



LONELY CHAMPIONS IN JAPANESE MANGA

Deconstructing the Competitive System in Male Representations in *Seinen* Manga

FABIO MARTÍNEZ-ALCAIDE, MILENA CARLA LIMA DE CARVALHO ², RAINER RUBIRA GARCÍA ¹

¹Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

² Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Although Japanese manga targeted at male demographics has traditionally shaped its protagonists according to patriarchal archetypes, certain works challenge this discursive norm. Rather than perpetuating the confrontational framework that structures the narratives of most genre fiction, these series depict violent yet triumphant characters who are profoundly dissatisfied with their existential condition. This article critically examines the implicit discourse embedded in the deconstructive approaches these works employ and identifies the defining attributes of their characters, drawing on a case study of three series emblematic of this trend.

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1. Introduction

The representation of gender identity in Japanese manga aimed at male demographics remains heavily influenced by the sexist archetypes promoted by patriarchal culture. Since the establishment of *kindai manga* as a standardisation of the aesthetic and narrative conventions shaping contemporary editorial products (Bouissou, 2010; Martínez-Román, 2016), it has been consistently observed that the protagonists of these fictions organise their understanding of the world around a hierarchical competition. The narratives in which they participate are typically structured around a series of confrontations, where victory as an objective seeks to exalt attributes commonly associated with traditional masculinity, the value of which lies in their contribution to the successful exercise of violence in its various forms. In most narratives within genres such as *shōnen* or *seinen*, it is possible to discern an almost dogmatic promotion of behaviour deemed 'virile'. This promotion often becomes hegemonic due to the way social and administrative institutions are constructed around it, constraining any male behaviour not oriented towards the defence or acquisition of goods or privileges through the exercise of power. Whether contextualised in the 21st World Martial Arts Tournament in *Dragon Ball* (Toriyama, 1984–1995) or the quest for the lost treasure of the pirate Gol D. Roger in *One Piece* (Oda, 1995–present), the narrative journey of these manga protagonists culminates in their triumph in competition, ascending to a position of superiority through the development of a force that subjugates the rest of the diegetic society. Moreover, this victory carries a moral connotation. By winning, the character not only proves to be the most competent but is also, by extension, presented as the agent who has acted with the greatest virtue, relegating rivals to a degradation within the hierarchical scale, often punished with ignominy or even death. The resonance with patriarchal philosophy is evident in the way physical strength is equated with moral strength (Suvilay, 2018, p. 251).

It is quite clear how this structure persists due to the satisfaction derived from consuming a power fantasy that reflects the concerns of the target readership demographics. Ultimately, these fictions offer a resolution of conflicts and challenges that is gratifying due to its reduction of real-world complexities to a simple contest, the outcomes of which are always framed in a clear dichotomy of success or failure. This monochromatic perspective provided by manga narratives for adolescent boys and adult men could be described as a mere exercise in escapism. It might, as Warren Young (1976) dramatically stated, represent 'a necessary interruption at the point where the desire not to think about death becomes manifest' (p. 380). This is partly true; however, the implicit discourse underlying the inevitability of the battles depicted in these series should not be overlooked. Beyond the overt sexist connotations derived from the dismissive treatment of characters who are female or whose gender identity deviates from traditional norms, there is also an issue with the relationship established between power, superiority, and satisfaction. Given the typical resolution of these plots, the three are often interpreted as synonymous, as the attainment of one implies possession of the others. For the character, this entails accepting a determinism that positions them as a tool perpetuating the very system of confrontations in which they participate, particularly when no change in attitude or renunciation is ever conceived. Not only does this perpetuate the status of their society, ultimately organised around continuous struggle, but it also results in a loss of autonomy, as violence becomes the sole means available to catalyse change in the world. Despite being a classic model originating in twentieth-century Japanese manga, recent conclusions of series such as *My Hero Academia* (Horikoshi, 2014–2024), *Jujutsu Kaisen* (Akutami, 2018–2024), and *Attack on Titan* (Isayama, 2009–2021) demonstrate that this discourse remains fully relevant in contemporary productions.

