

Shoujo Versus Seinen? Address and Reception in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011)

Catherine Butler¹ 

Published online: 15 March 2018
© The Author(s) 2018

Abstract This article uses the Japanese television anime series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011) as a case study through which to problematise the relationship between two prominent traditions within children's literature criticism: narratology, with its vocabulary of implied readers and textual address; and reception studies, which typically gather data through empirical work with children. The figure of the "child reader" is claimed by both traditions, although in one case that reader is a textual construct and in the other a human being; yet this ambiguity is not typically addressed within studies of individual texts. *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, a complex work that disrupts viewer expectations and genre assumptions, both destabilises its implied viewership and challenges conventional beliefs about the tastes and capacities of actual viewers, especially the extent to which those viewers can be categorised by age or gender. I argue that, by taking a sideways step from page to screen, and especially by analysing a non-Western work, it is possible to highlight the contingent and arbitrary nature of some of the assumptions that permeate literary critical discussion, and to help bring narratological and reception studies into a more productive relationship.

Keywords Textual address · Reception · *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* · Anime · Japanese television

Catherine Butler is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Cardiff University, where her academic books on children's literature include *Four British Fantasists* (Scarecrow/ChLA, 2006), *Teaching Children's Fiction* (Palgrave, 2006) and *Reading History in Children's Books* (with Hallie O'Donovan; Palgrave, 2012). She has also edited several academic collections, including *Modern Children's Literature* (with Kimberley Reynolds, 2014), and produced six novels for children and teenagers.

✉ Catherine Butler
ButlerC6@cardiff.ac.uk

¹ School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, John Percival Building, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK

The television anime *Mahou Shoujo Madoka Magica* (魔法少女まどか☆マギカ), known outside Japan as *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (hereafter *PMMM*), was a critical and commercial hit in its home country when first broadcast in 2011, winning a large fanbase and multiple awards, including the Japanese Ministry of Culture's grand prize for animation at the 15th Japan Media Arts Festival (Japan Media Arts Festival Archive, 2011). It has since spawned numerous spin-off manga, three feature films (including a sequel, *Rebellion* [2013]), video games and many and varied forms of merchandise. It has also gained a fanbase in the West, where there has been considerable discussion of its themes, structure, intertexts and gender politics, including some scholarly interest (Greenwood, 2015, Cleto and Bahl, 2016). However, this is the first academic article to consider *PMMM* in relation to its audience.

In what follows I will use *PMMM* and its reception in the (primarily Anglophone) West to explore the relationship of two critical traditions that have long cohabited in children's literature criticism but seldom cross paths: textual address and reader reception. By making a sideways move from book to screen, and from a Western text to a Japanese one, I will demonstrate the culturally bound nature of these traditions as they are used in critical discourse, and challenge both the critical habit of conflating implied and actual readers, and the tendency of critical discussion to default to binary language along the axes of age (child/adult) and gender (male/female).

The Relationship of Address and Reception in Children's Literature Studies

Both address and reception can be viewed as possible approaches to one of the abiding projects of children's literature criticism, that of providing a satisfactory account of the relationship between children's texts and their readers. The concept of textual address derives from the narratological tradition running from Wayne Booth (1961), Wolfgang Iser (1974) and (within children's literature) Barbara Wall (1991), and is often discussed in terms of identifying and describing a text's implied readership, implied readers being carefully distinguished from living readers and defined as textual constructs rather than as human beings. Reception studies, conversely, take as their province the ways in which actual readers have understood, discussed, used and felt about texts, as well as the broader interactions of texts with their cultural contexts. In such studies, empirical data of various kinds are likely to be prominent, with questions of address relatively overshadowed.

These differences in approach partly reflect methodological fault lines that reach back to the origins of children's literature as an area of academic study, rooted as it is in both Literature and Education departments, with their respective text-centred and empirical biases. As the discipline has developed, its attempts at self-definition have often revolved around such ambiguous terms as "the child reader", which has a place in both traditions. Is "the child reader" an implied reader, a construct created by texts themselves, or a metonym for real children, whose reading practices are potentially open to empirical investigation? Many of the best-known and most hotly

discussed contributions to children's literature studies, from Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984) to Perry Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult* (2008) and David Rudd's *Reading the Child in Children's Literature* (2013), have dealt in one way or another with demarcation disputes between living and text-generated readers.

