The Transformation Sequence of a Genre: *Mahō Shōjo* from *Sailor Moon* to *Magical Girl Site*

Mia Caroline Kivel

KCHU 460: Capstone in Cultural Studies

27 July, 2020

From its inception in 1953, the *mahō shōjo* ("magical girl")[1] genre of Japanese anime and

manga has been one that is heavily reliant on uncontroversial stock characters, familiar plots, and

charming aesthetics to draw in audiences. While these traits of the genre have made *mahō shōjo*

commercially successful, they allow for only a limited range of narrative possibilities. Indeed,

the *mahō shōjo* narratives of the twentieth century prove to be significantly constrained by what

Jean-François Lyotard would call the "grand narrative" of the genre, an overarching formula to

which plot and characterization must adhere. However, the critical and commercial success of

Gen Urobuchi's 2011 animated series, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica,* has served to usher in an

era of rapid postmodernization of the *mahō shōjo*. More specifically, *Madoka Magica* and its

spiritual successor *Magical Girl Site* (2013) seek to challenge and deconstruct critical features of

the archetypal *mahō shōjo* narrative and commercial framework made popular by 1990s

franchises such as *Sailor Moon* (1991) and *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1996). By charting the evolution

of the *mahō shōjo* from 1990s to the present day, one comes to realize that contemporary "dark

mahō shōjo" narratives operate by employing their audience's preconceptions of the genre to put

forth new understandings of gender, youth, and empowerment that are ultimately more nuanced

than those of their predecessors.

　　　To fully appreciate the wholesale postmodernization of *mahō shōjo* media that began

with *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, it is essential to understand the recognizable forms and

archetypes of the genre as they existed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Though the first *mahō shōjo* series were written as early as the 1950s, many of the genre's most

familiar tropes were established with the most popular series of the 1990s, Naoko Takeuchi's

---

[1] For the sake of clarity, the untranslated "*Mahō Shōjo"* will be used to refer to the magical girl genre, and "magical girl" will be used to refer to characters within that genre.

Sailor Moon and CLAMP's *Cardcaptor Sakura*. A conventional *mahō shōjo* series begins with a normal, if not somewhat naïve, middle school girl receiving magical powers. The newly minted "magical girl" must use her abilities to drive off some mysterious evil force threatening the world but is not strong enough to do so on her own. Instead, the magical girl must seek out allies (who often share a common design theme, appearing as part of a matched set) and fight alongside them, learning valuable lessons about love, friendship, and other conventionally feminine virtues in the process. These series often feature a number of more specific tropes as well, which Catherine Butler identifies as including a "'Dream' that is more than a dream," "Cute mascot character," "Transformation (*henshin*) sequences," "Named attacks/maneuvers," and "Jewelry [that] is the source of magical power," among other things (see figure 1). As the ubiquity of such tropes would suggest, the *mahō shōjo* genre as defined by the likes of *Sailor Moon* is rather formulaic, with each series presenting only minor variations on a familiar format.

Trope	Sailor Moon	Cardcaptor Sakura	Lyrical Girl Nanoha	Puella Magi Madoka Magica	Magical Girl Site	Magical Girl Raising Project	Yuki Yuna is a Hero	Magical Girl Spec-Ops Asuka
"Dream" that is more than a dream	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
Cute mascot character…	YES	YES	YES	YES	Inverted: Mascot is intentionally unsettling	YES	YES	Parodied: Mascot is a gun-toting rabbit with bulging eyes
Whom the protagonists meets by rescuing it…	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
… And turns out to be an alien	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	Unclear: Mascot is from another dimension	Unclear: Mascot is from another dimension	Unclear: Mascot is from another dimension
Transformation Sequences	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Named attacks/ maneuvers	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	SOMETIMES	YES	YES
Jewelry is the source of magical power	YES	YES	YES	YES	SOMETIMES	NO… Smartphones are	NO… Smartphones are	NO… Weapons are

Figure 1: Chart examining narrative similarities in *mahō shōjo* media. Expanded from a similar chart by Catherine Butler in "Shoujo Versus Seinen? Address and Reception in Puella Magi Madoka Magica (2011)"

