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ARTICLE



## Mythology *moe*-ified: classical witches, warriors, and monsters in Japanese manga

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### ABSTRACT

Through a gendered close reading, using classical reception studies as a springboard, this article discusses the reception and *moe*-ification of the female witch, warrior, and monster figures from classical mythology in Japanese *seinen* and *shōnen* manga at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It focuses on Flora and Schierke in *Berserk* (1990–); the Gorgon sisters in *One Piece* (1997–) and in *Soul Eater* (2004–2013); and Medusa in *Witchcraft Works* (2010–), all of whom are named and/or fashioned after Circe, the Amazons, the Gorgons, and Arachne. It points out to the intertextuality between these worldwide popular turn-of-the-century Japanese manga and classical mythology narratives. It discusses the *moe*-ification of these classical subversive monstrous female figures, formerly demonised and marginalised by the patriarchal discourse. It analyses how their reception in manga contributes to canonising the monstrous female. It illustrates how that offers the female readers of *seinen* and *shōnen* manga new ways of expressing and interpreting gender that liberate and restructure the female's relationship to power.

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## Introduction

The subversive female figure as an antidote to patriarchy is one of the most persistent and revolutionary simulacra. It has been resurfacing as the female witches, warriors, and monsters from classical mythology reinterpreted in Japanese manga. This article scrutinises the rebirth of classical female figures in worldwide popular *seinen* and *shōnen* manga at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Miura Kentarō's<sup>1</sup> *Berserk* (2003), Oda Eiichirō's *One Piece* (2002), Ōkubo Atsushi's *Soul Eater* (Ōkubo 2009–2015), and Mizunagi Ryū's *Witchcraft Works* (2014). This recent rebirth is akin not only to classical reception but also to Gilles Deleuze's (1994, 69) theory of simulacrum, in that it embraces the negative connotations of these subversive female figures in order to expose and undermine the discourse of the oppressor. Manga proves a convenient medium for reinterpretation of classical subversive female figures, formerly demonised and marginalised by the patriarchal discourse, because manga questions 'naturalised preconceptions' such as subversiveness (Berndt 2015, 28). The reception and *moe*-ification of the classical subversive female figures in the

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contemporary *fin-de-siècle seinen* and *shōnen* manga contribute to the canonisation of the monstrous female. Their classical reception presents these mythical female figures to a wider readership. It enables brand new readings and interpretations. More importantly, it provides the female readers of these manga new ways of expressing and interpreting gender so as to restructure the female's relationship to power.

Among the reasons why this article scrutinises particularly *Berserk*, *One Piece*, *Soul Eater*, and *Witchcraft Works* are their worldwide popularity, their attracting a substantial amount of female readers, their representation of female characters, and the male–female ratio of their characters. It should be noted that although these manga were originally aimed at a Japanese readership, they are being translated into other languages and read worldwide. In other words, their worldwide popularity affirms that non-Japanese readers are also familiar with these manga. Speaking of targeted readership, *seinen* (*Berserk* and *Witchcraft Works*) and *shōnen* manga (*One Piece* and *Soul Eater*) are intended for young adult males and male teenagers, respectively. *Seinen* and *shōnen* manga revolve around the action-packed adventures of a male protagonist. *Seinen* manga tends to include more violence and sex; therefore, it is targeted at young adult males instead of male teenagers. Nonetheless, a 2006 survey disclosed that the turn of the century *shōnen* manga, especially the manga magazine *Shōnen Jump* and the manga series *One Piece*, attracted large numbers of female readers. As a consequence, the female characters in *seinen* and *shōnen* manga started to gain importance and have more significant roles (Drummond-Mathews 2010, 74). Giancarla Unser-Schutz, Shiokawa Kanako, and Unno Kayoko note that since the 1970s, the female characters in Japanese *shōjo* and *shōnen* manga have become more adult-looking, spirited, and even aggressive. Pointing out the positive change in the representation of female characters in the recent *fin-de-siècle* manga, the childish female characters who used to be mere “rewards” for male characters’ success in 1995’ are replaced by female comrades and/or enemies in 2005 (as quoted in Unser-Schutz 2015, 137). Fujimoto Yukari asserts that the representation of women in *One Piece* ‘until then had been undreamed of in boys’ manga magazines’ because in *One Piece* ‘the female characters do not serve as objects of romantic interest but act naturally as equals’ (2013, 173, 177). Correspondingly, like the mythological characters they draw on, Flora and Schierke in *Berserk*; the Gorgon sisters Boa Hancock, Boa Sandersonia, and Boa Marigold in *One Piece*; Gorgon Arachne and Gorgon Medusa in *Soul Eater*; and Medusa in *Witchcraft Works* disrupt the patriarchal order and traditional conventions. They wield power and weapons alongside, instead of, or against male characters. They are portrayed as indispensable companions (Flora, Schierke, and Boa Hancock eventually) or worthy opponents (Boa Hancock initially, Gorgon Arachne and Gorgon Medusa, and Medusa) to the male protagonists of these *seinen* and *shōnen* manga. Lastly, the male–female character ratio is balanced in *One Piece*, *Berserk*, and *Soul Eater*, while the female characters significantly outnumber the male characters in *Witchcraft Works*.

