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Swedish Feminist Manga and Critical Comics Pedagogy in Natalia Batista's *Sword Princess Amaltea*

Abstract

This article considers the Swedish feminist manga *Sword Princess Amaltea* and its pedagogical paratexts. Originally released in three parts from 2013 to 2015, *Sword Princess Amaltea* was written and drawn by the Swedish comics artist Natalia Batista, and has been translated and published in several languages, including English and German. Batista's manga draws inspiration from both Japanese *shôjo* or girls' manga and Nordic feminist literature. In this article I show how Batista cleverly makes use of manga's visual conventions to challenge conventional representations of gender, sexuality, and the gaze. As a manga aimed at least in part at younger readers in school contexts, *Sword Princess Amaltea* and its accompanying instructional materials raise questions of genre and visual literacy in the language and literature classroom. Calling attention to the transnational circulation of manga and its genres, I analyze *Sword Princess Amaltea* with its paratexts in order to demonstrate the potential for a queer and feminist comics pedagogy.

Keywords: Natalia Batista, Swedish comics, feminist comics, manga, comics pedagogy

Sammendrag

Denne artikkelen tar for seg den svenske feministiske mangaen *Sword Princess Amaltea* og dens pedagogiske paratekster. *Sword Princess Amaltea*, skrevet og tegnet av den svenske tegneseriekunstneren Natalia Batista, ble opprinnelig utgitt i tre deler fra 2013 til 2015. Den har blitt oversatt til flere språk, inkludert engelsk og tysk. Som mangategner er Batista inspirert både av den japanske *shôjo*-tradisjonen (manga for jenter) og av nordisk feministisk litteratur. I artikkelen viser jeg hvordan Batista lykkes med å bruke mangaens visuelle konvensjoner for å utfordre tradisjonelle representasjoner av kjønn, seksualitet og blikket. *Sword Princess Amaltea* er en manga som delvis retter seg mot yngre lesere som fortsatt er skoleelever (som fortsatt går på skolen). Både boka og det didaktiske materialet som er utarbeidet til den setter søkelyset på spørsmål om sjanger og visuell kompetanse i språk- og litteraturundervisning. Gjennom min lesning av *Sword Princess Amaltea* med dens paratekster ønsker jeg å vise potensialet for en tegneseriepedagogikk med queer og feministisk tilsnitt samtidig som jeg ønsker å rette oppmerksomheten mot den transnasjonale utbredelsen av manga og dens undersjangere.

Nøkkelord: Natalia Batista, svenske tegneserieromaner, feministiske tegneserieromaner, manga, tegneseriepedagogikk

Swedish Feminist Manga and Critical Comics Pedagogy in Natalia Batista's *Sword Princess Amaltea*

In the second chapter of Natalia Batista's fantasy romance manga *Sword Princess Amaltea* (2013–2015), the title character Amaltea meets a nomad woman named Samyra Hadi Martuk who conveniently explains the backstory of the storyworld. In the past, men and women lived together as equals, but this balance changed when it was discovered that only women had access to magical powers. A matriarchal society arose in which women's superiority to men was assumed to be natural, and a war of the matriarchs soon broke out. Ultimately, peace was established, but only through the introduction of strict rules of succession that would maintain the balance between the queendoms. Among these rules is the tradition that a queen's youngest daughter should set out on a quest to marry a prince and thereby inherit a queendom in her own

right. It is at the beginning of such a quest that readers first meet Amaltea in Batista's manga series.

Natalia Batista's *Sword Princess Amaltea* is a work of Swedish feminist manga aimed at younger readers and published with an accompanying *lärarhandledning* [instructor's guide]. Originally written in Swedish, *Amaltea* has been published for an international readership with translations in English, German, among other languages. As a source of inspiration, Batista has identified the Norwegian novel *Egalias døtre* [*Egalia's Daughters*] (1977) by Gerd Brantenberg, a work of feminist speculative fiction depicting a society in which conventional gender norms are reversed and men are oppressed by women. Batista's work illustrates the transnational production of manga as a form of comics that can be adapted in many different local contexts. With *Amaltea*, Batista adopts manga's visual style to create a feminist comic in a fantasy storyworld, aimed at younger readers and made available for school settings. In the bonus material to the collected edition of *Amaltea* and the accompanying instructor's guide, *Amaltea* is published with a pedagogical paratext that can be used to teach the text through critical feminist and queer pedagogies. My argument is that reading *Amaltea* together with its pedagogical paratext is necessary to get at the text's complicated representation of gender, sexuality, and the gaze.