This is not to suggest that *mangaka* like Takeuchi and CLAMP are uncreative, but is merely reflective of the commercial realities of *mahō shōjo* media in the 1990s. Kumiko Saito

writes of *Sailor Moon* and *Cardcaptor* Sakura that "It is best to consider Japanese magical girl anime as twenty-five minute advertisements for toy merchandise" (2014, 144). She further notes that it is a common business practice in the Japanese children's animation industry to expect a roughly 10% loss on the production of each episode of an anime series, under the expectation that those losses will be recouped through merchandise sales. This paradigm implicit in the production of *mahō shōjo* manga and anime is critical to understanding the position the genre occupies in the Japanese zeitgeist to this day. Sociologists have noted that consumerism and mass media have played ever-increasing roles in the process of childhood identity formation in industrialized nations, with Jennifer Ann Hill going so far to suggest that "Children from the ages of 4 to 12 have increasingly been defined and viewed by their spending capacity. Girls especially are targeted by marketers to sell them a whole line of products they 'need' to emulate a feminine ideal" (2011, 347). In this instance, the archetypal magical girl, characterized by her naïve optimism, happy-go-lucky spirit, and impeccable fashion sense, has become a paragon of youthful femininity. This is due in part to carefully orchestrated marketing campaigns targeted at Japanese girls between the ages of 4 and 9 (Saito 2014, 144). This is somewhat concerning, as research by Deborah Roedder John has suggested that children are often incapable of distinguishing between advertisement and programming before age five, and unaware that advertisements are often misleading until around the age of eight (Hill 2011, 356). If *mahō shōjo* anime is to be understood as a form of advertisement, as Saito suggests, it must be recognized as one that profits off an audience unable to fully comprehend its nature.

In part because of the rampant commercialization of the genre, whether or not magical girls represent a true form of female empowerment has been a matter of significant scholarly

contention. While some proponents of *mahō shōjo* media such as Susan Napier have argued that anime series such as *Sailor Moon* "show images of powerful young women… that anticipate genuine, although small, changes in women's empowerment…and certainly suggest alternatives to the notion of Japanese women as passive and domesticated," other critical voices including Anne Allison have described the archetypal magical girl as "a self-indulgent pursuer of fantasies and dreams through the consumption of merchandise" which allows for a transformation that is "more a 'makeover' than a 'power-up'" (Saito 2014, 145). Certainly, there is a compelling case to be made on both sides of the argument. While magical heroines such as Sakura Kinomoto of *Cardcaptor Sakura* and Usagi Tsukino of *Sailor Moon* are unquestionably active and powerful female protagonists, it should not be accepted uncritically that the powers of those protagonists are received from mascot characters and material objects that are inevitably intended for mass production and sale to an audience of children.

Similar controversies have arisen surrounding the sexualization of *mahō shōjo* protagonists, who are almost universally underage girls. This debate has been particularly prominent among fans and critics of *Sailor Moon*, whose main protagonists are a team of several underage women dressed in unrealistically short skirts, with a significant visual emphasis placed on their long legs and exposed skin (see figure 2). Kathryn Hemman attempts to fairly address both sides of the contentious issue. She quotes one critic expressing the opinion that the archetypal *bishōjo* ("beautiful young woman") protagonists of the series represent a concession to patriarchal ideas of femininity, in that they "tend to strip down in the course of empowerment, becoming more, rather than less, identified by their flesh" (2014, 57). She further notes that the *seifuku* school uniforms of the Sailor Scouts "have indeed been transmogrified into fetish fuel for

male fans, who have portrayed the Sailor Scouts in every sexual situation imaginable in *dōjinshi* fan comics and online image boards such as Futaba Channel" (58). On the other hand, female fans of *Sailor Moon* have praised the series for its characterization, which is initially shallow but deepens as the series progresses. The series also garnered a certain amount of positive attention in the United States for its inclusion of an overt lesbian relationship (between two principal, heroic characters, no less) at a time when depictions of homosexuality in Western media were rare, and such depictions in Western *children's* media were all but nonexistent.

Figure 2: Naoko Takeuchi, "The Sailor Scouts," *Sailor Moon,* 1991-1997

Ultimately though, whether a given critic believes 1990s *mahō shōjo* media to be empowering or objectifying of women and girls, one must acknowledge that it presents to its audience a very specific notion of idealized youthful femininity. While transformation sequences in *mahō shōjo* media prior to the success of *Sailor Moon* often involved physical maturation from girlhood to adulthood (allowing the audience to equate the magical power of the

protagonist with physical maturity), this is almost never the case in more recent series. Rather, a transformation entails "adding frills or accentuating a hairstyle" but "does not go beyond a cosmetic makeover" (Saito 2014, 157). In these newer series, the visual representation of power is no longer maturity, but performative femininity and physical beauty. Among the most succinct descriptions of what exactly a "magical girl" is is offered in a fictitious "Help Wanted" advertisement in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Jokers*, which reads in part: "[Magical girls are] mysterious and adorable girls who solve problems ranging from city disputes to dangers from space. These girls were originally normal humans (though there are exceptions), but by chanting a secret incantation and posing, they can become heroes of justice, everyone's idol, the strongest heroine, and transform into Magical Girls" (Endō 2019, 1). Even in a genre defined by its ostensibly powerful female leads, this passage suggests that it is not enough that the magical girl be a hero. She must also embrace performative femininity in pursuit of universal adoration.