### ***Moe, moe-element, kyara-moe, and moe-ification in Japanese manga***

On the part of both the creators and consumers of Japanese pop culture, there is an encoding-decoding process based upon which Azuma Hiroki calls the database. To explain in a rather simplistic and reductionist manner, it is a database of stock characters with certain features inspiring *moe* in manga, anime, video games, and

related media. Having emerged in the late 1980s, *moe* originally referred ‘to the fictional desire for characters of comics, anime, and games or for pop idols’ (Azuma 2009, 47–48). For the producers, the success of a work is determined ‘by its ability to evoke the *moe* desire through character design and illustrations’ in order to sell merchandise and related goods (48). This paved the path for the emergence of *moe*-element databases. Azuma argues that, consequently, ‘many of the otaku characters created in recent years are connected to many characters across individual works, rather than emerging from a single author or a work’. Reminiscent of receptions, these connections are called ‘quotations’, ‘influences’, and ‘parodies’ (49).

Granted, the *moe*-ification and database-ification of mythological characters featured in Japanese manga might drive from and serve the aesthetic response of the readers. On the one hand, Gō Itō in his book *Tezuka is Dead* (*Tezuka izu deddo*, 2005) heralds the death of the author and story in favour of the appropriation of cute characters copied from previous texts (as quoted in Berndt 2008, 302). On the other hand, Azuma owns that just because otaku consumption is focused on characters and *kyara-moe* (character cuteness), it does not mean that narratives or the interest in them entirely disappeared (2009, 75). It might be argued that the database displays the intertextuality in narratives which are also, obviously, influenced by Western literature, culture, and mythology. As far as Azuma is concerned, the authors are unaware of the previous works when they create characters using *moe*-elements which are registered to the database (51–52). Respectively, he claims that once the *moe*-ified mythological characters make it to the database, the original myths and manga are supposed to fade away, leaving behind only the *moe*-elements in the database to be used again in other works. However, Azuma’s database theory seems to disregard the fact that some readers can still find intertextuality between these *moe*-ified characters in manga and their mythological origins.

The naming and fashioning of female characters in *One Piece*, *Berserk*, *Soul Eater*, and *Witchcraft Works* after goddesses, monsters, and witches from classical mythology include ‘disassembling and reassembling the characters in new and creative ways’ (Lamarre 2009, 258). This might seem, on a surface level, similar to Jean Baudrillard’s ‘*process of simulation*’ (1998, 126) and otaku’s construction of databases of their favourite characters. Drawing on Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, Azuma expresses that ‘[w]ithout reference to the real world, the original is produced as a simulacrum of preceding works from the start, and in turn the simulacrum of that simulacrum is propagated by fan activities and consumed voraciously’ (2009, 26). On that account, it might be argued that these four manga adapt and appropriate these female figures from the preceding manga rather than the classical myths themselves. Also, manga is a bundle of practices which include artists, editors, publishers, and even readers in the decision-making and creation processes (See Berndt 2015, 21). Hence, unlike literary textual analysis, it is not quite possible to refer to ‘author’s intention’ in manga studies. Nevertheless, Miura admits that he intended *Berserk* to display the Western influence on his work (Beaty and Weiner 2013, 35). The remaining three manga, too, illustrate the familiarity of Oda, Ōkubo, and Mizunagi with these classical myths. As discussed below, some of these female figures, such as the younger Boa sisters, are influenced by Japanese myths as well. Notwithstanding, one common characteristic of Flora and Schierke in *Berserk*; the Gorgon sisters Boa Hancock, Boa Sandersonia, and Boa Marigold in *One Piece*; Gorgon Arachne and Gorgon Medusa in

*Soul Eater*; and Medusa in *Witchcraft Works* is that they are all receptions of subversive classical female figures with witch-like attributes. These characters confirm that, as John W. Treat claims, it is impossible to consider “Japanese” popular culture without involving much of the rest of the world’ (as quoted in MacWilliams 2008, 16–17). While such cultural references might remain superficial since these characters cannot easily be identified as Japanese or ancient Greek, they still bring with themselves their historical connotations. Regardless of the author’s intention or the problem of authority, the readers can trace the intertextuality between classical myths and Japanese manga (See Ingulsrud and Allen 2009, 5).