Global manga, or manga written outside of Japan, have received increasing scholarly attention within manga studies, although Swedish or Nordic manga have so far not been substantially discussed.¹ While manga studies has primarily been seen as a field of Japanese studies, manga itself is increasingly understood as a transnational cultural form not strictly limited to Japan. Manga publishers, competitions and conventions are frequently transnational, with major publishers such as Tokyopop releasing titles both for English-language and German markets, for example. Like all comics, manga is a verbal-visual medium with its own affordances, codes, and conventions. While Japanese manga are read from right to left in the reading order of traditional Japanese writing, manga composed outside East Asia may not be.² Whether Japanese

¹ Schodt 1999 is notable for its early discussion of English-language manga; see also Johnson-Woods 2010 and Brienza 2016 for discussions of global manga in the US. On German-language *shōjo* manga see Nidjam 2020. Lindberg 2018 offers a brief comparison of the contexts for French- and Swedish-language manga (see below). Berndt 2020 proposes "mangaesque" as a term for manga's media specificity in addition to site of publication.

² Interestingly, *Sword Princess Amaltea*'s original Swedish publication uses Western left-to-right order, while the English publication follows traditional Japanese reading order. I quote from the English translation of

or global, typical visual elements of manga include close ups, sound effects, flexible panel layouts, and numerous other conventions such as *chibi* style in which characters are drawn in exaggeratedly small caricatures.³ Manga is not a homogenous form and considerable differences exist across genres. Indeed, feminist and queer manga have been an important site for challenging and reimagining gender and sexual identities. In particular, *shôjo* or girls' manga typically focus on romantic relationships with *bishônen* or beautiful boy characters, with a subgenre of Boys' Love (BL) manga, created predominantly by women for young women readers, representing homoerotic relationships between beautiful boys.

In Sweden, critical pedagogy has been characterized by a 'norm-critical' turn with a focus on social and cultural norms in course material and instruction. Norm-critique means calling into question how the dominant norms according to which categories of identity are articulated — including race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, among others.⁴ In comics pedagogy, the verbal-visual affordances of the comics medium are seen as particularly suited to teaching critical visual literacy, asking questions about how meanings are constructed through text and images in different contexts. In the classroom, critical visual literacy can involve what Ashley Manchester describes as “critical looking” (2017, p. 2) questioning how social norms are articulated visually on the comics page. Charles Hatfield has influentially described the “unfixability” (2009, p. 19) of comics in the classroom as works of literature, popular culture, visual culture, or something else entirely. This unfixability is seen as a feature of comics pedagogy that can be used to question established ways of thinking about texts and images in the classroom. As comics and graphic novels are increasingly created with younger readers and school contexts in mind, pedagogical paratexts in the form of instructor's guides and discussion questions are important for shaping the classroom use of comics in teaching critical literacies.

Amaltea published by Tokyopop unless the original Swedish is noted in brackets. All other translations from Swedish in this article are my own.

³ For an introduction to manga, its visual conventions, and genres, Schodt 1999 and Kinsella 2000 remain important English-language starting points.

⁴ As norm-critical theory is usually written for the Swedish educational context, surprisingly little of this research has been published in English. For a brief overview of Swedish norm-critical theory, see Frangos 2021. Here it is also argued that the rise of Swedish feminist comics since the 2000s has been influenced by norm-critical thinking in its challenge to conventional representations of gender and sexuality.

In this article, I read *Sword Princess Amaltea*, together with its pedagogical paratext, as a Swedish feminist comic that adapts the manga form in terms of critical pedagogy. Through the text's accompanying bonus material and instructor's guide, I show how Batista's work exemplifies the unfixability in the classroom of comics in general and manga in particular. Teaching Swedish feminist manga calls attention to the forms and genres of manga, fantasy, fairy tales, and feminist literature, thus asking questions about how gender and sexuality are represented in different genres of visual media. I begin with a discussion of *Amaltea* as an example of Swedish feminist manga.

Reading Global Swedish Manga

Though originating in Japan, manga is a transnational form, written and published for local readerships in many different languages. As manga's popularity as a global visual style has increased since the 1990s, manga written in local languages for local contexts have become increasingly common across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. In Sweden, manga continues to be seen as a children's genre and Swedish-language manga are often aimed explicitly at younger readers. In addition to Natalia Batista, Lisa Medin, Åsa Ekström, and Carolina Ståhlberg have become prominent with comics drawing inspiration from Japanese manga to greater or lesser degrees. Unlike other European manga cultures, Swedish manga has not been marketed as a brand of its own comparable to the French *manfra* or the German *Germanga*.⁵ As Ylva Lindberg has pointed out (2018, p. 65), US and French manga artists have had considerably more success winning prizes and receiving recognition in Japan than Swedish artists. Thus, Swedish manga artists tend to find themselves in a cultural field that is doubly peripheral, both to Japanese manga and to dominant comics cultures. Describing her own experience as a manga artist in Sweden, Lisa Medin has described creating manga as less about following a specifically Japanese template and more about adopting a "gaze" or point of view, "an idealized image of everyday life that resembles one's own," which she also calls, "[n]ostalgia for a borrowed past never experienced firsthand" (2018, p. 76).