Saito argues that *mahō shōjo* media as it existed from the 1960s to the 2000s has played a prominent role in the shaping of Japanese female gender identity through the proliferation of a very particular feminine ideal centered around aesthetic appeal, love, friendship, and innocence. This critical interpretation of the genre is a novel one, as explained by Jack Anderson in *Genre Theory in Information Studies*, who writes: "Seeing documents as materializing social actions and social organization was not mainstream in social sciences and the humanities 40 years ago" (2015, 3). In light of this, a robust genre-based criticism of *mahō shōjo* must center on the idea that the familiar and recognizable forms in a text meaningfully impact the way that it is received by the audience. This approach is both intertextual and discursive, putting forth the idea that "genre" is defined not only by form, but by context as well. Under that critical framework,

the *mahō shōjo* series of the twentieth century seem to respond to a very specific social context, one in which gender roles were upheld as relatively immutable and Japanese society was engulfed in an unprecedented surge of commercialism and media saturation.

It is in the wake of these overarching narrative archetypes, characterizations, and industry trends that Gen Urobuchi's *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* took Japan and the rest of the world by storm in 2011. Despite going on to win the prestigious grand prize for animation at the 15th Japan Media Arts Festival (Butler 2019), the series begins about as conventionally as one could imagine, with nothing in its promotional art, opening theme, or first two and a half episodes suggesting it to be anything more than a slightly higher budget rendition of the familiar *mahō shōjo* grand narrative. The series' first few episodes follow fourteen-year-old protagonist Madoka Kaname (a perfectly ordinary, if not unusually naïve girl) as she embarks on lighthearted escapades with her friends, until they are eventually exposed to the world of magic through a chance encounter with a magical feline alien named Kyuubey. She finds a loving mentor, observes battles against surrealist monstrosities known as "witches" (see figure 3), and plans out what wish she might have fulfilled by Kyuubey in exchange for joining the struggle as a magical girl. This opening sequence, as noted by Butler, is all but a carbon copy of earlier magical girl narratives including *Sailor Moon* and *Lyrical Girl Nanoha* (2011).
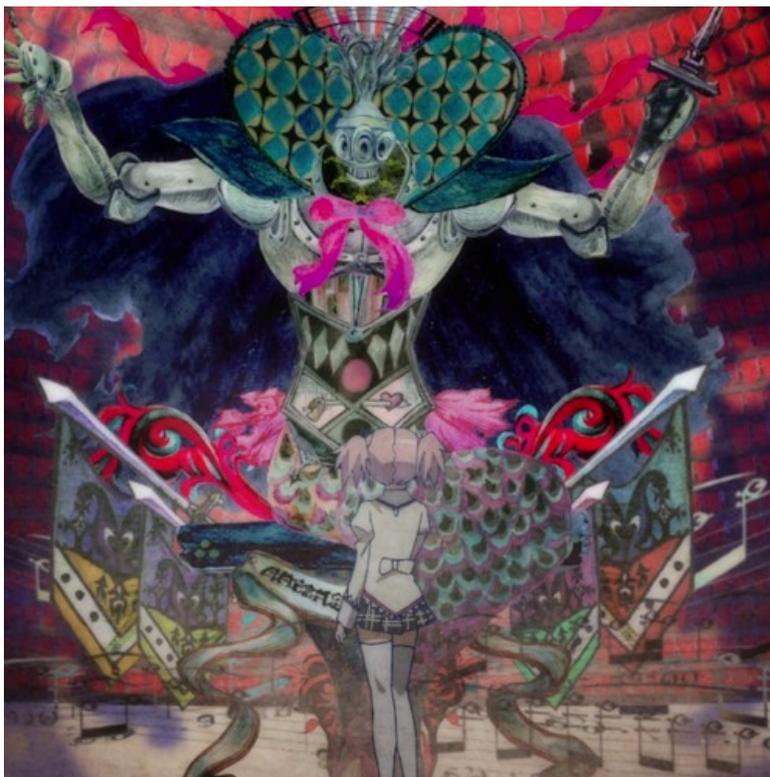
Figure 3: Magia Quartet (Akiyuki Shinbo, Atsuhiro Iwakami, Gen Urobuchi, and Aoki Ume) "Madoka Kaname confronts Oktavia von Seckendorff" *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* ep. 9*, 2011