According to Wall in *The Narrator's Voice* (1991), writing for children generally exhibits either single, double or dual address, each of which constructs a different implied reader (or readers). Single address occurs where a text constructs an implied child readership exclusively, through its choice of subject matter, style or vocabulary. Other texts (or perhaps other passages of the same text) use double address, constructing both an implied child and an implied adult reader, and offering different fare to each. While some material may appear child-directed (perhaps through its use of limited vocabulary or children as point-of-view characters), other features imply an adult reader (for example, through literary references with which children are unlikely to be familiar, or ironies visible only to those with adult experience). Wall's third category is dual address, which appeals to experiences and interests shared by adults and children, using language accessible to both, and constructing an implied reader who cannot be labelled exclusively as child or adult. However, Wall concludes that "genuine dual address" is "very rare" (35).

In theory, these distinctions refer to implied readers only, and represent quite a different critical tradition from that involving research into the behaviour and attitudes of actual children. Nevertheless, studies of address are inevitably informed by wider cultural assumptions about the tastes and capacities of children and adults (for example, that children are less likely than adults to notice irony), even if these assumptions and their capacity to constrain and shape textual analysis tend to be tacit. One advantage of considering a work that falls outside Western cultural categories is that the contingent and culturally specific nature of such assumptions can more easily be made visible. Specifically, Wall's binary language of doubleness and duality reflects a longstanding tradition, not only in children's literature criticism but in Western society generally, of defining the relationship of childhood and adulthood in terms of difference rather than continuity. Marah Gubar has noted that "the categories 'child' and 'adult' neatly carve up the human community into two separate classes of people" (Gubar, p. 454), and this article partly responds to her call to challenge that assumption of difference with a "kinship model" that acknowledges the overlap and variability of different human states (Gubar, p. 451). I contend that binary conceptions of age, as of gender, are deeply problematic; as we will see in the case of *PMMM*, they are especially so in combination.

Those who produce books, films, and television programmes for children signal the audience that they expect in numerous ways, both within the texts themselves and through paratextual and extra-textual features such as cover art, merchandise, marketing, and trailers—features that may be extended and elaborated by retailers, age-classification boards, parents, teachers and other gatekeepers. One may understand this kind of activity in terms of address (constructing an implied reader) or as a practical attempt to indicate a work's intended market. Like any act of communication, however, such signals are vulnerable to ambiguity—which is to say that they are opportunities for the creative production of meaning. I suggest that the makers of *PMMM* took advantage of this capacity for ambiguity in a way that

allowed them to expand their audience to include two demographics (young female teenagers and males in their late teens and early twenties) often seen in the West as distinct to the point of being mutually exclusive on grounds of both gender and age. In doing so they exploited the relationship between address and reception in ways that enabled the series to surprise reader expectation, to prosecute a metatextual exploration of its own genre assumptions, and to increase the reach and profitability of the franchise. Importantly, *PMMM* achieved this by combining two anime types: shoujo and seinen.

Anime (like the manga from which many are derived) are conventionally categorized in terms of their supposed audience, which is generally divided along age and gender lines, and thence correlated with certain genres and subject matters that are supposed to appeal to a given demographic. For example, kodomomuke (子供向け, “child-directed”) anime are marketed to young children and typically feature humorous stories, adaptations of children’s classics and the like. Shounen (少年, “boy”) anime are designed for slightly older boys, aged up to about 15, and are typically adventurous and action-based, a well-known example being *One Piece* (1999-present). Shoujo (少女, “girl”) anime are associated with girls from around 10–18 years, and come in a variety of genres, including slice-of-life stories, plots about sport and romance, and of course the mahou shoujo (魔法少女) or magical girl genre. There are also anime associated with older boys and young men, aged from around 15 into their early twenties, sometimes called seinen (青年, “young man”) anime. Many seinen anime are “dark”, dealing with violence, psychological disturbance and philosophical themes, sometimes with a degree of sexual interest: examples are *Elfen Lied* (2004) and *Psycho-Pass* (2012–2013). Assumptions about age and gender are thus built into Japanese genre categories no less than Western ones, although the fact that the divisions employed by manga and anime publishers map only loosely onto those used by Western publishers of children’s literature should alert us to the culturally bound nature of such divisions in both cases, as might the consideration that anime have a broader audience generally in Japan than cartoons in countries such as the United States (Katsuno and Maret, 2004, p. 83). In what follows I shall consider how some of the assumptions informing these divisions have inflected both reception and address in the case of *PMMM*.