⁵ See Lindberg 2018, p. 68. Discussing the examples of Ekström and Ståhlberg, Lindberg goes on to describe the strategies adopted by each artist for positioning their work within the transnational manga field: Ekström has published her manga in Japanese in Japan, and Ståhlberg uses recognizably Swedish settings and publishes in *Kamratposten*, an established magazine for young people.

Self-published in English in 2009, and released in German in 2010 by Tokyopop, Natalia Batista's English-language manga series *A Song for Elise* is the first *yaoi* manga published in Sweden. Though written in English, the setting of *A Song for Elise* is recognizably Swedish with, for example, the use of Swedish currency and the depiction of a Swedish high school. *A Song for Elise* tells the story of two *bishônen*, or beautiful boy characters, whose romantic feelings for each other are sparked by their shared sympathy for their mutual friend Elise. Similar to Carolina Ståhlberg's *Bleckmossen Boyz* with its setting of a Swedish upper-secondary school, *A Song for Elise* follows the traditional conventions of the BL genre by using a European setting for the manga.⁶ Similar to *A song for Elise*, Batista's *Sword Princess Amaltea* appears to be written for an international audience, with its English-language title retained in the Swedish publication. Working on the project that would eventually become *Amaltea*, Batista describes her conversations with German, Danish, American and Swedish publishers and the "motsägelsefulla kommentarer" [contradictory comments] (2019, p. 542) she would receive from each market. Despite eventually deciding on Swedish publication with Kolik Förlag, the Swedish market does not appear to have been an obvious first choice for Batista's manga.

Like *A Song for Elise*, *Sword Princess Amaltea* incorporates elements of the BL manga genre in its gender-flipped narrative and beautiful boy characters. Describing *Amaltea*, Batista points to two sources of inspiration, one Japanese and one Nordic: Mori Kaoru's manga *Otoyome-gatari* [*A Bride's Story*] (2008 to present) and Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalias døtre* [*Egalia's Daughters*] (1977). Notably, Mori's *Otoyome-gatari* is a *shôjo* manga outside the BL genre, an historical romance set in central Asia in the 19th century focusing on the daily lives of young women and their marriages. As points of inspiration, Batista emphasizes "såväl den detaljrika tecknarstilen som porträtteringen av en kapabel och självständig kvinnlig huvudkaraktär" [both the detailed drawing style and the portrait of a capable and independent female protagonist] (2019, p. 526). Moreover, Batista describes *Amaltea* as an adaptation of the classic utopian feminist novel *Egalias døtre*, a text that continues to be widely assigned in literature and social studies classrooms in the Nordic countries. Brantenberg's novel depicts a matriarchal society

⁶ In other words, Ståhlberg and Batista's Swedish school settings for their respective manga would actually be considered conventional in Japanese *shôjo* manga. This can be seen as an example of the self-exoticizing gaze described by Medin (see above). On the use of Western school settings in BL manga, see Lunsing 2006, p. 7–8.

in which male and female gender roles are reversed, where men are seen as oppressed and fight for equal rights. Famously, Brantenberg's utopian imagination extends to the language of the text in which female rather than male terms are taken as the universal.⁷ For example, in Brantenberg's original Norwegian text, "menneske" [human] would be replaced with "kvinner", or "huwim" in English translation. In *Amaltea*, Batista uses the same approach to depict her matriarchal society, replacing "man" with "kvin" [from Swedish "kvinna", meaning woman], and so forth. Batista's *Amaltea* is thus a text that draws inspiration from both Japanese manga and Nordic literature, in which the gender reversals of BL manga are combined with Brantenberg's feminist utopia.

Among manga genres, BL manga does not fit the Swedish understanding of manga as a children's genre. A subgenre of BL, *yaoi* refers to sexually explicit material within the BL manga genre, created for and read primarily by women. BL and *yaoi* manga have been an important part of the global circulation of manga from Japan through fan translations and adaptations, reflecting the significance of transnational fan communities in the popularity of manga and anime outside Japan.⁸ In BL manga, the representation of beautiful boy characters is a defining characteristic, in which the beautiful boy represents an idealized form of male beauty. Beautiful boy characters are typically drawn as androgynous, and they may even be described as "young women wearing cartoon character costumes."⁹ Though many BL manga are ostensibly realistic representations of gay male relationships, crossdressing or otherwise magical gender transformations are not uncommon in the genre. Manga scholars typically argue that BL narratives of ostensibly gay male desire are open to identification for straight female-identified readers as well, alongside multiple desires and sexualities as part of a global queer popular culture.¹⁰ Both in Japan and globally, BL manga are created, consumed, and discussed by young women as a site for subverting the gaze of cisheteronormativity. In particular, the

⁷ *Egalia's Daughters* has received surprisingly little critical attention in English. Marleen Barr (1989) has argued that Brantenberg's play with language is central to the novel's feminist vision.

⁸ See e.g., Levi 2008 on BL and *yaoi* in North America, and Malone 2009 on German BL manga. McHarry 2007 discusses issues of identity raised by *yaoi* manga in the West generally.