If *Madoka Magica* continued along these lines, the series would likely be little more than a footnote in the history of Japanese television animation, and the *mahō shōjo* genre as it exists today may never have come to be. At the end of the series' third episode, however, Madoka's charismatic mentor is unceremoniously killed in battle with a witch. Her head is bitten off and her magical hair pin is crushed between the witch's gnashing teeth, forcing the audience to be "alerted unambiguously to *PMMM*'s departure from the conventional parameters of mahou shoujo[2] anime" (Butler 2011). This unanticipated death sets off a series of events by which the characters learn that the wishes and magical powers offered by Kyuubey are a thinly veiled Faustian bargain: As recompense for their wishes, the girls' souls are extracted and imprisoned in magical gemstones. These gems will gradually grow darker and murkier as their owners

_____

[2] This is another common romanization of "魔法 少女". I have previously used the Hepburn romanization, the most commonly used Japanese romanization in the English-speaking world.

succumb to inevitable despair, and when they reach their breaking point, the magical girls will "hatch" from them as fully formed witches. Kyuubey harnesses this nebulously defined emotional energy released by this process and uses it to grant *more* wishes (thus perpetuating the cycle of misery), all in the name of combatting the eventual heat death of the universe

Jean-François Lyotard famously described postmodernism as an incredulity towards what he describes as "grand narratives," and *Puella Magi Madoka Magica'*s apparent incredulity to the archetypal *mahō shōjo* narrative is perhaps its most defining feature (Buchanan 2019, 359). In instances where the series *does* seem to adhere to the grand narrative of *mahō shōjo,* it does so only with the intention of exposing the hollowness implicit in that narrative. Much of the fundamental framework of older *mahō shōjo* series relies unsophisticated black-and-white assumptions: That youth is inherently innocent, that villains are always identifiable as such, and that good will always triumph over evil. These beliefs that are taken for granted in conventional *mahō shōjo* are rejected in *Madoka Magica* as its central characters struggle and even fail when confronted with enemies who used to be girls just like them. The series is successful in its intended subversion because it is a pastiche of more conventional *mahō shōjo* media, thus encouraging its audience to approach its plot with the lighthearted style of those series in mind. Even aside from the dramatic tonal shift that begins with the death of Madoka's mentor and is reinforced by the ultimate betrayal of the series' main cast by their archetypal mascot, a number of recognizable forms throughout the series are employed to produce unexpected results. In particular, the contractual wish offered by Kyuubey serves as a narrative device by which a character's assumed archetype can be established and subsequently cast aside.

Aside from protagonist Madoka Kaname, the character arcs of all of the series' magical girls are defined by the unintended consequences brought about by their wishes, almost all of which express different iterations of traditionally feminine selflessness. The romantically driven Sayaka Miki, who uses her wish to heal the injuries of a boy she loves, ends up rejected by him, and the despair resulting from that event leads to her own transformation into a witch. Kyoko Sakura, who uses her wish to improve the lives of her family, inadvertently prompts her father to commit a murder-suicide resulting in the deaths of his wife, youngest daughter, and himself. Most significantly, the wish of deuteragonist Homura Akemi to redo her meeting with Madoka and eventually save her from a tragic fate results in a gradually *worse* destiny for the latter with each of the former's innumerable attempts. It is also worth noting that though friendship and love are virtues that define not only these wishes, but the *mahō shōjo* genre more broadly as well, there is never a time when the series' five core heroines appear together. Urobuchi notes that this was intended to undermine the sense of uniformity and group belonging that defined *Sailor Moon*, stating in an interview that "Nobody in *Madoka* is linked to anybody. Just when Mami thought she was about to be freed from loneliness, she died; Before Sayaka noticed Kyoko's [romantic] feelings, she turned into a witch. In that sense, a very important theme in *Madoka* may be everything missed along the cross-paths" (Uno 2011).

Puella Magi Madoka Magica also exploits the assumptions implicit in the *mahō shōjo* genre to comment on the decades-old debate surrounding magical girls as a form of female empowerment. While feminist critics in Japan and the United States have commented on the fetishizing and arguably pedophilic quality *Sailor Moon*, for instance, the in-text presentation of magical girlhood in modernist *mahō shōjo* media is unambiguously positive. Heroines of the

genre from Sakura Kinomoto of *Cardcaptor Sakura* fame to Usagi Tsukino of *Sailor Moon*
delight in their newfound power, as well as the aesthetic appeal of their magically-enhanced
selves. Never once do these protagonists doubt whether or not their magic is a good thing, but
rather embrace their special lot in life with enthusiasm and joy. The opening verse of *Sailor
Moon*'s English theme song offers a succinct look at the uncritically accepted "girl power" of the
series, reading in part "Fighting evil by moonlight / Winning love by daylight / Never running
from a real fight / She is the one named Sailor Moon!"

Conversely, magical girlhood as it is presented in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is
innately exploitative. While the promise of valiantly "fighting evil by moonlight" is used to
entice unsuspecting girls to make a contract with Kyuubey, the creature's only real goal is to
exploit Madoka and her comrades for his own personal gain. It should not be overlooked that
Kyuubey, though ostensibly genderless, is the only character of significance to be referred to by
he/him pronouns, suggesting that magical girlhood in *Madoka Magica* amounts to little more
than victimization at the hands of a male-aligned being. In this narrative context, coupled with
the critical debate surrounding the fan-driven sexualization of underaged characters in *Sailor
Moon*, Kyuubey's targeting of girls on the cusp of puberty should likely be read as a commentary
on the so-called "Lolita complex," a term frequently used in discussions of anime and manga to
euphemistically refer to pedophilic attraction. This is especially true when one considers the
dichotomy established in the series between "magical girl" and "witch" which Kyuubey himself
describes in-text as an analogue to human puberty. In a conversation with Madoka directly prior
to the climx of the series, he explains that "On this planet you call females who have yet to
become adults, girls. It makes sense then that since you'll eventually become witches, you should

be called Magical Girls" (Urobuchi 2011). In this manner, *Madoka Magica* makes literal the theoretical conflict between the youthful, innocent *shōjo* and the sexually mature "monstrous feminine" that Kathrynn Hemmann has identified as a subtle but recurring component of the *mahō shōjo* genre (2014, 57).

In short, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* employs tropes, archetypes, and plot devices expected of the *mahō shōjo* genre to engage in what Sara Cleto and Erin Kathleen Bahl refer to as "New Media Fairy-Telling": an "ongoing tradition of generating new versions of old tales and inventing entirely new tales out of bits and pieces of existing ones" (2016). The series' deconstructive quality is impactful because the audience is familiar with the narrative framework of previous *mahō shōjo* series, and would be significantly deprived of meaning were that prior knowledge absent. Urobuchi was well aware of this in his writing of the series, and commented that waiting to see the audience reaction to his attempted genre subversion following the airing of a particularly controversial episode was "like waiting for what the doctor would tell me about my diagnosis" (Young 2012). Even so, while *Madoka Magica* represents an important milestone in the postmodernization of *mahō shōjo*, it should not be viewed as a *completion* of that trend. Despite the novel "fairy telling" employed throughout its twelve-episode run, the series ultimately remains tethered by its genre's "grand narrative" in terms of not only plot and theme, but out-of-universe commercialization as well.

From a purely textual standpoint, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* may work to subvert expectations of the *mahō shōjo* genre, but does nothing to dissuade the cultural preconceptions about femininity and girlhood that are woven into its fabric. Kyuubey's bargain, for instance, relies on the girls he contacts being too naïve to speculate about his true intentions, and nowhere

in the series is that assumption about girlish naïveté ever called into question. Indeed, Kyuubey defends himself as being entirely honest in his dealings with the magical girls, who only remain unaware of their eventual fate because, in his words, they "never asked." He also explains that adolescent human girls in particular are targeted for his contract because they are the most emotionally volatile beings he had ever encountered, making the despair released by their eventual transformation into witches more potent (and thus, productive for his own goals) than it otherwise would be. In this scene, the nigh-omniscient, male-aligned Kyuubey is presented as a perfectly logical, calculating being, in stark contrast with his emotionally-driven victims. This seems to support the idea present in both Japanese and Western culture that women, and particularly *young* women, are all too often controlled by their innate emotional instability.

Additionally, series implies that Madoka, alone of all the magical girls Kyuubey has made contracts with throughout history, is capable of stopping the cycle of misery that he had wrought. This is not because of her strength, intelligence, or determination, but because she possess the traditionally feminine virtue of selflessness in unrivaled abundance. As early as 1952, selflessness was upheld in writing as the noblest trait a Japanese woman could possess, as reflected in Ayako Tomii's "The Japanese Woman's Emancipation" which reads in part: "The woman of Japan traditionally has a virtue that is mourned as rare in other lands: That of selflessness. From selflessness has stemmed a patience, a devotion to date and a capacity for love that are too precious to shear" (9). Madoka Kaname sacrifices her life and her very existence to rewrite the laws of the universe, creating a new world where her friends can no longer be victimized by Kyuubey's schemes. This event is portrayed as uplifting, if not somewhat bittersweet, and provides a touching end to the emotionally intense series. Even so, one has to

wonder what implications this scene has in the minds of critical viewers. What message does it send to *Madoka Magica's* mostly female audience that women can overcome anything, but only by embracing the foremost of traditionally feminine virtues? Regardless of the series' deconstructive qualities, women in the universe of *Madoka Magica* remain narrowly confined not by the established rules of *mahō shōjo*, but by society's expectations of what a heroic female is allowed to be.

Even removed from the confines of its text, *Madoka Magica* seems to follow an eerily similar pattern to its predecessors in *Sailor Moon* and *Cardcaptor Sakura* as far as merchandizing is concerned. Series producer Itsuhiro Iwakami has said in an interview on the series that "it's not the kind of show where we design the toys first and take it to Toys'R'Us to have it sold, but within the confines of *otaku* culture, Madoka merchandise has been very successful" (Young 2012). If the years since the interview have been any indication, "very successful" may have been something of an understatement. Just as Sailor Moon and her lovable mascot have been printed on every piece of apparel and fan memorabilia under the sun, so too have Madoka and Kyuubey. This merchandise ranges from innocuous keychains, tee shirts, and plush Kyuubeys to more problematic items including Madoka Kaname *dakimakura*[3], which harken back to the discussions of fetishization and objectification that swirl around the *Sailor Moon* franchise to this day. *The Nikkei* estimated in one article that the *Madoka Magica* franchise yielded a revenue of around 380 million USD in the two years following its release (Nelkin 2013), and even today, this trend shows no signs of stopping. In 2017, app developer f4samurai released a spinoff smartphone RPG titled *Magia Record*, which received an anime adaptation in

---

[3] Body pillows printed with images of female characters from manga and anime, popular among a certain subset of male fans.

January of 2020. Industry data aggregator Panime reported that in 2019 Q1, the *Magia Record* app yielded around 20 million USD in revenue in Japan alone. While *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* may have *begun* as a critical reinterpretation of the *mahō shōjo* genre, its success has elevated it to such a status where it becomes difficult to call it truly subversive. Essentially, the franchise has not so much questioned as redefined the "grand narrative" of *mahō shōjo*, though it has served the crucial role of making magical girls appealing to an older, more diverse audience, thus allowing for further "fairy-telling" with more mature themes.

For a truly postmodern iteration of *mahō shōjo,* one might look to the numerous series that have cropped up in the wake of *Madoka Magica*'s critical and commercial success. Rather than reexamining the archetypal narrative of the genre, these tend to employ that narrative to critique different aspects of contemporary Japanese society. Examples of this post-*Madoka* wave include *Magical Girl Raising Project*, which uses a corporatized reimagining of magical girls to raise questions of government mismanagement and bureaucratic waste; and *Magical Girl Spec-Ops Asuka*, which employs a militarized portrayal of magical girls to discuss questions of war, PTSD, and the effects of trauma on young children. The most controversial of these, which uses the genre to critique the shallow characterization of female heroes, is Kentaro Sato's *Magical Girl Site*, first published in 2012 and adapted into a twelve episode anime series in 2018. This series fully embraces postmodernity by employing a "multiplicity of 'little narratives'" surrounding each of its characters to dissect not only the *mahō shōjo* "grand narrative," but the cultural preconceptions that gave rise to it to begin with (Buchanan 2018, 315).

Magical Girl Site follows an overall narrative arc that is recognizable to fans of the *mahō shōjo* genre, but inverts several key concepts in a manner that is more overt and grotesque than

anything seen in *Madoka Magica.* Rather than waiting three episodes for a dramatic tonal shift, *Site* opens with a harrowing inner monologue by its protagonist, Aya Asagiri: "Every day, all I think about is dying" (Sato 2017, 6). This is followed by a stomach churning first volume, over the course of which Asagiri is beaten by her sadistic brother, bullied by a gang of girls from her school, nearly raped in a sick practical joke, and loses a stray cat she cares for to an orchestrated accident with a train. In stark contrast with the upbeat tone of *Sailor Moon* and similar series, *everyone* in Asagiri's life is presented as irredeemably horrible, with the very best adults in the series being the mother and schoolteacher who are aware of her tortured existence, but do nothing to intervene. In this universe, magical girls are "misfortunate souls" selected by a mysterious "magical girl site" as recompense for the horrors they have experienced over the course of their young lives. This seems to happen when a girl develops the desire to kill either herself or someone else, and leads to a bargain being struck not unlike Kyuubey's in *Madoka Magica*. Magical girls are given "wands" that take the form of toy guns, smartphones, jewelry, or any number of other small objects, with each one producing a specific magical effect. These wands are powered by the magical girl's life force, and they are encouraged by the mysterious "site managers" (see figure 4) to use them until they die. Unlike the magical girls of *Madoka Magica,* those of *Site* are entirely aware of this feature of their existence. The series' conflict comes from the imminent threat of a coming "tempest" promised by the site, which will see humanity destroyed and the universe remade according to the will of the "antediluvian king" that oversees the site managers from the shadows. The unlikely team of magical girl allies come together to stop the tempest, and end up overcoming their original misfortunes in the process.

Figure 4: Kentaro Sato, "Site Manager Nana," *Magical Girl Site* episode 1, 2018.

Feminist critics might argue, and with a certain amount of validity, that Kentaro Sato seems to delight in victimizing his female protagonists. Indeed, the depiction of Asagiri's suffering at the hands of her brother and bullies is uncomfortable to read, particularly given the voyeuristic perspective the audience takes as the events unfold. Unlike, *Madoka Magica*, which opens on a positive note and grows gradually darker as it unfolds, *Site*'s opening salvo of misery is the series' emotional low. The initial "misfortune" that serves as a precondition for becoming a magical girl is presented as something for *Site*'s character's to grow beyond, rather than as an inevitable consequence of their girlish naïveté. While Asagiri begins the series in a suicidal haze, by its conclusion she is surrounded by new friends, unlikely allies, a love interest, and a family beginning taking the first steps towards healing. In this sense, *Magical Girl Site* turns the narrative arc presented by *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* on its head, suggesting in the process that even the worst circumstances can be overcome through determination, endurance, and force of will.

In addition to this unexpectedly uplifting narrative arc, Kentaro Sato presents his audience with a view of girlhood that is somewhat more expansive than that offered by *Madoka Magica, Sailor Moon*, or other predecessors within the *mahō shōjo* genre. Each of *Site'*s heroines is initially presented as a sort of two-dimensional stock character (following an archetype that would be instantly recognizable to a viewer well versed in the tropes of manga and anime), but rejects this shallow characterization over the course of her personal narrative. Deuteragonist Tsuyuno Yatsumura, for instance, appears as the quintessence of *bishōjo*, a beautiful if not slightly aloof young woman who appears somewhat detached from the world around her (Hemmann 2014, 46). This characterization is undermined by the revelation that her detachment is not due to personal pride or vanity, but instead results from past trauma. Yatsumura also develops into one of the most compassionate members of the core cast, a selfless young woman willing to aid her friends and allies even at great personal cost. Significantly, this growth takes place only after another magical girl inadvertently helps Yatsumura mover beyond the ghosts of her past, further supporting the series' core theme that even the most horrid circumstances can be overcome.

Perhaps the most striking example of Sato's expansive view of female identity is the case of Kiyoharu Suirenji, a relatively minor character in *Magical Girl Site* who nonetheless serves to undermine the most basic assumptions of what it means to be a girl, magical or otherwise. Suirenji is introduced as a comedic *otokonoko* (literally "male daughter") in a scene where she is bullied for posting duck-faced selfies on an instagram-like social media platform. As noted by Fujimoto Yukari, the concept of "Men who appear as women" is not altogether rare in Japanese manga and anime, and likely has its roots in *kabuki* theater of the Edo period. Even so, these

portrayals are typically either comedic (in media marketed towards men) or hyper-sexualized (in media marketed towards women) (2004, 80-82). Given the ubiquity of crossdressing male characters in *seinen* media and the context in which Suirenji is presented, this is clearly the archetype she is intended to initially represent. However, this comedic *otokonoko* characterization is unequivocally rejected when Suirenji repeatedly asserts that she *is* a girl, and becomes almost violently irritated when another magical girl makes callous jokes about her identity (Sato 2018, 11). There is a certain level of moral ambiguity presented by the this characterization as well, given that Suirenji is recognized as female by those responsible for the creation of magical girls: What does it say that the site administrators, the villains of *Magical Girl Site*, are *more* affirming of Kiyoharu Suirenji's gender identity than not only her bullies, but many of her allies as well? Regardless, this character clearly pushes back against the implicit assumptions of the *mahō shōjo* genre that have been in place at since its inception, declaring in no uncertain terms that one need not even be biologically female to become a heroic magical girl.

Regardless of ones' personal feelings towards the darker turn taken by recent *mahō shōjo* franchises such as *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* and *Magical Girl Site*, these series provide ample evidence that authors within the genre have embraced a more expansive view of narrative and characterization in recent years. However, it is important to bear in mind that these series are dependent on cultural touchstones such as *Sailor Moon* and *Cardcaptor Sakura* to be fully understood. Just as Cleto and Bahl suggest, postmodern *mahō shōjo* narratives are not entirely new, but represent a form of "fairy telling" in which existing stories are repurposed to convey new information and reach a wider audience. Even in *Magical Girl Site*, which serves as a

complete rejection of the tone and visual style of early *mahō shōjo* media, many familiar tropes

and plot devices can be identified. These familiar elements are then broken down and

reassembled, offering a new perspective not only on the genre, but on what it means to be a girl,

magical or otherwise.

Bibliography

Andersen, Jack. *Genre Theory in Information Studies* First edition. Bingley, England: Emerald, 2015.

Buchanan, Ian. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* 2 ed. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Burdelski, Matthew, and Koji Mitsuhashi. ""She Thinks You're Kawaii": Socializing Affect, Gender, and Relationships in a Japanese Preschool." *Language in Society* 39, no. 1 (2010): 65-93. Accessed July 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20622704.

Butler, Catherine. "Shoujo Versus Seinen? Address and Reception in Puella Magi Madoka Magica (2011)." *Children's literature in education* 50, no. 4 (2018): 400–416.

Cleto, Sara, and Erin Bahl. "Becoming the Labyrinth: Negotiating Magical Space and Identity in Puella Magi Madoka Magica." *Humanities (Basel)* 5, no. 2 (2016): 20–.

Endou, Asari. Magical Girl Raising Project: Jokers. New York, NY: Yen Press, 2019.

Hemmann, Kathryn. "Short Skirts and Superpowers: The Evolution of the Beautiful Fighting Girl." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 47 (2014): 45-72. Accessed July 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26401943.

Levey, Tania, and Catherine B. Silver. "Gender and Value Orientations: What's the Difference!? The Case of Japan and the United States." *Sociological Forum* 21, no. 4 (2006): 659-91. Accessed July 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/4540968.

McLelland, Mark J., and Romit. Dasgupta. *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*. London ;: Routledge, n.d.

Nelkin, Sarah. "Madoka Magica Anime Earns Over 40 Billion Yen in Goods." Anime News Network, July 9, 2013. *http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2013-07-09/madoka-*magica-anime-earns-over-40-billion-yen-in-goods.

Satō, Kentarō. Magical Girl Site. Translated by Wesley Bridges and Janet Houck. 14 vols. Los Angeles, CA: Seven Seas Entertainment, LLC, 2018.

Saito, Kumiko. "Magic, "Shōjo", and Metamorphosis: Magical Girl Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2014): 143-64. Accessed July 22, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/43553398.

Tomii, Ayako. "The Japanese Woman's Emancipation." World Affairs 115, no. 1 (1952): 8-9. Accessed July 30, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20668573.

Uno. "Interview with Gen Urobuchi." BLACK PAST, June 2011.

Young, Jason. "Roundtable Interview with Gen Urobuchi, Atsuhiro Iwakami and Katsushi Ota." The-O Network. T-ONO, April 13, 2012. https://www.t-ono.net/interview/roundtable-interview-with-gen-urobuchi-atsuhiro-iwakami-and-katsushi-ota.html.

Yukari, Fujimoto, Linda Flores, Kazumi Nagaike, and Sharalyn Orbaugh. "Transgender: Female Hermaphrodites and Male Androgynes." U.S.-Japan Women's Journal, no. 27 (2004): 76-117. Accessed July 30, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/42771920.