Puella Magi Madoka Magica

Over twelve 24-minute episodes, *PMMM* tells the story of an ordinary, somewhat naïve fourteen-year-old girl called Madoka Kaname. The story begins when Madoka is disturbed one night by a strange dream, in which she witnesses a dark-haired girl (whom we later learn to be Homura Akemi) fighting desperately against a powerful magical enemy in the ruins of a city. In her dream, a cat-like creature called Kyubey tells Madoka that she can save the situation if she agrees to let him turn her into a magical girl. At this point Madoka wakes up and gets on with her day, wrongly assuming (like many a protagonist before her) that it was “just a dream”. However, later that day Madoka and her friend Sayaka become trapped in a supernatural labyrinth and find themselves under attack by surreal, blade-wielding

assailants. Madoka and Sayaka are rescued just in time by Mami Tomoe, an established magical girl who, it turns out, knows Kyubey—no figment, but a real creature. Mami and Kyubey explain that labyrinths are created by witches, malign creatures who lurk in the human world and draw in victims to kill them or drive them to suicide. As in Madoka's dream, Kyubey asks Madoka and Sayaka to become magical girls and join the fight against the witches. He offers the inducement that, on becoming a magical girl, each will be granted one wish and issued with a Soul Gem, a piece of jewellery that acts as the source of a magical girl's power. Should Madoka and Sayaka accept Kyubey's offer?

This summary of the opening of *PMMM* may sound familiar to anyone who has seen other mahou shoujo anime, for it uses numerous tropes that are standard features of the genre. Mahou shoujo anime typically centre around an apparently ordinary teenage girl who, on encountering a magical creature (sometimes known as a mascot character), is given magical powers and a cool costume to go with them, then goes on to fight evil and uphold justice, usually while having to keep her magical identity secret from family and friends.

The most economical way to convey the extent to which the opening of *PMMM* adheres to the established conventions of the genre is through a direct comparison with earlier mahou shoujo anime. In Table 1, *PMMM* is compared with *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997), probably the best-known mahou shoujo anime in the West; *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1998–2000), another well-known mahou shoujo, broadcast (in a significantly edited and straightwashed form) in the West as *Cardcaptors* (2000–2001); and *Lyrical Girl Nanoha* (2004)—a series that is less well known, but significant in this context because, like *PMMM*, it was directed by Akiyuki Shinbou.

This table is far from being an exhaustive list of mahou shoujo tropes, but is indicative of the extent to which the opening of *PMMM* conforms to the features typical of the genre. It does so in terms both of major elements (the existence of a magic-granting mascot creature reminiscent of *Sailor Moon*'s Luna, *Sakura*'s Kero or *Nanoha*'s Yuuno) and of details, such as the protagonist running to school with toast from breakfast dangling from her mouth, a habit associated with the disorganised Usagi Tsukino (alias *Sailor Moon*). The result is that, the jarring surrealism of the labyrinth sequences notwithstanding, there is little in the first two

Table 1 *Mahou shoujo* tropes in *PMMM*

Trope	<i>Sailor Moon</i>	<i>Cardcaptor Sakura</i>	<i>Lyrical Girl Nanoha</i>	<i>PMMM</i>
"Dream" that is more than a dream	YES	YES	YES	YES
Cute mascot character...	YES	YES	YES	YES
... whom the protagonist meets by rescuing it...	YES	NO	YES	YES
... and who turns out to be an alien	YES	NO	YES	YES
Transformation (<i>henshin</i>) sequences	YES	YES	YES	YES
Named attacks/manoeuvres	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jewellery is the source of magical power	YES	YES	YES	YES

episodes of *PMMM* to suggest that it is anything but a relatively typical mahou shoujo anime. This impression is reinforced by the show's official trailer, which carefully selects only the gentlest and least disturbing sequences from its early episodes and matches them with an equally saccharine text, for example describing Kyubey simply as a “magical messenger who will grant a girl's one wish” (the inadequacy of which description will become apparent).¹