⁹ Editor of the influential manga magazine *June* Sagawa Toshiko quoted in Welker 2006. Welker goes on to describe the roots of BL manga in Japanese popular theater.

¹⁰ Research on BL manga is too extensive to summarize here, but see especially Wood 2006 on BL manga's queer global publics. On BL manga's female readerships in Japan, see especially Nagaike 2003 and Saito 2011a. On the female gaze in BL manga, see Meyer 2013. See Sommerland 2012 for a Swedish dissertation on BL manga.

intensity of identifications generated by BL manga is seen as inviting fan participation in the form of translation, imitation, and parody.

While the beautiful boy is usually associated with BL manga, femininity and female sexuality are typically expressed through the figure of the cute girl. *Kawaii*, or cute, is often identified as one of the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese popular culture, exemplified in Lolita fashion and the magical and beautiful fighting girls of manga and anime.¹¹ The *kenki*, or sword princess, is an example of the beautiful fighting girl in Japanese popular culture, both cute and powerful. Though cuteness may be perceived as a sign of passivity and objectification, scholars often point out how expressions of cuteness frequently turn into their opposite to reveal an underlying aggressivity and power.¹² In this way, the aggressively cute expressions of feminist manga can be understood in the context of grotesque expressions in queer and feminist comics internationally.¹³

Critical Manga Pedagogies

Though comics pedagogy has grown considerably as a research field, manga is not as frequently mentioned apart from some well-known examples like Nakazawa Keiji's *Ore wa mita [I Saw It]* (1972), originally published in the US in a pedagogical context with accompanying instructional material.¹⁴ When manga is not seen as purely an entertainment media associated with animation and video games, it is usually treated as particularly suited to children and younger readers. When manga is discussed pedagogically, it is most often as an example of a specifically Japanese visual culture, exemplifying the interdisciplinarity of manga studies, covering fan culture, visual culture, Japanese studies, literary studies, and so forth. In this way, manga illustrates what Charles Hatfield has called the "unfixability" (2009, p. 19) of comics in the classroom and the difficulty of giving a clear definition of comics for students. Though comics' unfixability may create uncertainty in the classroom, the multiplicity of disciplines

¹¹ See Prough 2011 for a genealogy of cuteness in Japanese *shôjo* manga. See Shiokawa 1999 for an analysis of the "cute but deadly" girl in Japanese manga. See Saito 2014 on the magical girl and Saito 2011b on the fighting girl in particular. Hemmann 2020 links the representation of the beautiful fighting girl to the female gaze explicitly.

¹² Ngai 2012 gives an overview of this argument with reference to Japanese popular culture and avant garde aesthetics.

¹³ In a Swedish context, the aggressive cuteness of *Sword Princess Amaltea* could be compared with gurlisque style in the widely celebrated feminist comics of Nina Hemmingsson and others. Cf. Österholm 2018.

¹⁴ See e.g., Ricketts 2013. On manga and visual literacy pedagogy more generally, see Prough 2018.

included in comics studies is also generative of new ways of thinking. As Hatfield puts it, “Comics *shouldn’t* be easy to define, as they are an interdisciplinary, indeed antidisciplinary, phenomenon, nudging us usefully out of accustomed habits of thought and into productive gray areas” (p. 23). How might a critical manga pedagogy be developed with attention to manga as a transnational visual genre and interdisciplinary academic subject? How can critical looking be developed through manga study with a focus on gender and sexuality? What can be learned from the way diverse manga cultures use the manga form to represent local contexts?

In my view, critical manga pedagogy draws from theories of critical visual literacies in comics pedagogy generally. Ashley Manchester has shown how queer comics especially can be used in the classroom to teach “critical looking,” which she defines as a method for teaching students “to see how the systems of gender and sexuality pervade all areas of aesthetic and social organization” (2017, p. 2). She continues, “Comics can be a vessel through which students learn to deconstruct, through a process of critical looking, the social assumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and identity that they bring to visual works.” (p. 8). Through its specific affordances as a visual medium, comics can teach practices of looking that call into question dominant norms or assumptions. Manchester draws on Dale Jacobs’s work on comics and multimodal literacy to emphasize the participatory role of readers in actively producing meaning through their engagement with the comics page.¹⁵ As a participatory medium, comics can also teach an active engagement with visual culture by focusing on how words and images are used together to create meaning on the page. Concretely, teaching critical looking through comics means asking questions about who looks, how the gaze is represented, and according to which visual codes different social and cultural identities and relationships are made possible.

Considering the difficulty of defining comics and teaching their verbal-visual codes, pedagogical paratexts may take on additional importance as classroom tools. As objects of fan culture, comics in general and manga in particular circulate through a variety of intertextual contexts: translations, adaptations, fan fictions, forum discussions, and so forth. First defined by narratologist Gérard Genette, the term ‘paratext’ is used to refer to textual material adjacent to a narrative without being part of it: titles, cover pages, front and back matter,

¹⁵ See Jacobs 2007 on comics and multimodal literacy. See also Jacobs 2020 on using paratexts to teach the complex transactions between comics and readers.

acknowledgments, and so forth. Paratextual materials form an important part of a text's 'transaction' with the outside world, as a form of mediation with publishers, reviewers, booksellers, classrooms, and readers. For example, introductory and explanatory paratexts are crucial to understanding the way translations mediate various readerships.¹⁶ Literary scholar Maria Lindgren Leavenworth has elaborated on Genette's concept of paratext in the context of fan fiction, describing how fan fictions present challenges not because of their relationships to source texts, but because of what she identifies as the "limitations and affordances of virtual forms of publication" (2015, p. 57). In other words, reading paratexts is necessary to understand the interactions between source texts and their readers across multiple platforms.

In teaching comics, pedagogical paratexts are also crucially important for teaching through critical perspectives. Attention to the pedagogical paratexts accompanying comics and graphic novels in school settings is necessary for asking questions about how comics in the classroom challenge or reinforce dominant narratives. For example, historical comics may provide supplementary information through supplemental appendices that can be used in contrasting ways, either to question the authority of the dominant historical narrative, or to legitimate one narrative at the expense of others (see Anderson 2020). Pedagogical paratexts may contribute to critical approaches to teaching a work of comics by including visual, historiographical, or contextual materials that allow students to ask questions about the authenticity and authority of not just one particular text, but all representations in words and images. Such a critical comics pedagogy requires attention not only to the content of the work but also to the paratexts accompanying it, an approach that Daniel Stein has called "metacritical pedagogy" (2021, p. 623).

Sword Princess Amaltea's Female Gaze

When Sword Princess Amaltea has her first chance to kiss Prince Ossian, her initial response is an expression of discontent with the heteronormative expectation that she should fall in love and marry the prince. Seeing him sleeping alone, she exclaims, "I really don't want to, it's gross" (2019, p. 77). As a princess on a quest to rescue a prince held captive by a terrible dragon, Amaltea imagines that the only way to wake the sleeping prince is with a kiss. Amaltea's face is drawn in close up with focus on her eyes fixed on the prince's body. A single sweat drop

¹⁶ For an overview of the paratext in terms of translation theory, see Batchelor 2018.

with the sound effect “Uh...” emphasizes the ambivalence of Amaltea’s gaze, simultaneously attracted and repelled by his body (figure 1). Ossian is the object of the gaze in this scene, drawn with his eyes closed in a panel beneath Amaltea’s gaze. In keeping with a matriarchal society in which women are privileged over men, Amaltea also takes the position of the subject of the gaze with Ossian as the object, reversing the traditionally male, heteronormative gaze.



Figure 1. From Natalia Batista, *Sword Princess Amaltea*. © Tokyopop 2018.

Amaltea is the queen’s second daughter and therefore expected to embark on a quest to find a prince to marry since she cannot inherit her mother’s “queendom” in her own right. Rejecting the expectation of heteronormativity, Amaltea explains, “I don’t want to be forced to rescue

some stupid prince!” (2019, p. 23). In the context of the storyworld, Amaltea’s resistance to heteronormative romance comes across as naive and chauvinistic, an example of privileged entitlement more typically associated with men. Amaltea thinks of men in objectifying terms as “lazy and irresponsible” who “never have to work hard for anything” (p. 23). Amaltea thinks of finding and rescuing a prince as the inevitable conclusion to her quest, something she needs to “finish” (p. 80), simply for “this to be over with” (p. 74). Amaltea climbs on top of the sleeping Ossian to place her lips on his, simply as a gesture. For his part, Ossian refuses to play along, waking up and shouting “Get off me! You perv!” (p. 79). By the end of the narrative, the reader learns that Ossian has actually run away from home to escape the fate of being married to a princess against his will, a resistance to heteronormativity that he ultimately shares with Amaltea.



Figure 2. From Natalia Batista, *Sword Princess Amaltea*. © Tokyopop 2018.

Amaltea and Ossian’s character designs emphasize their resistance to heteronormativity both inside and outside the storyworld. Batista has described Amaltea’s style as “Gothic Lolita” or “Sweet Lolita” with “cosplay factor” (2019, p. 534). Amaltea’s Lolita style draws on the exaggerated cuteness associated with representations of femininity in manga. Amaltea illustrates the beautiful fighting girl with elements of cuteness and aggression. Batista goes on to note that Amaltea’s long hair breaks with the premise of a society in which women are physically active and would otherwise be expected to have short hair. Instead, Amaltea is drawn with long hair in curls and a plaid bow, cape, strapped gloves, and heeled boots. In her

afterword, Batista explains Amaltea's appearance by pointing out that men also had long hair in the past (p. 534). In the splash page that introduces chapter 2, Batista draws Amaltea in motion, with one hand on the handle of her sword and one hand on the sheath, her cape fluttering above her, while her face is drawn to emphasize feminine beauty with a glossy finish on her lips and cheeks (figure 2). At other moments, Batista makes use of the *chibi* style to draw Amaltea and Ossian as exaggeratedly small in order to emphasize their emotions or ironize their situation. For example, after Amaltea wakes him with her kiss, Ossian calls her a "perv," to which her reaction is drawn in *chibi* style (figure 3). Through Amaltea's character design, Batista draws her as a powerful warrior in a matriarchal society, but also as a naïve and entitled adolescent. These elements of strength and innocence in Amaltea's character are emphasized in the manga convention of the beautiful fighting girl.