### **Berserk: from Circe to Schierke to chibi**

Miura Kentarō’s *Berserk* (2003) is an ongoing dark epic fantasy *seinen* manga series. It tells the revenge quest of Guts, a mercenary warrior, in what seems to be medieval Europe during the peak of witch hunts. Until the introduction of the witch Flora and her apprentice Schierke, the series portrays witches as Satan worshippers. This portrayal relies heavily on the Inquisition’s descriptions of witches and Witches’ Sabbath, including the half-goat and half-man image of the Devil, orgies, and human sacrifices. Reflecting the favourable change in the representation of witches in the series, Farnese, the former commander of the Holy See’s Holy Iron Chain Knights, and her half-brother Serpico, a former Holy Iron Chain Knight, join Guts’s travelling company. Farnese apologises to Flora for the Inquisition’s persecutions of the alleged heretics. She, eventually, becomes an apprentice witch to Schierke. As a matter of fact, Farnese’s faith in the Holy See begins to falter after she sees the Inquisition’s torture chamber. The Inquisitor reminds her that the torture chamber is a part of the Vatican she has sworn to protect. Serpico explains that along with the noblemen, the Vatican and the churches monopolise power and wealth; if anyone complains about this usurpation, the Vatican accuses them of being heretics, Satanists, and/or witches. In other words, Miura condemns the Inquisition’s scapegoating and witch hunts through the two former members of the Holy See.

As for Flora and Schierke’s introductions, Schierke is seen briefly for the first time at the end of volume 22. She is introduced properly in the second chapter of volume 24 titled ‘The Witch’ (*majo*). Flora, likewise, is introduced for the first time in the following chapters of the same volume. It is noteworthy that Miura explains the cosmology, philosophy, and logic of *Berserk* through the characters of Flora and Schierke. He chooses to wait until volume 24, in which he introduces the two witches. This strengthens the portrayal of these two witch characters as wise and beneficent protectors. Unlike the Satanic worshippers in the previous volumes, Flora has devoted herself to arcane studies at the fount of her great tree’s immense spiritual power. She maintains the balance between the Physical World and the Astral World. Furthermore, she prepares magic arms and coats of protection, ointments to perceive ethereal bodies, talismans to weaken the effects of the brand of sacrifice for Guts and his travelling company. They heal fast in Flora’s tree house thanks to the medicinal baths. Most importantly, Flora puts a protection spell on the Berserker armour and has Schierke deliver it to Guts. Even after being burned to death by the Apostles sent by Femto, the arch nemesis of Guts, she continues to protect Schierke and Guts’s travelling company.

She appears as a wall of fire between them and the Apostles. Flora's death reminds of the Inquisition's burning the alleged witches at the stake. Femto has Flora killed because he fears that one witch who is so old that she has actually been expecting her imminent death might pose a threat to his sovereignty. Like the Vatican, he wants to be the sole and unchallenged controller of the kingdom's wealth and power.

Flora and Schierke, whose name sounds like Circe, are in many ways receptions of the classical witch Circe. Indeed, Homer's Circe is considered to be 'the first extant portrait of a witch in Greek literature' and serves as 'a template for all later witches' (Ogden 2002, 98; Rabinowitz 1998, 73, 100). The herb-clad hills and courts of Circe's home is sheltered in the midst of a thick wood on an island and surrounded by mountain wolves and lions that are bewitched by Circe's evil drugs. For Roman writers, the abode of witches is always 'peripheral to what they saw as the centre' (Purkiss 2003, 261). Accordingly, in *Berserk* the Holy See's religion has driven herbalist healers, such as Flora, to the outskirts of towns during the witch hunts. Pointing out to the Otherness of the witch, Flora's tree house is in the midst of a deep forest within the borders of the Interstice between the Physical World and the Astral World. Similar to that of Circe's house, which is protected by wild beasts, Flora's house is surrounded and protected by barriers and golems. Alongside the barriers and golems, the pentagrams, spirals, triangles, and moon symbols decorating her house are also associated with witchcraft.

After the death of Flora, Schierke joins Guts's travelling company. Being a young girl with magical abilities, whose powers are constantly growing, Schierke resembles *mahō shōjo* (magical girl). Instead of the cute animal familiar of *mahō shōjo*, albeit reminiscent of the witch's familiar, Schierke is accompanied by Ivalera, a female elf. Ivalera oversees her training and even saves her life at one point. The magical girls are subversive female figures, too, who disrupt the traditional gender roles. Their quests present female readers a means to escape from 'the constraints of expectations and [to] become the traditionally male heroes and fighters' (Brenner 2007, 178). In like manner, when Schierke meets Guts's companions for the first time and saves them from the trolls, her sentences are significantly short and imperative. Guts calls Schierke boss and Lady Witch. Both express his confirmation of her authority. He pays heed to her advice. Kotani Mari, a Japanese critic, mentions 'a certain aggressiveness' in the *shōjo*, as well. This aggressiveness was 'formed within the system', but 'ended up paradoxically possessing an aesthetic and sexual magic that shook the system' (2007, 57). Just as the female characters in the *fin-de-siècle seinen* and *shōnen* manga adapt the simulacra of the subversive female figure to undermine the patriarchal discourse, Schierke's spirited and aggressive nature allows her, as a teenager, to give orders to the adult male protagonist. Unlike the rest of the female characters discussed in this article, Schierke is not sexualised. She is not defined primarily in relation to her sexuality or through passivity (see Creed 2007, chap. 11, par. 1). She is short and cute. Whenever she is 'in a heightened emotional state', she is drawn in *chibi* style, even shorter and cuter, in an 'exaggerated and simplified form', also known as 'superdeformed', 'hypercartoony' (Brenner 2007, 29; Cohn 2010, 192, 189). This *moe*-ification absolves Schierke from wearing the *femme fatale* face of the monstrous-feminine (see Creed 2007, Introduction). However, it does not infantilise her or render her powers as less threatening or easily containable. On the contrary, although Schierke is the mildest and humblest among these female manga characters, her righteous aggressiveness can

be fatally destructive. For instance, she can flood an entire village whilst trying to actually help them because of her general animosity against humans who persecute arcane spirits and those who study arcane arts.

Schierke's overflowing emotions display the duality and fluidity inherent in the image of the witch. Historically and mythologically, water and the properties of fluids have been associated with the feminine (Cixous 1976, 889; Irigaray 1985, 111; Moi 2002, 115–16). Schierke's enchantments, drawn in the shape of vertical spirals, akin to the curling tops of her witch's hat and wand, symbolise water and are thus indicative of the fluidity of the witch's body and language. Besides, Schierke's transformations include assuming the physical form of the elements and spirits she invokes during her spells. Hélène Cixous claims that 'women take after birds' and '[f]lying is woman's gesture' because for centuries women have 'been able to possess anything only by flying'; they have 'lived in flight' (1976, 887). Respectively, just as Circe can 'send her soul flying through the air' (Ogden 2002, 99), so can Flora, Schierke, and Farnese have out-of-body experiences by releasing their ethereal body from the physical confines of the physical world and thereby delving into the astral world. For instance, Schierke can borrow the body of a bird to astral travel when she does not want to use her astral form.

Schierke's magic mostly focuses on guidance and protection. Like Circe instructs Odysseus on how to travel to the Underworld and talk to the prophet Teirisias, Schierke acts as a guide to her companions thanks to her extensive knowledge of the Astral World which is gradually merging with the Physical World. Like Circe of the many drugs/spells, she heals the wounds of Guts and other companions with her herbs and spells. When Guts wears the Berserker armour, she becomes his eyes and ears in her astral form and preserves his will. That is to say, Schierke becomes indispensable for the survival of Guts and his travelling company and thereby one of the major characters in the manga series.

### **One piece: the Gorgons and the Amazons merged into pirates**

*Shōnen* manga adapts and rewrites world history, literature, and mythology. It tends to mix genres, cultures, and periods. Because manga is historically, aesthetically, and culturally ambiguous, the Amazons and the Gorgon sisters can be merged into the all-female Kuja pirates in Oda Eiichirō's ongoing *shōnen* manga series *One Piece* (2002) (See Drummond-Mathews 2010, 75; Ingulsrud and Allen 2009, 10; Berndt 2008, 305). Adrienne Mayor, a historian, expresses that 'Amazons have been interpreted as negative role models for Greek women; as repulsive monsters or "Others" who threatened the Greek masculine ego ... expressing fears of female rebellion against male oppression' (2014, 26). Therefore, Greek heroes are always victorious over Amazons and restore 'the "proper" patriarchal order' (Mayor 2014, 11, 27; Doherty 2003, 137). The Gorgons, likewise, are three sisters with poisonous snakes instead of hair and dreadful looks whose gaze could turn one into stone. In one of the many versions of the Gorgon sister Medusa's story, she is a beautiful woman. Poseidon rapes her in a temple of Athena. As a punishment, Athena turns Medusa into a monster that would turn into stone anyone who looks at her face. Eventually, Perseus kills Medusa by beheading her, uses her head as a weapon, and then presents it to Athena. The goddess appropriates the head of 'the unchaste and monstrously feminine Medusa as her aegis' (Beard 2017; Purkiss 2003, 205).

As regards *One Piece*, Boa Hancock, Boa Sandersonia, and Boa Marigold of the Kuja tribe have been kidnapped as children, sold into slavery, branded, forced to eat devil fruit for entertainment, and developed powers. Reminiscent of Medusa, Boa Hancock can turn to stone anyone looking at her with sexual desire. Like Circe and Medusa, the two younger Boa sisters cross the boundary between the human and the animal, displaying ‘femininity’s power to render categories and identities unstable’ (Purkiss 2003, 260). They can transform into giant snake hybrids with the breasts, arms, hands, and head of a woman. Sandersonia can turn her hair into snakes, reminiscent of the eight-headed snake in Japanese folklore, while Marigold can have snakes of fire instead of hair, reminiscent of Salamander the snake god of fire. To be able to return to Amazon Lily, the three sisters keep their enslavement as a secret. They claim that they have killed a monster called Gorgon which has cursed them with eyes on their backs. Anyone who looks at those eyes will supposedly be petrified. In this regard, Boa sisters’ brands of slavery and the younger sisters’ ability to transform into snake hybrids are bodily disfigurements which, according to Barbara Creed, mark the monstrous-feminine as different and impure in phallogocentric horror narratives (2007, chap.1, par. 9). Correspondingly, Amazons had tattoos whereas the Greeks tattooed only criminals and war captives. Athenian vase painters, too, portrayed ‘tattooed foreign slave women’. Among these tattoos were sunbursts, circles, and rosettes (Mayor 2014, 95, 98), similar to the shape of the hoof of the Celestial Dragons branded on the backs of the Boa sisters.

Additionally, like the Amazons who killed or gave away their male babies (Doherty 2003, 137), the Kuja tribe only give birth to daughters. Besides, men are forbidden on the Kuja Island due to their greed and foolish acts; any man who steps on the island disappears. Resembling Circe’s and Flora’s homes, Amazon Lily, the Isle of Women, is surrounded and protected by a Calm Belt with giant sea snakes alongside giant predators on the island. In the middle of the island is a mountain surrounded by a thick forest. Their village is built inside the mountain. With nine enormous snakes carved out of it, the top of the mountain looks like ovaries. The name of the tribe Kuja means ‘nine snakes’ in Japanese. Akin to the witch’s familiar, Hancock has a giant snake that can swim underwater while each Kuja warrior has a familiar snake wrapped around their upper body which serves them as a staff or weapon when needed. Whereas the snake represents rebirth, the mountain itself is ‘a symbol of the fertility goddess’ (Rabinowitz 1998, 100). Appropriately, the Kuja tribe women find, cure, feed, and sew new clothes for Monkey D. Luffy, the main character of the manga series. Luffy has his 2-year training on how to use haki on Amazon Lily, too. Born and raised as warriors, the Kuja tribe women are strong, brave, and elegant; they change ‘Might is right’ into ‘Might is beautiful’.

The Empress of Amazon Lily, Captain of the Kuja Pirates, Royal Shichibukai, Hebihime, Snake Princess, Boa Hancock is named after John Hancock, an American revolutionary leader who financially supported the colonial cause and served as the president of the Continental Congress. Names in manga can function as symbols, providing emotional clues and indicating ‘a character’s intended role or personality’ (Brenner 2007, 58). John Hancock was the first to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This connection might be hinting at Boa Hancock’s possible role in a future revolution. After all, the World Government is the common enemy of Boa Hancock and the Revolutionary Army, in that the Celestial Dragons, who have enslaved the Boa



sisters, are the World Nobles, the privileged descendants of the founders of the World Government. Despite being one of the Shichibukai, the Seven Warlords of the Sea, and working for the Marines, albeit only to keep the Marines and the World Government away from Amazon Lily, Boa Hancock aids Luffy, a wanted pirate. Indeed, she falls in love with Luffy for his pure heart and selflessness, for having attacked a Celestial Dragon and wreaked havoc to stop a slave auction. She helps Luffy in his attempt to save his ‘brother’ Portgaz D. Ace, who is imprisoned to be executed by the World Government. Like Circe guiding Odysseus to the Underworld, Boa Hancock, using her Shichibukai title, takes Luffy to Impel Down, an underwater prison inspired by Dante’s Hell. In Oris Plaza, where Ace is to be executed, and later on in Sabaody Archipelago, she attacks the Marines to protect Luffy. That Boa Hancock guides and physically fights to protect Luffy instead of being, as a woman, in desperate need of a man to guide and defend her overturns the traditional gender roles.

The name Hancock, being a combination of the homophone of ‘hen’ and the word ‘cock’, further indicates Boa Hancock’s combining the social attributes of the female and the male as the Amazons do. She looks like a typical *shōjo* character inspiring *moe* in the readers with ‘a slightly confused, dreamy, yet seductive vulnerability – that doe-eyed “please don’t hurt me” look’ (Orbaugh 2003, 204). Even so, it is Boa Hancock herself who does the hurting. Like Circe who ‘has enough confidence in her ability to radiate pornographic glory to attempt to seduce Odysseus even though he has just caught her attempting to turn him into a beast’ (Rabinowitz 1998, 81, 73–74), Boa Hancock always gets away with her spoiled, sadistic, and cruel acts just because she can mesmerise everyone with her beauty. Thomas Lamarre asserts that ‘we might also gloss scopophilia [usual pleasure] as affective response or as *moe*, because it is a matter of the attractiveness of things prior to the formation of a distinct subject or viewing position’. He draws a parallel between Laura Mulvey’s and Enomoto Nariko’s theories in terms of Lacanian subject formation: men desire to be the gazer while they want women to be the gazed, that is the object of their gaze (2009, 281). The petrifying power of Boa Hancock, however, turns the male gaze back on itself.

As Robin E. Brenner maintains, the layout of manga plays the role of the storyteller; the panels on the page ‘mimic a camera’s eye’ with ‘close-ups, pans, jump-cuts, and irising’ (2007, 65). Moreover, the use of panels and frames and the narrative conventions in manga ‘promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation’ (Mulvey 1989, 17). For Mulvey, there are ‘two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking’. The scopophilic one ‘arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight’, whereas the other one, ‘identification with the image seen’ is ‘developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego’ (18). The scopophilic pleasure is akin to fan service, that is to say, akin to the female characters’ in *seinen* and *shōnen* manga being drawn ‘with hourglass figures’, skimpy outfits, ‘and a lot of jiggle’ (Brenner 2007, 33). In terms of Mulvey’s use of Lacan’s theory, the mirror image that these female manga characters provide for young female readers of *seinen* and *shōnen* manga, which is ‘more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body’, and the ‘misrecognition’ (1989, 17) might instead be liberating and empowering. Any identification with Boa Hancock’s *moe*-elements, her abnormally large breasts, long legs, and ivory skin, would obviously be a misrecognition. Notwithstanding, Boa Hancock’s unabashed sexual assertiveness poses a sharp contrast with women who

have been turned away from their bodies, ‘shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty’ (Cixous 1976, 885). Jaqueline Berndt asserts that it is possible for manga readers to be both observers and participants ‘which makes identification without immersion possible, as distinct from film’ (2017, 70). Unser-Schutz, in addition, suggests that ‘girls consuming shōnen-manga may experience something more complex than just the internalisation and reproduction of stereotypes’ (2015, 149). For instance, Boa Hancock and her two sisters delineate that the male-imposed labels of ‘woman as beautiful but deadly killer’ and ‘woman as non-human animal’ can be used as a means of protection or revolt against the very same male order. Reconstructing the female’s relationship to power, the Boa sisters prove that females can use their powers to protect or avenge themselves, their community (the Kuja tribe) and their allies (Luffy) (see Creed 2007, Introduction). Further invalidating the either/or representations of women, the Boa sisters initially prove to be worthy opponents to Luffy; afterwards, they become mutually cherished allies who can depend on one another’s abilities, powers, and confidentiality.

### ***Soul Eater and Witchcraft Works: Medusa the evil witch***

Mary Beard, a classicist, traces the origins of the ‘cultural template, which works to disempower women’ back to the classical world and notes that most often powerful female characters from classical mythology are ‘portrayed as abusers rather than users of power’ and as ‘monstrous hybrids’ rather than women. They take the power ‘illegitimately, in a way that leads to chaos, to the fracture of the state, to death and destruction ... they must be disempowered, put back in their place’ (2017). Brenner explains that:

Japan combined Western concepts of gender with their older Confucian teachings to confine women to expected roles and elevated men to the controllers of the business and governmental spheres. Women did not gain the right to vote until 1947, as a result of the U.S. occupation and their hand in the creation of Japan’s new constitution. . .  
 ... Japan’s pop culture, including manga, reflects a much broader view of women’s place in society, as well as cultural fears about how that place is changing as women move into the corporate world and gain independence. (2007, 92–93)

The Gorgon sisters Medusa and Arachne in Ōkubo Atsushi’s *shōnen* manga *Soul Eater* (2009–2015) and Medusa in Mizunagi Ryū’s ongoing *seinen* manga *Witchcraft Works* (2014) are likewise among the archvillains and evil witches, reflecting the male anxieties about women’s gaining authority and power in public life. In *Soul Eater*, the Gorgon sisters’ abuse of power creates chaos and unleashes madness upon the world. Arachne kills humans and witches alike to meld their souls into weapons; she creates demon weapons, that is, humans who can transform into weapons. Medusa resurrects Asura the first Kishin who killed humans with good souls to make his demon weapon. After the death of the two Gorgon sisters, through the initiation and insistence of the younger generation, humans and witches work together to save the world from chaos and madness. They build a new order to coexist, transcending race and gender, without erasing or forgetting, but learning from the history of humans and witches. In *Witchcraft Works*, Medusa is after the powers of the White Princess Evermillion who

is sealed inside Takamiya Honoka. Both good and evil fractions of witches, namely Workshop Witches and Tower Witches, are largely made up of females with female leaders. As a matter of fact, Mikage Kyōichirō, a male Workshop witch and a chemistry teacher, is bullied by his female students in the student council and brainwashed by his sister. He warns Takamiya that his life, too, will probably be governed by females. Mikage reflects the male ‘resentment and fear of being “taken” by the woman, of being lost in her’ (Cixous 1976, 877 n.1).

As for the monstrous hybridity, in *Soul Eater*, Medusa and Arachne cross the boundary between human and animal. Medusa breeds snakes in her body. The two snake tattoos encircling her arms can materialise and mimic the serpentine movements of her body. She can put her snake familiars inside humans and animals and use them as weapons or listening devices. Medusa’s slithering into the Death Weapon Meister Academy disguised as a school nurse is made obvious with a giant *nyoro* drawn in snake-like kanji on the background. *Nyoronyoro* means ‘slitheringly’ in Japanese. Like Homer’s Circe, Medusa loves herbs and gives students drugs she has prepared to create a kishin. As for Medusa’s sister Arachne, after Medusa’s betrayal, she has split her body into spiders and hid her soul in a golem to go into hiding for 800 years. Arachne returns thanks to the madness spreading after the resurrection of the kishin. She uses her spiders and cobwebs as sensors, spies, weapons to immobilise or turn her victims into marionettes, or receptacles to spread madness. Medusa also has to fake her death. She splits her body into snakes. She hides her soul inside a snake, a dog, and a 5-year-old girl, respectively. Medusa betrays her sister Arachne once again; she helps humans to kill Arachne and eventually takes over her body. The residual memory in Arachne’s body is portrayed through Medusa’s hybrid features resembling snakes and spiders. The narrow and squinty eyes of Medusa and Arachne go against the traditional female archetype and point out to their ‘evil, sadistic, and vicious’ characters. Medusa has the irises of the snake. Her intent to kill is illustrated with dark lines shadowing the sclera of her eyes and arrow-shaped snakes wriggling out of her body. Arachne has entirely black scleras covered with cobwebs. Traditionally, female characters have large and round eyes, connoting ‘innocence, purity, and youth’ due to the social constructs and impositions designating the female as ‘the purer sex’. Medusa and Arachne’s overt sexuality, ‘more fantastic hair, dress, and accessories’, akin to or decorated with symbols of snakes and spiders, are indicative of their evil nature. The two sisters use their beauty, charms, and ‘sexually confrontational behaviour’ to seduce and threaten their male opponents (Brenner 2007, 42, 48).

In *Witchcraft Works*, Medusa has coiling snakes instead of hair, snake fangs, a forked, reptilian tongue, and a giant snake familiar coiled around her body. Since she has the curse of petrifying eye and hand, she always wears an eye mask and a straitjacket. She uses her giant snake to fetch and carry things. In her witch form, Medusa dresses like a Lolita, with a huge polka-dotted ribbon at the top of her head and a long, fluffy skirt with rows and rows of frills. Her straitjacket has a giant eye over her chest and a giant mouth over her belly. In her human form, she has an hourglass figure, large breasts, long legs, and long wavy light-coloured hair. She wears a power suit with a tight mini skirt, dark coloured leggings with clover and diamond patterns, and high-heeled fancy shoes. If you look at Medusa ‘straight on’, as Cixous suggests, she is ‘not deadly’, but ‘beautiful and she’s laughing’ (1976, 885). Like Medusa and Arachne in *Soul*

*Eater*, the evil witch Medusa in *Witchcraft Works* looks beautiful and sexy despite her huge ribbon, eye mask, and straitjacket. She laughs at one of the guards before she cracks the monolith and escapes from prison too.

Beard reads Medusa's 'snaky locks as an implied claim to phallic power'. She points out that the re-presentation of Medusa in Western literature, culture and art echoes 'the classic myth in which the dominance of the male is violently reasserted against the illegitimate power of the woman' (2017). In *Soul Eater*, her own son Crona kills Medusa, whereas in *Witchcraft Works*, Takamiya Honoka's kiss can turn the petrified Kagari Ayaka back to normal. In both accounts, a male reclaims or neutralises Medusa's power. Luce Irigaray affirms that women are condemned to exist fragmentarily on the margins of the dominant patriarchal ideology (1985, 30). Medusa in *Soul Eater* is, correspondingly, introduced in fragments with an eye or half of her face drawn in a single panel at a time. Afterwards, she is literally dismembered by Doctor Franken Stein. During their fight, Stein sews Medusa's body to the ground or the wall to immobilise her because female fluidity is threatening for the male. Medusa, on the contrary, uses vector arrows, throwing anything on their top in the direction the arrow is pointing. Arachne, adversely, embraces 'irrationality, chaos, darkness ... non-Being' (Moi 2002, 165), leaving her body to become insanity itself. Even so, it makes her lose her offensive powers, renders her vulnerable, and causes her imminent death. When we first see Medusa in *Witchcraft Works*, along with her familiar, a giant snake, she is tied, chained, and sealed within a magic monolith in the midst of a prison guarded perpetually. Like women's return 'from "without", from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"', like the eternal return of the subversive female figure as an antidote to patriarchy, refusing to be put to 'eternal rest' (Cixous 1976, 877), Medusa always escapes – first from the monolith and later from the Rottenburg Workshop – and returns to Tōgetsu City.

John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen argue that the characters 'drawn in the *moe* style ... evoke a sense of arousal, but also sympathy for the character' (2009, 196). Accordingly, the *moe*-ification of Medusa and Arachne in *Soul Eater* and the *chibi* style drawings Medusa and the Tower Witches to express their immense relief and joy at the end of Chapter 12 in *Witchcraft Works* enable manga readers to identify and sympathise with these monstrous women. Moreover, Medusa claims that the attacks of her apprentice witches on Kagari and Takamiya are merely for practice. Kagari and Medusa further their hybridity, eating an apple of discord, which temporarily merges the powers of witches. Lastly, using her petrifying gaze to unlock the amulet of memories given to Takamiya, Medusa transports Kagari and Takamiya to the tiny world inside the amulet, so that the two can witness their past encounter with one another. Indeed, more often than not, Medusa and her apprentice Tower witches end up helping Kagari and Takamiya.

## Conclusion

Manga are written as gendered texts, targeting a specific gender and a specific age group. However, young girls and women worldwide do read *seinen* and *shōnen* manga, such as the ones discussed in this article. The experiences of authors along with 'the anticipated needs' of readers play a role in the depiction of characters, which in return 'can influence readers' perceptions of gender' (Unser-Schutz 2015, 136). This reciprocal author–reader influence shapes the way both authors and readers, be they male or female, regard gender.

It might ultimately be a means to reform how society at large regards gender as well. Marleen S. Barr asserts that '[w]ith Hélène Cixous's and Jane Gallop's positive definitions of "monstrous" in mind ... feminist fabulation need no longer remain marginalized.... It is time to canonize the monstrous' (1992, 21, 22). In like manner, Japanese manga help canonise the monstrous female. The *moe*-ification of the classical goddesses, monsters, and witches in Japanese manga enables identification and/or infatuation with these aggressive, nonconformist, independent, and powerful women, formerly demonised and repressed by patriarchal discourse. The female characters fashioned after Circe, Medusa, Arachne, and the Amazons in *Berserk*, *One Piece*, *Soul Eater*, and *Witchcraft Works* 'can serve as a springboard for subversive thought' aiming at transforming the contemporary social and cultural structures based on 'self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism' (Cixous 1976, 879). They can modify the females' relationship to power.

## Note

1. Japanese names in this article are written in the Japanese format with surname first followed by given name.

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