The conventional nature of the opening episodes is underlined, but also somewhat undermined, by the degree of self-aware genre-savviness exhibited by some of the characters. Sayaka, in particular, recognizes both Homura's appearance in Madoka's dream and her later incarnation as a mysterious transfer student as anime clichés. Madoka, enticed by the prospect of becoming a magical girl, takes time to sketch out “costume ideas” in her school notebook (Episode 2). Although these details ostensibly highlight the show's mahou shoujo credentials, the degree of self-consciousness they imply may hint that this is something of a pose. It may also reflect the fact that, by 2011, the mahou shoujo genre had a long and rich history, of which middle-school students such as Madoka and Sayaka would plausibly have some awareness.

It is only at the end of Episode 3 that the viewer is alerted unambiguously to *PMMM*'s departure from the conventional parameters of mahou shoujo anime. Here, in a scene set within a cake-themed labyrinth, we see Mami fight and apparently kill a witch, witnessed by Madoka and Sayaka (both still pondering Kyubey's offer). At Mami's moment of triumph a giant caterpillar-like creature hatches from the witch's body, bites Mami's head off, and feasts on her corpse. Madoka and Sayaka are horrified, and so it seems were many of the show's viewers. Mami had been introduced as a main character, a dependable mentor to the other girls. As if to confirm her permanence, she features heavily, along with Madoka and Sayaka, in the show's opening credits. To kill off such a major character so suddenly and violently, as early as the third episode of the series, was shocking, and the scene has become notorious in consequence. Youtube hosts numerous reaction videos to the series that allow us to witness the shock of unprepared viewers at Mami's death (see, for example, Timekeeper 2015).

This moment marks a decisive shift in the series. The first two episodes ran the end credits against an everyday picture of Madoka, Sayaka, and their friend Hitomi, set to a melancholy ballad performed by Madoka's voice actress. From Episode 3 the ending theme changes to rock guitar and drums, against an animation of Madoka walking, then running, past her silhouetted friends into the darkness of an abyss. Early in the following episode the distraught Madoka, who is suffering flashbacks, leaves the sketch book containing her naïve sketches of herself as a magical girl in Mami's empty apartment, as if abandoning the idealistic version of magical girlhood that Mami had embodied and to which she herself had aspired.

What does this change of direction imply? There are several possible interpretations, distinct but by no means mutually exclusive. We may view this simply as a change of *tone*—from an essentially upbeat show about good triumphing over evil to a dark and unhappy show that emphasizes the suffering and

¹ Japanese text: “少女の願い事をひとつだけ叶えてくれる魔法の使者” (AniplexUS, 2011).

cost involved in heroism. We might in addition say that this tonal shift indicates a change of *genre*, from shoujo to seinen anime, that the mode of address has changed, and with it the implied viewership. Finally, we might suggest that there is also a change of *audience*, again from shoujo to seinen—that is to say, from girls in their early teens to boys and men in their late teens and early twenties. It is tempting in fact to assume that each of these three potential inferences implies the other two, but the situation is rather more complex, and for the moment it is helpful to keep them distinct. The dual function of terms such as “shoujo” and “seinen” in describing both genres and audiences is a potential source of confusion and ambiguity here, much as “child” and “adult” are within children’s literature criticism.

In subsequent episodes, the initial optimism of *PMMM* continues to be undermined. It turns out that Kyubey is not after all a helpful mascot in the tradition of Sailor Moon’s Luna. Rather, he is a predator who lures girls into a Faustian contract for his own ends, knowing that (as well as the enticement of a wish and magical powers) he can rely on his victims’ familiarity with the mahou shoujo genre itself and the attraction of fighting evil while looking fabulous. The genre-savviness of Sayaka and Madoka is thus revealed as *wrong-genre-savviness* (TV Tropes, n.d.). That is why, for example, the term “Soul Gem” causes them no alarm. After all, Sailor Moon possessed a lot of magical paraphernalia with similarly grandiose names, such as Spiral Heart Moon Rod and Moon Power Tiara. Anyone familiar with mahou shoujo anime might expect magical girls to be issued with accessories of this sort. What Kyubey fails to mention, but is lying in plain sight, is that the Soul Gems are actually containers for the girls’ souls, which he “rips out of their bodies” when he makes them into magical girls, leaving their bodies as mere “exterior hardware” (Episode 6).