Figure 3. From Natalia Batista, *Sword Princess Amaltea*. © Tokyopop 2018.

By contrast, Ossian is drawn as short-haired and dark-skinned in a world where nearly every other character is light-skinned and men are drawn with long hair (figure 4). Batista calls Ossian's short hair a "protest" against the "standard" (2019, p. 533) of his society. Throughout the narrative, male characters are drawn with long hair as a sign of their passivity as objects of desire. Where long hair for female characters indicates power and privilege in the storyworld of *Amaltea*, it is for male characters a symbol of objectification. In contrast with *Amaltea*'s exaggerated cuteness, paradoxically connoting strength and aggressivity, Ossian's short hair symbolizes his resistance to the gender and sexual norms of his society. In other words, Batista's character design for Ossian symbolizes resistance in two ways: within the narrative, as a protest against the gendered norms, and for the reader, as a subversion of the male gaze of heteronormativity.¹⁷ For her part, Batista refers to ongoing discussions of representation in comics when she explains Ossian's character design, pointing out her refusal to draw a comic with only light-skinned characters. While Ossian's skin color allows him to stand out in comparison with the other characters, it also alludes to the conventions of *shôjo* manga, in which black hair is seen as masculine and white hair as effeminate and "separated from reality".¹⁸ In this context, Ossian's character design draws on the visual conventions of the beautiful boy in *shôjo* and BL manga as an object of female desire.

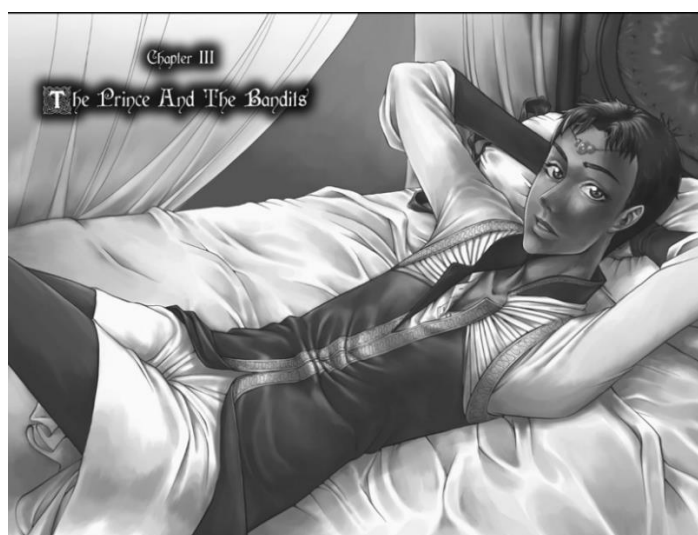


Figure 4. From Natalia Batista, *Sword Princess Amaltea*. © Tokyopop 2018.

¹⁷ See Mulvey 1989 for a foundational account of the male gaze. Theories of the gaze have also been important in feminist manga studies, e.g., Meyer 2013 and Hemmann 2020.

¹⁸ The black/white duality in BL manga has been explored by feminist manga scholar Fujimoto Yukari, quoted in Welker 2006, p. 852.

The storyworld of *Sword Princess Amaltea* depicts a matriarchal society of ‘queendoms’ in which princesses go on quests to rescue princes, an example of a gender-flipped fairy tale. As it turns out, the world of *Amaltea* is not a utopia, but contains its own forms of power and domination practiced not only against men but against everyone through the matriarchal houses who compete for status by requiring their daughters to complete dangerous quests. It is this system against which both Amaltea and Ossian rebel, and from which they ultimately escape at the end of the narrative. In a scene of magical transformation at roughly the mid-point of the series, Amaltea and Ossian experience a further breakdown of the gender binary when they wake up with their genders transformed, with Amaltea as a man and Ossian as a woman. Experiencing the dramatically unequal norms that apply to women and men in their society, Amaltea and Ossian develop a sympathy for each other that leads to their eventual romance.

Batista draws the scene of Amaltea and Ossian’s magical gender transformation as another site of queer looking that echoes Amaltea’s first voyeuristic encounter with Ossian. When Ossian is bathing in a lake, Amaltea thinks that she will take “just a little peep [*glutta*]” (2019, p. 208) since she has never seen a man naked. Instead, she discovers that both have been temporarily transformed into each other’s gender through the lake’s magical power. Significantly, Amaltea and Ossian are never drawn fully naked in this scene or at any other point in the narrative, so their genders remain indeterminate. Here too, Batista follows the conventions of BL manga in which, as opposed to sexually explicit *yaoi*, erotically suggestive drawing is used to imply the gender and sexual identities of the character, without directly revealing them. In this way, Amaltea and Ossian’s gender transformation reflects the indetermination of gender and sexuality in the narrative as a whole as it is characterized by reversals and transformations of conventional gender and sexual norms. In the narrative’s conclusion, Amaltea and Ossian save the magic water of the lake in order to complete a final gender transformation that allows them to run away from Ossian’s mother’s queendom and avoid marriage as the completion of Amaltea’s quest. Thus, *Sword Princess Amaltea* concludes with the possibility of a queer utopia, a site of refuge outside the cisheteronormative expectations of their society.

The Pedagogical Paratext in *Sword Princess Amaltea*

In addition to the author’s bonus material, *Sword Princess Amaltea* is published with a pedagogical paratext, an instructor’s guide for use in Swedish classrooms. Written by Helga

Boström, the instructor's guide is intended for the Swedish lower-secondary school, grades six to nine. Introducing *Amaltea*, the instructor's guide describes the text as "något så ovanligt som en svensk samhällssatir i mangakostym" [something as unusual as a Swedish social satire dressed up as manga] (2019, p. 2). *Amaltea*'s blending of forms, genres, and contexts is foregrounded in the instructional context through the reference to Swedish satire and manga. Here, what Hatfield has called the "unfixability" (2009, p. 19) of comics in the classroom is foregrounded by the pedagogical paratext. Introducing manga as a form, the instructor's guide describes manga as a type of comic that "ursprungligen kommer från Japan" [originally comes from Japan], comparable to "en 'vanlig' serie" [a 'normal' comic] (2019, p. 3). The instructor's guide introduces the different cultural forms on which *Amaltea* draws while taking for granted the availability of Western comics as the standard for comparison. Emphasizing these contrasts, the pedagogical paratext does not attempt to introduce any singular definition of comics as a form, although it begins by positioning Swedish manga as something 'unusual' in comparison with a 'normal' comic.

Amaltea is further introduced for instructors with reference to the work of Nordic feminist literature on which it is based, Gerd Brantenberg's Norwegian classic *Egalias døtre*, or *Egalias döttrar* in Swedish translation. Brantenberg's 1977 novel is described as "dammig" [dusty], but with a "budskap" [message] that also applies to *Amaltea*, namely, "att alla människor ska respekteras som individer" [that all people should be respected as individuals] (2019, p. 2). *Amaltea*'s pedagogical paratext thus clearly grounds the text both in the context of Nordic feminism and in the normative values of democratic education in the Swedish curriculum. Beyond the reference to Brantenberg, a list of suggested readings places *Amaltea* in the context of other comics as different as the American post-apocalyptic feminist comic *Y: The Last Man* (2002–2008) and a Swedish feminist satirical comic, Liv Strömquist's *Prins Charles känsla* (2010). Surprisingly, relevant Japanese *shôjo* manga are not mentioned even though American comics are included. Examples of fighting girl manga such as *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1996–1999) also offer important comparisons for *Amaltea*, but are not mentioned. Ultimately, the suggested readings in the instructor's guide are not meant to be exhaustive, but to place *Amaltea* in the context of other relatively well-known feminist texts in different forms and genres.

More specifically, the pedagogical paratext addresses the question of *Amaltea*'s genre both as manga and as fantasy. Typical manga elements are introduced, including close ups, facial expressions, *chibi* style, sound effects, and the representation of movement in the panel (2019, p. 3–4). Describing manga style, the instructor's guide explicitly mentions "det gulliga, komiska och ikoniska" [the cute, comical, and iconic] (p. 4). However, the instructor's guide does not ask students to consider the Japanese context for these stylistic elements, nor what they would mean in a Swedish manga. In addition to elements of manga style, the instructor's guide also introduces attributes of the fantasy genre with which students would be expected to be familiar. The world of *Amaltea* is described as a fantasy world inspired by fairy tales with "slott, drakar, magi, hästar och svåra uppdrag" [castles, dragons, magic, horses, and difficult quests] (p. 2). The instructor's guide suggests asking students to identify "sagoingredienser" [fairy-tale ingredients] (p. 10), in order to discuss what makes a 'saga' or fairy tale. Another introductory question suggested for students by the instructor's guide focuses even more specifically on genre: "Vad är manga och vad är fantasy?" [What is manga and what is fantasy?] (p. 6). Students are asked to build on their own understanding of manga and fantasy as preparation for their engagement with *Amaltea*.

Significantly, the instructor's guide does not ask or expect students to define *Amaltea* according to any specific form or genre, allowing all the elements of manga, fantasy, fairy tales, and feminist literature to coexist. One question suggested in the instructor's guide draws on another paratext, the back material, asking students to interpret the book description: "Sword Princess Amaltea utspelar sig i en sagovärld precis som alla andra – fast tvärt om" [Sword Princess Amaltea takes place in fairy-tale world just like all others – but the other way around] (2019, p. 6). The Swedish phrase "tvärt om" can be translated "the other way around," "reverse," "contrary," or "opposite." In this case, the book description refers to the gender-flipped setting of the narrative in which typical gender norms for male and female characters are reversed. Asking students to reflect on this description, the pedagogical paratext calls attention to normative expectations of fantasy or fairy-tale genres. If the normative fairy-tale world is one in which princes rescue princesses, then the "tvärt om" or reversed fairy tale tells the opposite story. Students are thus asked to question the traditional expectations of genre, thinking about how fantasy and fairy-tale genres are gendered and what it means to reverse these conventions.

The instructor's guide published with *Amaltea* focuses only on the first volume of the manga, chapters one through five. Divided up by chapter, classroom exercises and discussion questions help students through a close reading of the text. Among these suggestions for instruction, the only page specifically mentioned for close reading is the scene in chapter two when Amaltea voyeuristically encounters Ossian in bed. The classroom instruction begins, "Låt eleverna diskutera hur de tänker när de ser prins Ossian i sängen" [Let the students discuss their thoughts when they see Prince Ossian in bed] (2019, p. 9). At this juncture, the starting point for discussion is the student's own gaze directed at Ossian in a scene where it is actually Amaltea whose gaze is represented, thus identifying the reader's gaze with Amaltea's. The instructor's guide continues with suggested questions for the students: "Finns det någonting i bilden som gör dem förvirrade? Vad och varför i så fall?" [Is there anything in the image that confuses them? What and why in that case?] (p. 9). The pedagogical paratext discussing this scene takes Amaltea's gaze as a site of confusion, but does not attempt to resolve questions about whose gaze is represented or the significance of this gaze.

The instructor's guide continues with another question about the scene involving Amaltea's gaze on Ossian: "Finns det helt allmänt någonting i Amalteas och prins Ossians beteenden, egenskaper och repliker som inte följer de mönster som eleverna är vana vid" [Is there anything generally in Amaltea and Prince Ossian's behavior, characteristics, and speech that does not follow the patterns that the students are used to] (2019, p. 9). Students are therefore asked to analyze specific details of the image while paying attention to how the characters do or do not conform to their expectations. With such questions, *Amaltea's* pedagogical paratext allows for what Manchester calls "critical looking" (2017, p. 2) in comics teaching. The instructor's guide asks students to reflect on a scene of looking in which the female gaze is represented, without explicitly defining or identifying this gaze. By directing attention to scenes of looking in *Amaltea*, the pedagogical paratext makes possible a critical perspective on the gaze and its effects, without explicitly connecting the gaze to specific representations of gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

In Swedish pedagogical research, Theréz Lindstedt Önneskog's master's thesis reports that only a small number of the students she surveyed were previously familiar with manga, though many

recognized manga style without knowing it was called manga (2019, p. 14). As a case study, Önneskog examines Batista's *Sword Princess Amaltea* as classroom material for teaching Swedish in grade six, exploring the use of manga in the Swedish literature classroom. Although students did not necessarily have familiarity with specific aspects of manga before their discussion of *Amaltea*, Önneskog found that they themselves began to mention differences between manga and Swedish comics when first presented with the text (p. 11). Önneskog's analysis emphasizes that many questions remain about how comics fit into the Swedish curriculum when students themselves begin to ask questions about how to work with text and images in the classroom.¹⁹

As I have argued, reading Swedish feminist manga means engaging with an originally Japanese cultural form in a local context. *Sword Princess Amaltea* is a Swedish comic that draws on manga, fantasy, fairy tales, and feminist literature. These overlapping forms, genres, and histories offer an opportunity to raise questions about comics in the language and literature classroom. Depicting a fantasy storyworld, *Amaltea* exemplifies typical *shôjo* manga elements through its beautiful boy and fighting girl characters, close ups, *chibi* style, and exaggerated cuteness. Moreover, *Amaltea*'s representation of the gaze through the visual conventions of BL manga in a feminist narrative encourages practices of critical looking in the comics classroom. Reading *Amaltea* alongside its pedagogical paratext emphasizes how the text's genre elements and scenes of looking can be read through a feminist and queer critical pedagogy. Rather than attempting to fix or pin down the text and its contexts, *Amaltea* can be used in the classroom to invite critical perspectives on gender, sexuality, and visual culture. Precisely as a transnational cultural form, Swedish manga can thus be an opportunity for a critical practice of comics pedagogy.

¹⁹ As Önneskog puts it, this work "skapar frågor och funderingar om hur eleverna ställer sig till att arbeta med serier inom olika ämnen" [creates questions and reflections on how students relate to working with comics in different subjects] (2019, p. 16). On comics pedagogy in the Swedish school system more generally, see Wallner 2017.

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