Paradoxically, protagonists presented as agents of change and instigators of revolution often conclude their dramatic arcs by renewing or even reinforcing the social institutions they initially sought to dismantle due to the suffering these caused. In *Bleach* (Kubo, 2001–2016), Kurosaki Ichigo becomes a key soldier in the military body of the Soul Society, despite beginning the series by invading its headquarters to prevent the unjust execution of his mentor; Ri Shin, in *Kingdom* (Hara, 2006–present), escapes his condition as a slave by rising through the ranks of the Qin army, contributing to the establishment of a tyrannical government that perpetuates the subjugation of its servants; and even a decidedly destructive protagonist like Yagami Light in *Death Note* (Ōba and Obata, 2003–2006) fulfils his ambitions by instituting a penal regime even more brutal than the one that preceded it. Perhaps unintentionally, these works demonstrate through their narratives the inseparable nature of the

methods used to achieve an end. Their protagonists adopt a hypocrisy that is rarely reflected upon. Genuine transformative capacity must be accompanied by actions and attitudes fundamentally opposed to the conditions demanding change, not only to avoid broader consequences but also to prevent usurping individuals' autonomy by requiring them to adopt the very practices responsible for their suffering.

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, a shift in the discursive paradigm can be observed with the emergence of several series that manifest a deconstructive intent regarding the values upheld by traditional masculinity. These works share the presentation of a narrative centred on an archetypal male protagonist who dominates the hierarchy of the confrontational system. As is typical, he wields absolute and incontestable strength, unmatched competence in the use of violence, and emotional detachment, punishing opponents with death in most conflicts in which he participates. However, far from adhering to a premise more characteristic of the *nekketsu* manga subgenre, these works subvert reader expectations by depicting their protagonists engaging in introspection to grapple with the frustration they experience despite their success. Adopting an approach akin to the personalist perspective of *gekiga* manga, yet without relinquishing the mass appeal enabled by commercial genre design, these productions distinguish themselves from their counterparts by portraying the challenges that patriarchal philosophy imposes on men. Recognising the significance and impact of manga's discourse on its audiences, this article seeks to examine some of the most prominent features characterising these deconstructions. To this end, it focuses on analysing the shared attributes of three *seinen* works similar in narrative structure and thematic progression, selected based on the popularity they have garnered from their initial publication to the present, with two of them even adapted into anime. These works are *Berserk* (Miura, 1987–present), *Vagabond* (Inoue, 1998–present), and *Vinland Saga* (Yukimura, 2005–present). Each offers a distinct perspective on the consequences of violence in their respective universes, consistently imbuing it with a negative connotation. Moreover, each follows its protagonists—Guts, Musashi, and Thorfinn, respectively—from childhood to maturity, enabling the establishment of a causal relationship that specifically delineates the ways in which the patriarchal structure subjugates and involves men in its dynamics. Finally, each illustrates the varying degrees of separation and rejection with which their protagonists attempt to distance themselves from the confrontational system, achieving greater or lesser success depending on their ability to alter their belligerent attitude towards society.

2. Abuse as an Introduction to Violence

The introduction to the system of confrontations and the discipline demanded by the patriarchal hierarchy of each narrative's diegesis occurs early, during the protagonists' childhood. This formative period is marked by a process of conditioning defined by the marginal position these characters occupy within society, as they become victims of abuse and rejection from their peers due to their perceived weakness in an era of conflict that demands strength. Both Guts, the protagonist of *Berserk*, and Thorfinn, his counterpart in *Vinland Saga*, are adopted by the mercenary bands that killed their parents, receiving tutelage that resorts to physical punishment whenever their attitude or competence fails to meet the minimum requirements of the military regime. Similarly, Musashi in *Vagabond* endures constant denigration from his own father due to his ineptitude in the way of the sword. From the perspective of masculine norms, these practices can be identified as processes of expulsion and ostracism directed at men who, due to youth or nonconformity, fail to adhere to the cultural conventions of their gender (Castelli-Olvera & Castelli-Olvera, 2016, p. 207; Kaufman, 1999, p. 3).

Abuse, as a recurring element in the characters' pasts, establishes itself as a prerequisite for learning to coexist within the community of men, sanctioning individual actions that do not align with the norms governing such coexistence (Castro, 2004, p. 524). Its consequences and mechanisms, in both physical and verbal forms, are better understood through Michael Kaufman's typology of the various forms of masculine violence. As a rite of initiation that introduces the child to the existence of a patriarchal power hierarchy, aggression becomes a tool whose efficacy stems from its capacity to incapacitate both body and mind. From a biopolitical perspective, by damaging the body, this punishment limits the individual's sensory engagement with the natural world, and it is under this threat that the child is coerced—not only to comply with a prescribed will but also to operate with the speed and efficiency demanded of them (Foucault, 2023, p. 160). However, when viewed through the lens of masculine gender studies, it

becomes evident that this process also fosters an internalisation of violence, enabling the child to learn its selective use for achieving objectives and, crucially, for channelling emotions into rage (Kaufman, 1999, p. 1). It is also necessary to consider how this process equips these protagonists with the future strength to confront the challenges of adulthood, as their triumphs must be contextualised within a framework that demands the systematic brutalisation of the individual. This brutalisation, endured to the same extent that it is inflicted, instils a habitus of domination that embeds the need to assert authority over other men and, secondarily, women (Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2003, p. 48). As the narratives of their respective works progress, these characters are seen to perpetrate the same acts of which they were victims, with particular prominence in the cases of Guts and Thorfinn. Both the Black Swordsman and the Icelandic explorer exhibit, in the early stages of their stories, a volatile temperament that antagonises most of their interlocutors, demonstrating that their assimilation of the competitive system has shaped their masculinity in two ways: as a fury triggered by the prospect of their power being challenged and as a detachment that equates emotional vulnerability with the weakness punished throughout their upbringing (Kaufman, 1999, pp. 3–4). Numerous scenes in these manga illustrate how this behaviour often leads to isolation, as the characters fail to acknowledge either the needs of other members of society (Hickey, 2016, p. 1) or their own.

When addressing the various spectra of violence, it is also essential to consider the impact of sexual violence depicted in these fictions, as the numerous instances of this deplorable act reveal both an endogenous and exogenous condition of punishment. In the narrative of *Berserk*, two instances of rape significantly affect the protagonist's development. The first occurs during Guts' early adolescence, when, unbeknownst to him, he is hired out by his adoptive father to satisfy the perverse desires of one of his subordinates. Far from aiming to correct weakness, this punishment arises as a response to the youth's excessive success, as his growing martial prowess threatens his guardian's position. As a manifestation of patriarchal power, this act combines three elements: the perpetrator's sense of entitlement to pleasure, the guardian's insistence on defending his influence through force, and the protagonist's emotional repression. Regarding the general stance these fictions adopt, it can be said that victims of sexual abuse, particularly male victims, choose to remain silent and endure the pain, bearing a harm that permanently damages their being and interpreting life as a morally vacant void (Ó'Móchain, 2023, p. 10). The second instance of rape occurs much later, during a demonic ritual, when Guts is forced to witness his beloved, Casca, being sexually assaulted by Griffith, one of his closest comrades. In this case, the particularity of sexual violence as a means to harm the man lies not only in its culmination of subjugation and humiliation but also in its tendency to implicate women, objectifying them as necessary martyrs in the process of male maturation.

Ultimately, the prevalence of a masculine model of abuse that emphasises domination and displays of power fosters an attitude of resignation and fatalism among its victims. This fatalism shapes the character and disposition of the protagonists, transforming them into amoral, almost feral entities driven by two principles: aggressive instincts and vengeance, both inculcated by the patriarchal hierarchy. Through punishment in its various forms, the traditional figure of the mentor or instructor in *nekketsu* manga is subverted to forge an education of body and spirit moulded to the holistic ideal of masculinity (Ducarme, 2018, p. 7). Regarding these trends, it is fitting to recall Julien Offray de La Mettrie's (2019) words: 'Criminals, the wicked, the ungrateful, those who, in short, do not feel Nature, miserable tyrants unworthy of the light, in vain take cruel pleasure in barbarity' (p. 64). In response to the suffering endured as a result of punitive dynamics, these protagonists seek retribution to the same extent that they inflict it, for, as La Mettrie notes, 'he who torments men torments himself, and the evils he will feel will be the just measure of those he has caused' (de La Mettrie, 2019, p. 64).

3. Entry into Competitive Dynamics and Development of a Coercive Discipline

In all these narratives, the transition from the formative stage is marked by a traumatic event. The characters' entry into the system of confrontations is brought about through a final degradation that pushes the body to its utmost limits, where extreme pain and public humiliation are indispensable prerequisites for becoming a fully formed man. This process, once again utilizing the body as a tool of power, reveals the ritualistic and theatrical traits characteristic of torture. Whether through scars or the social resonance of degradation, an infamy is automatically ascribed (Foucault, 2023, p. 33) to those individuals entering the competitive dynamic who have yet to prove their strength. Within the narrative framework of the works examined, this torture always carries a tragic yet emancipatory connotation:

Guts loses an arm, an eye, and the rest of his company in a supernatural ceremony; Thorfinn is branded as a slave for four years after witnessing his captain's execution; and Musashi flees his village under a new identity after being unjustly condemned to die of starvation. Thus, it is presumed that for these characters, the attainment of adulthood is a solitary event that reinforces the antagonism elicited by their peers. Motivated by retribution for the wrongs inflicted upon them or by the desire to establish a hegemony that secures an unassailable position of privilege, their life trajectories invariably lead to an endless series of battles in which they emerge victorious due to their unparalleled skill. This struggle constitutes the primary dramatic engine of *shōnen* and *seinen* manga. From a narrative construction perspective, combat provides structure to the narrative framework, supplying objectives and methods, and achieving such significant prominence in the text that it is comparable to the structural role of the verb in the syntactic construction of a predicate. Within the patriarchal framework, it represents the essential moment of displaying, channelling, and acquiring power to advance hierarchical promotion. For the male agents participating in it, it entails the application of mutual torment, sometimes publicly displayed, to extract a confession of weakness from the opponent through the duel (Foucault, 2023, p. 52). Typically, the protagonist's victory in Japanese manga entails a moralizing humiliation of the antagonist (Bremond, 1970, p. 108). However, for the subjects of this analysis, the circumstances following success engender a progressive degree of pessimism due to the indifference shown by the patriarchal structure even towards its most distinguished representatives.

Both physical strength and skill in swordsmanship, which constitute violent aptitude, are the result of a disciplined training regimen. This practice, despite its benefits for combat and health, remains another coercive mechanism applied to the body. As with punishments, its role in these narratives demonstrates that it enhances the body's utility while diminishing its self-determination, resulting in the objectification of the subject through the loss of independence (Herrera, 2019, p. 105). The three protagonists examined conceive of their being solely as an instrument of aggression, and thus they dedicate the limited time outside the competitive dynamic to preparing for their next encounters. During this preparatory period, disciplined agents increase both their economic utility within the patriarchal hierarchy and their political obedience, as, despite their social dissidence, they are not exempt from contributing through their actions to the perpetuation of the same power mechanisms and archetypes by which they have been subjugated. Although the introductory abuse may belong to the past, the memory imprinted through punishment manifests the ghosts of former aggressors, whose presence in recollection incites a constant discipline to escape the potential resurgence of weakness. While series adhering to the narrative conventions of commercial genres offer an abstract depiction of trauma, in *Berserk*, *Vagabond*, and *Vinland Saga*, it often takes the form of the abusers who tutored their respective characters, returning from the dead in recurring dreams to mock them.

Typically, the construction of discipline in these narratives also requires isolation, not only in the emotional realm presumed by masculine power but also in the physical spaces inhabited by the characters. When the decision is made to live in solitude, readers' interpretations endow this act with symbolic empowerment, detaching the character from traditional training institutions. Such is its potential that it necessitates a resource entirely distinct from those of their counterparts. At first glance, this appears as a disruptive opposition that, as Judith Revel suggests, seeks to destabilize the foundations of political power and challenge the coercive regimes that control individuals' time, space, and movement (Revel, 2008, p. 32). While a rejection of formal organizations is evident, it is necessary to recognize that the ingenuity of the patriarchal structure's mechanisms lies in the breadth of its instrumentalization of the male individual. The clearest example is found in Musashi's behaviour during his *dojoyaburi* phase, when he attacks the Yagyū and Yoshioka *dōjō* to demonstrate the superiority of his hermit-like autodidacticism over the orthodox regimes of martial training in schools. Interpreted as assaults on his father and the samurai swordsmanship tradition, these actions give the impression of destabilizing the apparent centres of masculine violence's power. However, their impact on the social structure is nullified by the fact that Musashi's sole tangible achievement lies in discovering isolation as another, more effective form of coercive discipline compared to traditional scholastic designs. Once again, the man is bound by a somatic culture, with the difference that, in this instance, it is excessive self-care that initiates the process of subordination.

4. The Solitude of the Pinnacle Catalyses the Onset of Rehabilitation

Due to the sacrifices invested in overcoming a plethora of confrontations, the protagonist's ascent to the pinnacle of the patriarchal hierarchy is typically an event celebrated both within their diegetic environment and by readers, who, through this fantasy, satisfy the desire for power accumulation instilled in the male character. This atmosphere of jubilation is further reinforced by the promotion of mottos such as 'friendship, effort, and victory' (Hartzheim, 2019, p. 575) or 'resilience, honesty, and sacrifice' (Levi, 1998, p. 72), which have been championed for decades by the editorial framework of manga magazines. These ostensibly beneficial values, however, must be subjected to critical scrutiny, as they are inseparable from dramatic elements that manifest contrary ideas. The dissonance between the overt message of masculine manga texts and their underlying discourse must be acknowledged. Paradoxically, these works advocate a camaraderie that is more utilitarian than social, as it is ultimately discarded when the need arises to prioritize the accumulation of power in a single authority to perpetuate conflict. So-called friends are not positioned as equals but rather fulfil a role akin to a retinue that applauds, admires, and submits to the will of the powerholder. One of the most telling tropes regarding this exploitation of affective bonds is the progressive marginalization of secondary characters, whose sole narrative function is reduced to serving as subjects of repeated defeats to reaffirm the superior power of antagonists and the protagonist.

Departing from this conception of success as the culmination of the competitive process, the works under study in this article interpret their protagonists' ascent to a position of incontestability as the unsatisfactory conclusion of their ambitions. Unlike more conventional narratives, this event occurs without fanfare or recognition, as the metaphorical pinnacle they have reached is devoid of substance. Potential peers with whom they might have shared common ground have perished during the ascent, while the few surviving bonds forged amidst displays of violence have been severed due to the threat they pose to the emotional detachment of masculinity. The reward offered by the system of confrontations is equally hollow, as the only change observed in the world is the inversion of the dynamics governing its participants, with protagonists now becoming the new institutions of supreme authority. As dominant agents, they become the ones who must be overthrown by the next aspirants in the power hierarchy, having reached the peak of their utility and awaiting the obsolescence of their technique, which will inevitably lead to their demise. By prioritizing the utilitarianism of men, the functional nature of competitive aspiration in masculine manga serves as a tool to control males with potential power, enabling their exploitation as a labour force. This labour force, within the diegetic space, entails the effective use of violence and reflects the traditional connection between male maturity and productive capacity within an economy (Cook, 2013; Dasgupta, 2003). It is no coincidence that the professions typically depicted in these series belong to the martial or executive spheres, making it advantageous for political structures to maintain a social environment that is both formative and punitive, requiring no external intervention for its management. In the resulting meritocracy, productivity takes precedence over all other conditions, denigrating individual attributes that deviate from the core ideals of hegemonic masculinity, such as tenacity or the capacity to endure abuse (Dasgupta, 2004).

Promoting a conformist discourse, those diegetic individuals who find satisfaction in participating in the chain of exploitation serve as a balm that reinforces the entrenchment of an ideology rooted in the interests of contemporary liberal models. In contrast, protagonists like those in *Berserk*, *Vagabond*, and *Vinland Saga* lay the foundations for a new archetype characterized primarily by their explicit nonconformity with their domestication to competition. Mirroring processes observed in real societies, resignation to the impulses of megalothymia (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 181) and submission to hegemonic referents ultimately prompt these men, once disillusioned, to embark on a process of recovering their intrinsic value as individuals (Lozano-Méndez & Loriguillo-López, 2016, p. 319). In other words, they shed patriarchal conventions to initiate a maturation of the spirit that complements the early maturation of the body, progressing towards the acquisition of self-awareness and self-possession of identity (Laín, 1989, p. 123) that were inaccessible during childhood.

Initiating this rehabilitative effort of identity demands a partial or complete rejection of violence. Through its renunciation, the character gains clarity of mind and locates the source of their frustration, though this is far from a straightforward process. Competitors within the system of confrontations persist in their challenges, necessitating a new form of isolation that also mitigates accumulated aggression. By once again submitting to discipline, the protagonists reinforce their resolve and integrate

into a society of vulnerable individuals occupying the lowest rungs of the patriarchal hierarchy, forging communal bonds based on collaboration and shared power. In *Vagabond*, Musashi arrives at a rice-farming village after abandoning the way of the sword, working as a farmer to combat the famine suffered by his neighbours due to persistent flooding; *Vinland Saga* depicts Thorfinn doing likewise, labouring as a slave under Danish conquerors before establishing his own pacifist colony in America; and even in *Berserk*, Guts abandons his quest for vengeance to travel with new companions to an island free from the demons pursuing him. Regardless of the specifics of each case, the development of a creative mechanism stands out as a key contributor to this positive redirection. In their evolution, these three characters once again become instruments of production, but the new authority of the vulnerable offers a power rooted in a natural environment (Foucault, 2023, p. 152), free from the artifices of the patriarchal hierarchy and flowing to meet the needs of each member of these societies. The body continues to be utilized for productive benefits, but it no longer requires punishment, being cultivated through a discipline grounded in responsibilities rather than combat. Recalling Danjou's words, this labour fosters morality, fills the void of beliefs by replacing fatalism, and becomes a principle of all good (Danjou, 1821, p. 180).

5. Conclusions

Characters in manga have consistently served as a mirror reflecting the dilemmas of reality (Drummond-Matthews, 2010, p. 74). Though not always in the most precise manner, they invariably exert a significant influence on the interpretation of gender identities and the sexual condition of their readers (Ting, 2020, p. 311). Owing to their widespread distribution, genres targeting male demographics currently stand as primary catalysts for the ideologies proliferating among contemporary men. Among these, the ambition to succeed within a competitive system remains fully prevalent, pitting male peers against one another and fostering a discipline that even extends to the development of violent attitudes. The protagonists of genres such as shōnen or seinen are not merely tools to promote the consumption of escapist entertainment; rather, they possess the capacity to project archetypes onto their audience, the promotion of which benefits economic entities that commodify human labour. Both the power they present as an objective to attain and the discipline required to aspire to it are mechanisms that strip the individual of self-awareness, offering in exchange an ambition that operates to their detriment, unbeknownst to them, within dynamics of exploitation. It is also through this ambition that neoliberal currents and national elites succeed in denying the working-class basic pleasures and services, promising a better future (Driscoll, 2007, p. 171). However, the scarcity of rewards and the recognition that all humanitarian revolutions end in failure (Lozano-Méndez & Loriguillo-López, 2022, p. 301) have prompted a reconsideration of the paradigms embodied in these manga's casts. The emergence of characters like Guts, Musashi, and Thorfinn evinces a desire to valorise the autonomy that men appear to have lost during their time as economic tools. Starting from the brink of complete objectification, the protagonists of these series gradually seek to reclaim their humanity after resigning themselves to hegemonic structures of attitude and reference.

Having been misinterpreted by readers seeking in manga an enjoyment of the brutality that violence can unleash, the characters examined in this text are far from being considered unwavering archetypes of traditional masculinity. Instead, they are deconstructions that offer insight into the extreme consequences of indulging the afflictions caused by the dynamics of patriarchal hierarchization. In an era witnessing the resurgence of obsolete ideologies that demand men exert annihilating force against society's most vulnerable sectors, it is pertinent to recall the chimerical nature of absolute masculinity through series such as *Berserk*, *Vagabond*, and *Vinland Saga*. These works conclusively advocate collaboration and transversal humanism, beyond strength or weakness, as a counter to abuse and exploitation, championing men's self-determination to forge their own identities without being confined to the instrumentalism that pits them against their peers.

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