Thereafter, the emphasis of the series is on the inescapable tragedy of life as a magical girl. Not only are magical girls slaves to their fate of fighting witches (which they must do in order keep their Soul Gems from becoming corrupted), but when they inevitably succumb to despair they are destined to become witches themselves. This metamorphosis is in fact the point of Kyubey’s system: Kyubey is an alien, who uses the anguish of magical girls, and specifically the emotional energy generated by their witch-transformations, as a power source. The device of aliens harvesting energy from humans is not in itself an innovation (energy-sucking aliens were regular antagonists in *Sailor Moon*) but here it is an industrial process. Magical girls are created precisely to fall into despair and become witches, and are then recycled as fodder for new magical girls.

One of the favourite manoeuvres of *PMMM*’s writer, Gen Urobuchi, is to take the tropes of the mahou shoujo genre and explore their possible rationales. Should we assume that mascot creatures are benevolent, or might they have ulterior motives? Where do monsters-of-the-week come from? Why is it that magical girls (like other cartoon characters) are able to withstand so much physical punishment in fights without suffering serious injury? (Here, it is because their bodies are merely animated corpses, sustained by magic.) Why is it always magical *girls*, rather than boys, women or men? Kyubey explains that he chooses teenage girls because

“females in the second stage of development” have the greatest fluctuations in emotional state and thus make the most abundant energy sources (Episode 9).

This approach has led to *PMMM* being widely discussed by Western fans as a “deconstruction” of the mahou shoujo genre,² in that it follows the consequences of the genre’s assumptions through and attempts either to find explanations for them or to consider how they might play out in a real-world context—for example, showing the mental trauma caused by witnessing a sudden violent death. For those who are dismissive of the mahou shoujo genre, *PMMM*’s strength lies in its ability to expose the genre’s supposed absurdities; for others, it validates the genre by stress-testing its possible weaknesses and resolving issues apparent in earlier series. Some fans see the show’s change of direction at Episode 3 as a disclosure of its true nature, a pulling away of the “cute” mahou shoujo mask to reveal the nihilistic truth behind, making it “a seinen that’s cleverly disguised as a shoujo” (MasterKingJC4ever, 2012), in the words of one Youtube reviewer. In this discourse, the seinen and shoujo genres are placed firmly in opposition.

Nevertheless, the conclusion of the series arguably rehabilitates what one might call mahou shoujo ideals and aesthetics. At the start of the final episode, the notebook containing Madoka’s magical-girl sketches, which she had abandoned in Mami’s apartment, is returned to her, suggesting that her first, idealistic vision of magical girlhood is not after all to be definitively discarded. When she finally becomes a magical girl in that same episode (in which incarnation she appears in a pink costume stereotypically bedecked with ribbons and frills), Madoka makes a wish to erase Kyubey’s system, rearranging the universe in consequence. Under Madoka’s dispensation evil still exists, but now takes the form of wraiths (魔獣, “majuu”, literally “magical beasts”) rather than witches (魔女, “majo”). When magical girls’ Soul Gems are exhausted in fighting wraiths, instead of turning into witches they simply disappear from the mortal world and are led by the now-godlike Madoka to a comfortable afterlife. “Magical girls make hopes and dreams come true” (Episode 12), declares the transformed Madoka—a line that would not have been out of place in *Sailor Moon*. The ending of the series is not entirely happy: magical girls still die in battle, and Madoka’s transformation means that she is forgotten by almost everyone she loved; but it is far less inconsistent with previous mahou shoujo anime than the wholly bleak trajectory of Episodes 3–11. The final generic status of *PMMM* is thus debatable: does it come to praise the mahou shoujo genre, or to bury it?

The Reception of *PMMM*

The traditional audience of mahou shoujo anime (as of shoujo anime generally) is pre-teen and early-teen girls, and *PMMM* has a considerable following from that demographic. Yet there is also a large Western seinen audience for the show, attracted in many cases by the presence of the darker elements that I have outlined

² For a few examples among many, see Glass Reflection (2011), Bridges (2014) and JaredMithrandir (2015).

above. In practice, this latter group's reception of the show is far easier to trace, since they are more given to recording their opinions on discussion lists and bulletin boards such as 4chan, personal blogs, and sites such as MyAnimeList and Youtube, where both reviews and "real time" reactions to *PMMM* are plentiful. These are useful sources of data, which I have supplemented by means of a small online survey (for the results of which, see Butler 2016), but it should be borne in mind that those who leave comments on public fora such as these are a self-selecting group, not necessarily representative of the show's audience as a whole.

Seinen discussions of *PMMM* often begin with a claim for *PMMM*'s exceptional status amongst mahou shoujo series. This can be a pre-emptive defence against charges of feminization and infantilization: the author does not normally watch shows about magical girls, he explains, nor does he expect his viewers to be in the habit of doing so; but he exhorts them to give *PMMM* a chance because (unlike, by implication, most mahou shoujo anime) it will be worth it (MasterKingJC4ever, 2012; Crowe, 2012; Lelouch Killuah, 2013; Departed Reflections, 2015). This exceptionalist rhetoric, which elevates one particular show at the expense of the genre of which it is an example, is far from universal in seinen discussion, but is more common than the alternative approach of embracing the mahou shoujo genre in general. In this respect, discussions of *PMMM* contrast with those conducted by adult male admirers of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* [2010-present] (the so-called "brony" fandom), which often convey a liberatory sense that giving oneself permission to like a "cute" show affords access to pleasures and emotions normally repressed by the demands of traditional masculinity. For many seinen commentators on *PMMM*, however, the show's mahou shoujo designation and the fact that its *dramatis personae* consist primarily of middle-school girls are regarded as obstacles to be overcome, although the contrast between the initial appearance of the show and subsequent events may then go on to form part of its appeal. For example, the German Youtube reviewer Lelouch Killuah (2013) begins by showing an idealised image of Madoka and her friends, voicing the words "Awww, how sweet! Magical girls. Aren't those the little girls with magical powers who save the world and cheerfully—".³ At this point the video cuts abruptly to a visceral clip from Episode 7, showing Sayaka in the midst of a mental breakdown, hacking again and again at the body of a witch while blood splatters onto her face, and crying, "I don't feel pain anymore!"

In addition to this appreciation of the contrast between the anime's early episodes and the later ones there is frequently a sense that, when the series' "turn" occurs in Episode 3, the naïve idealism of mahou shoujo anime is confirmed as mistaken and limited, and thus inferior to the more cynical or nihilistic worldview by which it is superseded. In this way, seinen viewers are also positioned as more sophisticated and skilful viewers. The naïveté of Madoka and Sayaka regarding the nature of magical-girl life is implicitly replicated in the hopes and expectations projected onto the show's putative shoujo audience.

³ German text: "Oh wie süß! Magical Girls. Sind das nicht diese kleinen Mädchen mit Zauberkraften, die die Welt retten und fröhlich durch die—".

The prioritization of seinen over shoujo perspectives takes place against a wider cultural backdrop, in which the experiences of adults and males are prioritized over those of children and females. This is not, of course, an exclusively Western phenomenon, as Laura Miller has pointed out with reference to Japanese otaku culture (Miller, 2011).⁴ *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (2011), Tamaki Saitou's classic psychoanalytic study of manga and anime featuring "sentou bishoujo", or girls depicted as skilled fighters (of whom magical girls make up a sizeable proportion), predates *PMMM* by a decade, being first published in Japanese in 2000, but his focus is telling in this respect. The one occasion on which he briefly acknowledges the existence of a shoujo audience is in the book's preface. In discussing such characters as Sailor Moon and Nausicaä from Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), he notes: "Japan's beautiful fighting girls were originally icons with which their intended audience of young teenage girls could identify. Now, however, a group of consumers has emerged that far exceeds that one in scale—the otaku" (Saitou, 2011, p. 7).

As a numerical claim, this is debatable. A 2005 survey puts the number of Japanese otaku with special interest in manga and/or anime at 460,000 (Nomura Research Institute, 2005). By contrast, at the end of that year the population of 10- to 14-year-old Japanese girls, the traditional audience of mahou shoujo anime such as *Sailor Moon*, stood at just under 3 million, more than six times as many (Statistics Bureau, 2007). The suggestion that the otaku audience "far exceeds" the shoujo one is thus considerably wide of the mark, but it says a good deal about the respective visibility and cultural capital of these two groups. (If one thinks in terms of spending power rather than numbers, Saitou's assertion begins to look more credible.) It is significant that in a book largely devoted to material originally marketed to a shoujo audience, Saitou devotes just one sentence to that audience, reserving the rest for an analysis of the psychology of male otaku who fit the seinen demographic. The psychology of young female viewers, who are said simply to "identify" with heroines such as Sailor Moon, is, one might conclude, considered so straightforward as to warrant no further comment.

Not all young male Western adults who enjoy anime would see themselves as otaku; but in the West, too, shoujo viewership of anime such as *PMMM* is generally less visible. This is partly because shoujo viewers appear in general less inclined than young adult males to share their views on public media.⁵ My own attempt to disseminate an online survey (Butler, 2016) canvassing viewer reactions to *PMMM* via sites such as MyAnimeList, Facebook and Youtube came up against this problem: although I was able to garner numerous responses from female viewers (28 out of 72), 64% of these were adults. It is likely that many were long-term anime viewers raised on earlier shoujo shows, but the opinions of current shoujo viewers proved more elusive.

⁴ "Otaku" is "a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on" (Azuma 2001/2009, p. 3).

⁵ There are exceptions: for one articulate example, see "Top 10 Reasons Why I Love *Madoka Magica*", by the 14-year-old Youtuber, Sugarmist (2016).

Some evidence of the Western reception of the show by younger female viewers is to be found in the comments left at sites such as the “Magical Girl Confessions” Tumblr, which posts anonymised thoughts about mahou shoujo anime by fans of the genre. Below are two samples of Magical Girl Confessions devoted to *PMMM*, one drawn from the early months of the site in 2011, shortly after *PMMM* first aired, and the other from the turn of 2015–2016.

First, from 2011:

Puella Magi Madoka Magica made the thought of wanting to become a magical girl some day depressing to me.

Magical Girl has always been my favourite genre and I feel bad because I just don't want to watch *Madoka Magica*.

I wish we had more backstory of Mami Tomoe. She seemed like an amazing character and I would love to know more about her.

I really like how everyone has individualized outfits in *Madoka Magica* instead of similar looking ones. (*Magical Girl Confessions*, 2011)

And from 2015 to 2016:

While I hate how dark *PMMM* turned out, I love how human-like the characters seem (instead of being stereotypes), and also how cute the characters/design/artwork is. I just wish the story was a little happier.

I currently feel like Madoka. My long-distance friends are going through some tough times and there's little I can do to help. I'm sad and worried about them, even if for me it's “second-hand”. I want to be able to help more, but all I can do is listen and cry for them like Madoka.

To be honest, I would totally contract with Kyubey, despite how I might end up. If I ended up saving even one person it would be worth it.

I'd like to have Kyoko Sakura as my older sister. She is just so cool.

I adore Homura's hair, the flip she does with it, and the way it's animated. Homura makes me feel like I'm beautiful just the way I am. I'm so grateful [for] her character design and the animation helped me see that my hair doesn't have to be blonde to be good. (*Magical Girl Confessions*, 2015-16)

This is a small but fairly representative sample. (I have excluded comments that focus on specific plot points, that appear to have been written by older viewers, or that relate to other parts of the franchise such as the sequel movie.) Many of the comments are evaluative or aesthetic (is it a good story or not? are the costumes well designed?), or take the opportunity to compare *PMMM* with other shows in the mahou shoujo genre; but others focus on the feelings of the commenters for individual characters, relationships or situations. “Confessors” may project themselves into the plot, speculating on how they would react in a similar situation; or draw analogies between the story and aspects of their own lives. