Japanese audience, with characters who are all Japanese. As such, it is important to consider how culture informs gender roles, and how the manga's Japanese setting informs its characters' and readership's perceptions and constructions of masculinity. In *Masculinity and Japan's Foreign Relations*, Yumiko Mikanagi states that even "in the twenty-first century, Japanese men often liken themselves to bushi (samurai warriors) and the bushi ethos is closely wedded to all types of masculinity in Japan. Thus, images of bushi, for better or worse, have affected the construction of masculinity in modern Japan" (25). This historical gender ideology echoes in Kou's family line, which links him to a lineage of Japanese combat and masculinity. He is a scion of the Minamoto clan, one of Japan's foremost martial clans from which many famous samurai claim descent. Like the men that Mikanagi references, Kou indeed ties his identity to his bushi forefathers: "My ancestors [the Minamoto warriors] left countless powerful, anti-evil magical

artifacts for their descendants to use. I will master them all and use them to protect people from vicious supernaturals like you. That is the calling of every boy born into the Minamoto clan!" (ch. 3, p. 6). His proclamation reveals not only a desire to continue his ancestors' exorcizing business but also the perpetuation of masculine codes and traditions: he specifies that every Minamoto *boy* has a calling to become a bushi, even though female warriors also exist within his family. This revelation links the Minamotos to the bushi/masculinity connection that Mikanagi asserts.

The manga's Minamotos trace their bloodline to the historical figure Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu, a commander of the Imperial Guard and a secretary in the Ministry of War. Over time, his military exploits transformed into legends of him slaying oni (ogre-like demons, most famously Shuten Dōji, one of the three evilest yōkai, or supernaturals, in Japanese folklore). Both *JSHK* and Japan's historical myths celebrate this Heian-era yōkai slayer for his martial prowess, and indeed, his combat heritage lives on in *JSHK*'s contemporary setting. Like their ancestor, the Minamotos exorcize supernaturals through battle. Kou's older brother, Teru, even inherits Yorimitsu's legendary oni-slaying sword, Dōjigiri. While Kou's family are exorcists rather than samurai, and while Yorimitsu lived before the samurai class formally emerged, the manga's Minamotos are still combat-based, and they directly trace their lineage to later Minamoto samurai and shōgun. These continued practices and lineages situate Kou within a long tradition of Japanese combat and valor. Interestingly, despite his honorable service, Yorimitsu is not a major figure in Japanese history. A more prolific legendary occultist is Abe-no-Seimei, a Heian-era onmyōji who dispelled maleficent yōkai with charms and spells rather than swords or arrows. The fact that the story chooses the bushi Yorimitsu over the non-combative Seimei suggests its intention to draw a connection between Kou and warrior culture.

Although Kou is a tritagonist rather than a protagonist, he is still a hero figure in a shōnen series. The story codes him in a way that can be best understood as action shōnen heroism. In fact, he displays more shōnen attributes than the titular main male character or any other male character thus far, solidifying the connection between him and shōnen conventions. While never explicitly stated, the series suggests this link through his exorcist ambitions, heterosexual interests, sense of justice, and coming-of-age.

One of Kou's most notable traits is his alignment with action and fighting. He demonstrates this propensity as early as his formal debut in Chapter 3, setting the tone for his character. His first speech is a proclamation of his family's martial heritage and his intent to exorcize the ghost boy Hanako, thereby connecting him to the battle shōnen traditions of combat and physical engagement. The story revisits this notion, as Kou often suggests physical domination as the answer to conflicts, including when it is silly or unnecessary.[9] Even his debut stance—perched atop the school rooftop and brandishing Raiteijou, his spirit staff weapon—aligns him with action and motion.

This athletic inclination is in inverse relationship to his academic intelligence. Shōnen stories often feature physically adept but academically inept protagonists, and indeed, Kou struggles in school: his exam grades are 180th place at his school level and several chapters reveal that he is poor in or receives failing grades in art, science, and classical literature (*JSHK* chs. 12, 20, 59). Even outside of the classroom, he demonstrates a stereotypically shōnen simplemindedness. In Chapter 65, Kou claims that he is "never ever going to trust" Hyūga Natsuhiko before falling for his blatant lies a mere fifteen minutes later: "I had no idea you've [Natsuhiko] saved so many people… you're such a man of action! And so well-loved! You're amazing! You have all my respect! That story about the dogs at the South Pole really got me!" (28–29). The smash cut[10] in this scene highlights Kou's gullibility: he berates Natsuhiko (demonstrating his hot-headedness and combativeness) before the manga cuts him off mid-sentence and shows him crying into his hands and calling his previous adversary "master." The scene's absurdity—especially the mere fifteen minutes it takes to completely change Kou's feelings about Natsuhiko—emphasizes the silliness and simplemindedness characteristic of shōnen protagonists. Kou's battle inclinations paired with his moments of dimness reveal a very specific type of masculinity, one that centers action and physicality in the construction of boyhood.

Kou's strong sense of justice further aligns him with shōnen masculinity. He does not value strength for strength's sake; like others of the shōnen hero archetype, the desire to ensure his loved ones' safety and happiness is his primary motivation. Most notable is his resolve to extend his crush Nene Yashiro's short

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[9] Chapter 30 satirizes this tendency. Here, Kou's solution to dispelling the mysterious ghostly arms is challenging them to arm wrestling.

[10] A film edit that abruptly cuts from one scene to another, highlighting the disparity between the two scenarios. A staple in comedy.

lifespan. His heterosexual infatuation with the girl aligns with hegemonic masculinity and the shōnen genre's promotion of male/female romantic attachments. Motivated by altruism and love, Kou repeatedly declares himself as Nene's protector and dedicates himself to defending her from physical threats. This arrangement resembles the knight/princess relationship model emblematic of traditional heterosexual pairings, with the strong, mêlée-oriented Kou protecting the delicate, non-combative Nene.

However, Nene is not the only person whom Kou looks out for. Time and again, he proclaims his intent to protect his friends and family. Kou's battle with Hakubo in the Oni Arc features the classic battle shōnen formula of an underdog heroic figure facing off against a stronger adversary. When it appears as though the underdog will lose, he achieves an unprecedented win after declaring that he doesn't "care if no one expects [him] to! Or even wants [him] to! None of that matters! [He's] gonna make every last one of them happy" (ch. 90, pp. 23–25). With this proclamation, Kou attains his first major combat victory. His triumph is oppositional to Brannon's "The Big Wheel"; rather than be driven by his own success or status, his loved ones' prosperity motivates him.[11] In heroically shōnen ways, Kou couples his strength with the selfless and kindhearted intent to help others. The Minamoto exorcists indiscriminately exterminate all supernatural threats. However, Kou's compassionate nature has him struggle to accept that every supernatural creature is unfailingly evil. He defies Teru (his older brother and role model) by standing up for and saving Hanako twice, first in Chapter 10 and later in Chapter 85. His actions resemble how *Kimetsu no Yaiba*'s Tanjiro Kamado feels compassion for demons or how *Naruto*'s Naruto Uzumaki befriends the dreaded Gaara. Through his protectorship, Kou continues this tradition of shōnen heroes combating hate and advocating for friendship. Although he is not *JSHK*'s protagonist (as many shōnen heroes are in their own series), his actions nevertheless align him with shōnen herohood's attitudes and beliefs.

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[11] This selflessness does, however, align with Japanese masculinity; you fight not so much for your own benefit and interests but for your family, in-group, and society. Such behavior is culturally expected for Japanese men, and therefore, shōnen heroes. This is one example of hegemonic masculinity changing shape depending on the cultural context. Ambition and upwards mobility are masculine traits *in general*, especially within the Western contexts from which shōnen draws influence (the grandfather of the modern manga, Osamu Tezuka, was inspired by Walt Disney and Max Fleischer). While Kou's actions here subvert generalized/Western masculinity, they reinforce Japanese masculinity.

Kou fits into the shōnen hero formula not just because of his personality but also because of his circumstances. His relationship with his mother aligns closely with other shōnen heroes, and these son/mother relationships are central to shōnen narratives. In the aptly named article "What Boys Will Be: A Study of Shōnen Manga," Angela Drummond-Mathews asserts how shōnen stories, which follow the hero's journey framework, allegorize boyhood rites of passage (70). Shōnen heroes move from the comfort and routine of their regular lives to the struggle and adventure of their journey, where they then emerge as better people. This odyssey symbolizes the trials that boys must undergo to become young men. Shōnen coming-of-age stories have been imagined in a multitude of ways, but they generally share one common event: the death of the shōnen hero's mother. From *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* to *Attack on Titan*, the dead mother trope is ubiquitous in the genre. Even if they are still alive (as is the case with some series, such as *Hunter x Hunter*), shōnen mothers generally have very little characterization or narrative importance; they simply exist to be their sons' mothers. Gentle and loving, seldom seen outside of an apron or comfortable (yet still feminine) clothes for homemaking, shōnen heroes' mothers symbolize the safety of childhood and feminine domesticity. Their untimely deaths, then, represent the moment that a boy must leave the roost and navigate the strange, perilous adult world. Unlike shōnen fathers, shōnen mothers are rarely (if ever) aspirational figures whom their sons aspire to be like. Instead, shōnen mothers adopt a more passive role, with their untimely deaths propelling their sons' metaphoric journey to adulthood.

The Minamoto matriarch joins this long tradition of dead mothers. In Chapter 77, Kou reveals that she passed away when he was nine years old (31). Although his adventures (*JSHK*'s plot) occur years after this event, his mother's passing deeply affected him. It influenced him to step up and help more around the house, getting one step closer to maturity. The Red House, which shows interlopers their heart's desires, presents to Kou a vision of his mother if she were still alive: she greets him in the kitchen, frets over his health, and offers him snacks (*JSHK* ch. 77). This scene reveals how Kou's fondest memories of his mother are highly gendered: the entire vision never leaves the domestic sphere, paralleling the limited roles available for shōnen mothers. Indeed, like others of this archetype, Mrs. Minamoto's narrative presence is felt in its absence. Her death pushes Kou to take on more responsibilities and it contributes to the burdens on Teru's shoulders, but her own personhood means little to *JSHK*'s story at large.

Even her re-introduction in this chapter is more about advancing Kou's development and revealing the Red House's mysteries than it is about her.

Shōnen Under Erasure

Founded by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction theory is a philosophical and literary theory emerging from the 1960s school of post-structuralism. It aims to expose and subvert the hierarchical binary oppositions that frame our understanding of reality: good/evil, day/night, presence/absence, man/woman. According to Derrida, dualisms are never equal; one is always privileged over the other. Deconstruction seeks not to destroy but to destabilize these dichotomies and power struggles. It recognizes how these divisions may not always capture the full nuance of existence. The deconstructionist concept *sous rature* (translated as "putting something under erasure") involves crossing out a word or concept within a text but leaving it legible and present (Guillemette *et al.*). Doing so acknowledges a word or concept's necessity within a certain context, as well as its inadequacy to fully encapsulate reality.

This framework can help us understand Kou's relationship with his gender expression. Rather than position masculinity/femininity as a hierarchal binary opposition where one must overcome the other, *JSHK* reveals gender's nuances and complications. Throughout the series, Kou subverts gender stereotypes or adopts feminine characteristics, all the while maintaining the gendered markers that tie him to conventional boyhood. In these ways, his masculinity is subverted but not eliminated; it is put under erasure.

To fully understand Kou's gender destabilization, we must first understand the genre in which he exists. Despite being situated within a historically formulaic media category, *JSHK*'s iconography and narrative style blend shōnen and shōjo conventions. While *JSHK* indeed features shōnen's adventure, combat scenes, and predictable temporal sequences, its primary narrative focus is the characters' emotional entanglements and unraveling the mystery behind the titular Hanako-kun. The manga's distinctive art style (gratuitous symbolic flowers; enormous, sparkling eyes; and complicated, non-linear panel designs) invites readers to emotionally engage with the characters and their psychological development. This specialized visual language typifies the shōjo genre, shōnen's feminine counterpart and one of the formulators for Japan's so-called "girls' culture." As Mizuki Takahashi notes in *Japanese Visual Culture*, "only those with the ability to decipher [shōjo's aesthetic codes are] welcomed into that private realm" of girlhood (129). *JSHK*, then, explodes our sense of dialectical binary genres by adopting these

feminine codes into a masculine tradition, destabilizinging the lines between boyhood and girlhood.

In addition to incorporating visual and narrative elements from multiple genres, *JSHK* also pokes fun at shōnen and shōjo conventions, suggesting its desire to work outside these typified frameworks. Chapter 106 parodies the theatrical romantic plots common in early shōjo romance series,[12] with gratuitous flowers, dramatic speeches, elaborate dialogue bubbles, and the Yugi brothers drawn in a much more sophisticated and conventionally attractive style (10). The next page satirizes the gap between these shōjo visuals and the manga's reality: Tsukasa Yugi, drawn in a silly chibi style, makes the unromantic suggestion of feeding Nene a rat. Volume 1's ending comic also offers a subtle critique of shōnen conventions. When asked to describe their ideal selves, Nene imagines herself as an alluring, voluptuous woman; Kou dreams of being a rugged, muscular man; and Hanako wants to be a giant fire-breathing monster. The visual and narrative sketches here are standard to the shōnen action subgenre: sexualized women, power fantasy men, and city-levelling monsters. However, Hanako's comment that such alterations "would change the whole style of the series" (ch. 5, p. 26) reveals *JSHK*'s self-awareness in being an atypical shōnen manga. The series's genre-blending destabilizes the borders between boyhood/shōnen and girlhood/shōjo, and indeed, the notion of conventional boyhood itself. Like how *JSHK*'s style blends shōnen and shōjo conventions, Kou's ambivalent gender performances unsettle masculinity and femininity conventions.

While Kou's hot-headedness, daring, and propensity for fights align with Brannon's "Give 'em Hell" model, his combativeness is not as destructive. This subversion reveals the different ways that writers and readers may express or understand violence and its attendant masculine associations. As discussed above, Kou uses his strength to protect others. In contrast, Tsukasa Yugi is the character who exhibits the unrestrained violence and brutality common to "Give 'em Hell." Barring perhaps Teru Minamoto (whose profession necessitates his exorcizing supernaturals to protect humans), Tsukasa has killed the highest number of supernaturals in the series simply because he finds it fun. He does so in excessively violent ways: in his first proper appearance, he vivisects a supernatural just to examine its insides, and he later kills the former No. 3 by repeatedly bashing their head to the ground (ch. 17, 32). While Kou also fights adversaries, he never prolongs their suffering or uses methods that increase their pain. Both

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[12] Like how action is the most popular and prolific shōnen subgenre, the romance subgenre is shōjo's equivalent.

boys meet opposition with force. However, Tsukasa differs from Kou in that he defaults to physical domination, such as when his instinctual response to Nene's non-compliance is to harm her (ch. 33, p. 26). In contrast, Kou does not immediately act on his violent impulses. While he threatens to beat up the Red House Boy, he never actually does so (ch. 76). His fight with Tsukasa in the Mitsuba Arc illustrates the gap in the two boys' violence: Kou attacks Tsukasa to avenge Mitsuba and Tsukasa attacks Kou to overpower him. Although shōnen heroes are or become the strongest in their fictional canons, *JSHK*'s most powerful and fight-ready character is arguably Tsukasa, whose overwhelming force is frightening and destructive. As he is the series' primary antagonist, we condemn his excessive violence more than Kou's. With this, *JSHK* demonstrates power as a way of putting shōnen violence and battle performance under erasure.

Despite his intimate connection to the famous Minamoto warriors and his position as an action-oriented character in a shōnen series, Kou is not a successful combatant like his predecessors. While he is also deeply invested in battle performance, he is a canonically poor fighter. *Hōkago Shōnen Hanako-kun* reveals that he has the lowest spiritual energy out of the three Minamoto siblings, including his five-year-old sister (*HSHK* ch. 13, p. 12). This low power level explains why he loses at least seven major battles in the series — nearly every single one he has engaged in, to date. Even in the Fictional World, where Mei Shijima restores his formerly-sealed Raiteijou to full strength, Kou still cannot win against a de-superpowered Hanako, a fact that the ghost boy takes note of: "I'm guessing you'll be too weak to move soon… even with No. 4's help, this is the best you can do" (ch. 57, p. 17). It is not uncommon for shōnen heroes to start their series weak before growing stronger; the underdog narrative is standard to the genre. However, *JSHK* implies that Kou never achieves a high level of exorcist power. When Mirai transforms him into the adult version of himself in Chapter 26, he admits that his lightning magic is still inferior to Teru's when he was the same age (33). Kou starts the story weak, and as this chapter reveals, *remains* weak. In contrast, because the genre allegorizes boys' coming-of-age, shōnen necessitates growth. Its heroes' training, determination, and hard work eventually yield fruit, and their strength through perseverance is evidence of their success and status as heroes. In this sense, Kou's slow combat growth without radical evolution is antithetical to the genre in which he is situated and from which he derives many character traits.

Another shōnen staple is the heroes' having rivals. The shōnen rival is often the hero's foil: where heroes are generally hot-headed, outgoing, compassionate, and academically unintelligent, rivals are generally cool-headed, aloof, cynical, and adept at strategizing. These characters not only provide narrative contrast with heroes, but they also push heroes to self-improve. Shōnen rivals often possess more status, respect, and/or technical skill than the heroes do, and as the archetype name suggests, are thus figures for them to compete with and surpass.

Interestingly, Kou lacks any rival figures. This can be explained in that *JSHK* is not an action manga and Kou is not the protagonist; focusing on his combat development would be tonally inconsistent with the series. However, he does have some people analogous to rival figures. Hanako is (initially) Kou's rival for Nene's romantic attention. The two share the key differences that mark shōnen heroes and rivals as foils: blond, hot-blooded, and naïve Kou versus dark-haired, calculating, and worldly Hanako. Kou's unreciprocated love for Nene further contrasts with her innate draw to Hanako, mirroring how shōnen rivals usually have some sort of initial advantage over heroes. The duo's occasional clashes (especially in the beginning, when Kou is adamant about exorcising the ghost boy) subscribe to shōnen's long tradition of hero and rival opposition, including their eventual reconciliation (ch. 9–10). Despite the boys' similarities in hero/rival conventions, Kou and Hanako do not perfectly fit this mold. Hanako is far too silly and childlike to be a traditional shōnen rival; Kou, who should be the immature and reckless hero figure, often reprimands him for his pranks and jokes, such as his being upset when Hanako spooks Nene in Chapter 58: "What are you doing!!? You could have made senpai's life even shorter!!" (p. 35). While shōnen heroes and rivals eventually become better matched throughout their series, the gap between Kou and Hanako's competition for Nene's love only widens. By Chapter 109, Nene is determined to confess her romantic feelings to Hanako while Kou remains her good friend. The boys' failure to fully fit the hero/rival formula reveals how Kou lacks this genre relationship staple.

Kou's older brother, Teru, is another figure analogous to a shōnen rival but is not quite one. The eldest Minamoto son is much more serious and dignified than Hanako is, aligning him more closely with the stock shōnen rival personality type. He is also more of an aspirational figure to Kou than the titular character. As one of the strongest humans in the series, Teru is someone Kou has always admired and wanted to emulate: "Nii-chan! I promise I'm gonna be just like you someday!! I'll be even stronger!" (ch. 9, p. 2). Teru's absolutism and hostility toward supernaturals clash with Kou's compassion for them, an ideological difference

that culminates in the brothers' brawl in Chapter 87. This conflict, as well as Teru's antagonistic role in many story arcs, mirrors shōnen rivals' frequent antagonism towards heroes in other shōnen works.[13] However, like with Hanako, Teru's similarities with shōnen rivals end after a certain point. While they indeed butt heads about supernaturals, the brothers have an otherwise affectionate and supportive bond that does not include the push-and-pull characteristic of shōnen heroes and rivals' relationships. In fact, Teru is hardly a rival even in the generic sense since Kou appears more intent on working alongside him rather than competing with him. The brothers' great skill gap also complicates the notion that Teru is Kou's rival or that Kou even has a rival at all, since he is not yet at a level where he can compete with many characters.

Despite Kou's similarities to other shōnen protagonists, the ambivalence surrounding his rival suggests his atypicality in this facet of shōnen herohood, as well as *JSHK*'s atypicality in genre conventions. Perhaps Kou's lack of a rival illustrates the series' intent to showcase a hero figure who is not meant to grow and engage in combat or competition (as shōnen heroes are wont to do), but who nurtures and expresses other, non-traditional kinds of strength.

For most of his life, Kou's role model has been Teru. Strong and brave, someone that everyone turns to when supernatural threats emerge, Teru is an aspirational paragon of exorcist masculinity. Kou strives and fails to match Teru in battle, but he surpasses him in domestic duties. The Minamoto matriarch's passing pushed Kou not into becoming a stronger exorcist (as would have been the case in a more standard action shōnen) but into feminized labor. As Kou puts it, "You've [Teru] been trusted to handle exorcisms since you were even younger than me. Tons of people relied on you. Meanwhile, I was stuck at home being a stand-in mom" (ch. 87, p. 13). Kou's identification with his mother is striking, as shōnen heroes hardly ever identify themselves with their mothers (or other female figures). This identification is not self-deprecating, though; the crux of Kou's unhappiness here is that he feels like others do not rely on him like they do his brother. His dissatisfaction does not stem from being a boy responsible for homemaking. In fact, Kou enjoys cooking and cleaning: "Not that I minded doing the housework. That's not what bothered me" (ch. 87, p. 12). This subversive pleasure challenges the Male Sex Role theory's "No Sissy Stuff" model. Hegemonic masculinity asserts that masculinity and femininity are oppositional; "real men" must renounce femininity or risk emasculation. Kou's identification

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[13] Examples include Sasuke Uchiha from *Naruto*, Yu Kanda from *D.Gray-Man*, and Sesshōmaru from *Inuyasha*.

and pleasure in domestic duties, while maintaining traditionally boyish traits and interests, disrupts the notion that men can only be one or the other: manly or sissy. Chapter 97 highlights the parallel between feminized and masculinized skills. Here, Kou draws a connection between his superior cooking abilities and Teru's superior combat abilities, and the brothers' inverse relationship with them: "He's [Teru] so good at everything else… but as usual, his cooking is a disaster. His 'help' just makes my job harder… from Teru-nii's point of view… maybe my attempts at being an exorcist are just as bad" (ch. 97, [p. 6]). Kou's thinking is suggestive of deconstruction. Here, he frames cooking and exorcizing as two opposites but does not position either skill as superior to the other; even the "perfect prince" Teru Minamoto is made an equal through his domestic failures. Out on the field, Kou is the weak and inexperienced younger brother, but even the prodigious fighter Teru recognizes his authority as master of the kitchen. Cooking and exorcizing mirror each other. The implicit similarities that Kou points out question the binaries that divide them.

Although fighting is not his strong suit, with several other characters overpowering or having better combat outcomes than he does, Kou's strongest proficiency is arguably his emotional intelligence. He shows signs of this aptitude as early as Chapter 15, deducing that Nene is lying about being fine around Hanako. In a show of great emotional maturity, Kou sets aside his pride and infatuation to help mend his friends' relationship. He pretends to be a bad baker to convince Nene to "help" him make Hanako's favored dessert, donuts. He then urges her to gift Hanako the treats. Kou's actions here help strengthen Hanako and Nene's relationship, and this bond is the building block upon which their deep love later forms. Kou's interpersonal astuteness occurs in at least five other major events: first when he can tell that Hanako is hiding something important from the group, second when he observes that Nene is the only person around whom Hanako puts down his guard, third when he realizes that the Red House Boy is Tsukasa instead of his descendent (as Nene believes), fourth when he deduces that Nene is in love with Hanako, and lastly when he recognizes that Mitsuba is not joking about his post-Severance suicidality (chs. 26, 56, 73, 76, 99). In all these instances, Kou deduces others' true feelings and interpersonal affairs without being told of or even witnessing them. Instead, he relies on minute emotional displays and interactions. This high degree of emotional subtlety is unusual for shōnen heroes, who, in very gendered ways, are generally clueless when it comes to emotional matters.

In another defiance of "No Sissy Stuff," Kou is very emotionally expressive. Not counting some minor background moments, he has cried eleven times in the series, making him one of the most—if not the most—emotional *JSHK* characters. These tears are often the result of pain or an inability to contain his happiness, defying the Male Sex Role theory's "The Sturdy Oak" model, an insistence that men must maintain toughness and confidence in any event. Hegemonic masculinity therefore codes frequent crying as feminine behavior, and Kou's easy tears are subversive in a long tradition of heroes who are indeed Sturdy Oaks in the face of danger or hardship. While he embraces more vulnerable and feminized emotions, Kou also exhibits supposedly acceptable masculine feelings such as the combativeness, aggression, and daring common to "Give 'em Hell." The presence of both feminized and masculinized emotions illustrates a more complex shōnen figure than in traditional shōnen manga.

Queering *JSHK*

Although Kou exhibits an unambiguous and immediate romantic interest in the heroine Nene Yashiro, his relationship with the ghost boy Sōsuke Mitsuba is more passionate and emotionally intimate. It is important to note that, at the time of writing, any romantic feelings between Kou and Mitsuba lie in the realm of subtext. However, the way that their relationship develops can lend itself to a Queer reading. Due to the non-canonical nature of the two boys' relationship, "Queer" in this sense refers not just to same-sex romantic love but also to any relationship model that breaks the confines of traditional male/female romantic social scripts. I define Kou and Mitsuba's deep, passionate, and emotionally intimate attachment, which blurs the lines between the platonic and the romantic, as "homointimacy."

While they have a strong and loving bond, *JSHK* suggests that Kou and Nene are better off as friends. This platonic relationship is unusual for traditional shōnen series, where hero figures often attain heterosexual romances. Kou's debut chapter starts with Nene reading a fairy tale about a prince who falls from the sky and saves a maiden from the evil spirit holding her captive. This dynamic parallels the three main characters' situations: Nene is contractually bound to serve as Hanako's assistant, and Kou descends from up high to attempt to vanquish him. The set-up, therefore, links Kou to the realm of fairy tales. True to romantic clichés, he immediately falls for Nene and later enters a love triangle with her and Hanako. Nene even comments on the similarities between real life and the story: "A boy from the sky… just like in the movie! It can't be! A young man's here for me…?" (ch. 3, p. 4). Life, however, is not a fairy tale. Nene does not return Kou's

infatuation, a romantic disinterest that never changes throughout the story. She finds that he does not live up to her expectations of what a prince should be, echoing her earlier admission that there is a difference between fantasy and reality. Although Kou conforms to many fairy-tale conventions (being introduced like the prince in Nene's story, falling in love at first sight, and mirroring the classic knight/princess dynamic through his protectorship over her), he ultimately fails to win the maiden's heart, suggesting that this romantic interest—and, perhaps, this heteronormative relationship model—is fairy-tale-like in its fantasy.

When shōnen series explore romance, their heroes usually attain their heterosexual conquests, from *Dragon Ball*'s Son Gokū marrying Chi-Chi to *Shokugeki no Sōma*'s Sōma Yukihira winning Erina Nakiri's affection. While Kou and Nene never enter a romantic relationship, we should not consider this Kou's masculine failing; their platonic love is built upon mutual respect and care, offering ways to imagine male/female bonds that do not necessitate romance. Daniel Flis asserts that shōnen narratives—and sometimes protagonists themselves—generally sexualize, objectify, and reduce the narrative importance of their female characters, especially love interests (3). Kou, however, is nothing but respectful to Nene, both as his senpai (an older mentor) and as a woman. He never joins in on Hanako's lecherous jokes and instead scolds him for them. Although he is physically attracted to Nene, he disapproves of Hanako's meta-suggestion for a more sexualized depiction of her in the manga (ch. 5, p. 27). His respect is not dependent on Nene's reciprocal love for him, nor does he do it to win her over romantically. There are several moments when he loses to his romantic rival, such as when he believes that Hanako and Nene have kissed in Chapter 29. Although he is distraught over his crush kissing another boy, his respect and chivalry towards her never change. In fact, over the course of the series, their bond follows a sibling-like trajectory and affection. In the Red House Arc, Kou initiates two forms of physical intimacy with Nene: first when he gives her a piggyback ride, and second when he lends her his clothes to wear (ch. 83, p. 4, 6). These actions are very intimate in a cultural setting where physicality between the sexes is uncommon, and they would signal a shōnen hero's budding romance with his love interest in any other series. *JSHK*, for its part, does not treat them with special consideration; they are just simple acts of care from one friend to another. At this point in the story, it is unclear if Kou's affections for Nene are still romantic, but his calmness when asking her if she loves Hanako at least demonstrates how he does not feel entitled to her love (ch. 73, p. 30). With this, Kou evades any male romantic entitlement common to "No Sissy Stuff."

However, we can also interpret his calm acceptance as him finding someone who is becoming more special to him. Kou and Mitsuba's bond is marked by passion and intensity not present in their other relationships, highlighting its significance to the boys. Their interactions reveal their strong feelings for each other, even when it is unclear whether those feelings are purely platonic. The story maintains this ambiguity by alluding to the possibility of the boys' same-sex infatuation without fully confirming anything. In the Volume 4 omake (bonus pages), Kou Minamoto asks Mitsuba if he crushed on any girls while he was still alive, while the Volume 10 omake has Yomogi Satō ask Mitsuba who he thinks is the cutest girl in their class (ch. 20, 50). In both scenes, instead of giving a straight answer, Mitsuba says that there are no girls who are cuter than him. His response maintains ambiguity as to his experiencing attraction to women; Mitsuba could like girls but simply has not found one that he thinks is cute enough for him, or he could be uninterested in dating them altogether and is giving a non-answer. Either way, he does not fully confirm his attraction, thus leaving room for a homoromantic interpretation.

This ambiguity returns in Chapter 47. Here, Kou tries to leave the Fictional World with Mitsuba, who wants to stay. Mitsuba attempts to distract him by pointing out the shooting stars, and Kou asserts that he is here for Mitsuba, not the stars. Mitsuba then asks, "For me…? Is this a confession? Sorry, but I'm not interested in guys with lame earrings" (7). Again, the manga teases romance between the two boys even when it does not have to, introducing homointimate potential into their dynamic. Mitsuba's comment also lends ambiguity; he rejects Kou because he does not like "guys with lame earrings," but this does not eliminate the possibility of Mitsuba liking boys in general. Similarly, in one of the artbook's bonus comics, Kou says his ideal type is someone with a cute smile, a romantic preference with no gender specifications (*AI: JSHK* vol. 1). Although what constitutes a cute smile is subjective, Mitsuba has one of the series' most unique ones, being the only main character with a catlike smile (which often indicates cuteness in mange/anime's visual language). In this sense, he can satisfy this romantic prerequisite, especially after Kou makes it his mission to ensure Mitsuba's happiness (and thus protect his smile).

In Chapter 77, the Red House Boy asks Kou if he loves Mitsuba and if he is two-timing on Nene with him. Instead of definitively answering, Kou just expresses exasperation: "Get bent, kid… seriously, what are you even talking about…?" (14). The Red House Boy's question comes out of the blue. While his silly belief that Kou is cheating on Nene with Mitsuba is probably meant to

illustrate his innocence, this homoromantic teasing still entertains the possibility that some Queer subtext is present, especially since the chapter establishes that Mitsuba is someone very important to Kou.

Later, in Chapter 98, Mitsuba convinces Kou to take him somewhere nice in exchange for information. Kou asks his group chat for fun places to go on a night out, and again, others interpret his actions as romantic: “Does this mean you’re on a date!? If you’re on a date, you should go to a theme park!” ([13–14]). Kou does not answer their questions, but he does say in an aside that “it’s not a date, though” ([14]). He is not incorrect; Mitsuba asks him for a night out for information exchange, not romantic bonding. However, the fact that the manga continues to tease these moments only brings attention to the duo’s romantic subtext instead of denying its existence. Rather than avoid any potential romance between Kou and Mitsuba, it persistently hints at such possibilities, a sort of knowingness that can support a Queer reading or be a subtle acknowledgement that such interpretations are popular in the readership. The “fun place” that Kou and Mitsuba end up visiting is an aquarium. This is a common date spot in romance manga and anime, so much so that it has become almost a cliché. Despite Kou’s claim that they are not on a date, this night out still marks a huge turning point in their relationship and is a site of great emotional bonding, much like first dates are for many couples: Kou gifts Mitsuba a gachapon (vending machine) toy, the pair opens up emotionally, and Kou eventually convinces Mitsuba to find a reason to live (mirroring Mitsuba’s efforts to stop Kou’s suicide attempt in the Picture Perfect Arc) (ch. 98–100). He also piggybacks Mitsuba home, mirroring him piggybacking Nene home in a previous major arc. These two are the only characters to whom Kou extends this service; they are also the only characters that he has ever been hinted to like romantically. Perhaps the parallels in this scene represent the metaphorical movement of Kou’s strong feelings for Nene over to Mitsuba, whatever one interprets those strong feelings to be.

Kou dedicates himself to saving Mitsuba from his ghostliness, but unbeknownst to him, he has arguably already saved Mitsuba by befriending him. In his debut appearance, Mitsuba states that his spirit will move on if he can take a picture of something important to him — something so significant that it tethers his soul to the Near Shore.[14] Much of Chapters 18 and 19 involves his and Kou’s wild search for this elusive photography subject, as it is Mitsuba’s policy “to only take pictures of things [he likes]… or things [he thinks] are important to [him]” (ch. 18, p. 19).

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[14] In many supernatural anime/manga, the “Near Shore” is the human/living world and the “Far Shore” is the non-human/non-living world.

When Kou later expresses his desire to befriend Mitsuba even though they are an exorcist and a ghost, Mitsuba photographs a rare human subject, someone he thinks is important to him: Kou. As Tsukasa reveals in Chapter 19, Mitsuba's true desire—the reason his spirit has not yet moved on—is because he wishes to stay in everyone's memories. However, he forgets this desire and becomes satisfied with just Kou's attention and affection, highlighting the significance the boy exorcist holds in his heart (ch. 19, p. 16). Whether we read this moment as platonic or romantic, it becomes clear by the end of the Mitsuba Arc that the pair have forged a strong and lasting bond, one that has deeply affected them both. Regardless of our interpretation, their bond still indicates homointimacy — a deep emotional attachment that unsettles heteronormative social scripts because another boy has become the most important person in Mitsuba's life.

Similarly, Mitsuba becomes one of the most important people in Kou's life. After he (seemingly) disappears in Chapter 20, Kou cannot stop thinking about him. In his own words, it feels "like time had stopped" whenever Mitsuba is involved (ch. 42, p. 5). Indeed, their bond disrupts spatial and temporal boundaries, and the distinction between the Near and the Far Shores. In the Picture Perfect Arc, Mitsuba claims that, as a human, Kou can never understand Mitsuba's uniquely supernatural issues and feelings. Kou's response to this outburst stuns Mitsuba to silence: "Want me to die? Then I can be with you forever" (ch. 48, p. 21). Kou risks his life for many people, but Mitsuba is the only one to whom he offers it. Although Mitsuba admits that he feels homicidal jealousy towards humans, he saves Kou when he jumps out of the school window following this statement, demonstrating how Kou's life bears more weight to him than his existential loneliness. This care is reciprocal. In the Red House Arc, Kou deduces that the titular house shows him the things that he most desires. Immediately after this revelation, an illusion of Mitsuba appears. The apparition claims that he cannot go on without Kou, that Kou is all that he has, and that he wants Kou to become a supernatural and stay with him forever (ch. 77, pp. 15–17). Although Kou does not fall for the Red House's trap, the fact that these are the things that he most wants to hear from Mitsuba emphasizes the enormity of his desire for him.

The importance of the boys' bond embeds itself in the story's visual language. Kou's most recognizable physical trait, the one that others often comment on, is his omamori earring, a talisman for traffic safety. Before the story's events, Mitsuba died in a traffic incident. The boys' narrative entanglement and Mitsuba's countless references to Kou's earring further connect the two story elements.

Kou, with his traffic safety amulet, dedicates himself to saving Mitsuba from dying once more. The only other person to whom he dedicates this much energy into defending is his (possibly former) crush Nene. This is another link suggesting Mitsuba and Kou's potential love. Nene's dream in *HSHK*'s Chapter 27 features a world where all the characters—dead and alive, supernatural and human—are classmates. In this dream, Mitsuba appears to be a regular, living human boy, just like the other dead and supernatural characters are. Interestingly, Kou's earring is missing in this world where Mitsuba is safe. Perhaps this is the manga's subtle way of affirming the connection between the boys: Mitsuba is alive and well, so Kou's omamori (symbolizing his protectorship) is unneeded. All these details suggest the ropes of fate that bind Kou and Mitsuba.

Intimate Cannibalism

Cannibalism and consumption are acts rich with symbolic meaning; their appearances in *JSHK* signify sex, love, and bridging the gaps of otherness. As one of humanity's deepest taboos, cannibalism in many social contexts "others" or "queers" its participants. *JSHK*, however, frames consumption as an act that destabilizes the lines between the other and the self. This reading mirrors how sex similarly dissolves these distinctions, uniting its participants as "one." Chapter 94 illustrates consumption as the purest, most literal form of uniting bodies with a lover. Here, the human/supernatural couple, Sumire Akane and Hakubo, consummate their pseudo-marriage through consensual cannibalism. For several pages, readers are led to believe that the oni Hakubo is, in Sumire's words, "carrying out [his] husbandly duty" (ch. 89, p. 21). This misleading is made possible because the scene borrows from the cinematic conventions of sex, particularly the disparate shots of the couple's bodies, the visual blocking obscuring their full actions, and the fade-to-black ellipses (Krzywinska, *passim*). It is not until we see a panel of Sumire's bloody arm do we realize that Hakubo is eating her alive. With this, *JSHK* draws a connection between love and cannibalism, and alternative ways of portraying unity. While not an intimacy scene, Kou and Mitsuba's Chapter 99 fight mirrors Sumire and Hakubo's cannibalism scene through the similarly dimmed lighting and disparate, close-up panels of their bodies. In fact, these two major story arcs follow each other, further emphasizing their narrative connection. Like how Hakubo eats Sumire's arm, Mitsuba bites Kou's finger, drawing blood and stirring his appetite: "I am really trying to control myself. But you're making it so hard to resist" (ch. 99, [p. 29]). The cinematic parallels call attention to the couples' and scenes' similarities, particularly their intimacy through consumption. As Amy Heneveld says, "the act

of cannibalism gives voice to the wordless acts of physical love and intimate exchange that are difficult if not impossible to describe, and thus articulates the possibility of unity between two desiring subjects" (412). Indeed, Mitsuba, who usually feigns disgust with Kou, admits that he must restrain his want to consume him, which is one form of desire. Similarly, Kou is unable to eloquently articulate his feelings for Mitsuba when asked, but he clearly expresses his desire to keep him alive when he encourages his cannibalistic urges: "Eat it" (ch. 99, [p. 22]). The pair grows to greater understanding after this chapter: Kou now knows about the ailment that afflicts Mitsuba and Mitsuba witnesses firsthand Kou's genuine care for him. As the ultimate taboo, cannibalism can draw out people's true feelings when these desiring subjects cross the line of social acceptability.

The notion that cannibalism unsettles interpersonal divisions is particularly useful in the context of Queer and queered love, especially the taboo relationship between an exorcist boy and a ghost boy. In Chapter 84, Teru Minamoto shares a legend about how humans who eat supernaturals are bound to become supernaturals themselves.[15] Indeed, the manga's events kickstart when protagonist Nene Yashiro eats a mermaid scale, putting her under the mermaid's curse, giving her mermaid characteristics, and binding her fate to the supernatural. When Hanako, her love interest, eats the other half of the mermaid scale, their fates intertwine and their love story begins (ch. 1). Here, consumption unsettles the boundaries between humans and supernaturals: both their physical being and the restraints on their love. In the Nightlife Arc, Mitsuba reveals that, although supernaturals do not need to eat, he must consume humans or other supernaturals to maintain his physical form, and he considers himself a monster among monsters because of this (ch. 99, [pp. 11-13]). Mitsuba is already a queered character: as a ghost, he cannot befriend living humans, and as an artificially created supernatural, he is othered from regular supernaturals. His cannibalistic nature further alienates him from both groups, whom he must kill and eat to survive. He feels he is "nothing but a monster" and this fuels his suicidal ideation (ch. 99, [p. 13]). After Kou hears this story, he responds with uncharacteristic seriousness: he immediately kills a weak supernatural and offers its bloody heart to Mitsuba (an act already rich with romantic symbolism). He says that even if Mitsuba is "the absolute worst piece of dirt alive, even if [he's] a monster… if [he] wasn't around anymore," Kou would not know what to do (ch. 99, [p. 35]). After

[15] Kou physically reacts to this news. At several points in the series, he expresses interest in becoming a supernatural so that he can be with Mitsuba and better understand supernaturals. This scene therefore hints at future connections between Kou, Mitsuba, and cannibalism.

this cannibalism scene, Kou forgives Mitsuba for biting his finger and has a candid conversation with him about his liminal existence, demonstrating how intimate cannibalism helps collapse the walls between individuals. Although social and moral transgressions should other their participants, Kou's wholehearted acceptance reveals not only his deep love for Mitsuba, but also a way to dismantle the lines between queered individuals ("monsters") and others. As his older brother suggests, humans with great resolve can certainly overcome the boundaries that separate them from the Far Shore.

Conclusion

Kou's character arc illustrates the different sides of shōnen masculinity, their conventions and complications. While he still conforms to many hegemonic traits at this point in the story, he also introduces a softer and Queerer form of masculinity. This gender-blendedness challenges the traditional binarist ways we view characters' gender expressions, putting masculinity under erasure. Rather than looking at gender as a hierarchical binary opposition—masculinity versus femininity—Kou's gender journey can serve as a model for understanding the nuances and complexities of gender expression in fiction. His story is part of a growing trend in recent shōnen, where male protagonists display more complex relationships to masculinity, femininity, and the traditional roles that dictate our still largely heteronormative global society. Shōnen's hypermasculine norms have remained largely unchanged since the post-war period where the genre formally developed. As we witness this highly gendered manga form break down its own traditions and display increasing gender ambivalence, we witness the advent of a new generation of stories, heroes, and readers who exist outside of and challenge gender traditions.

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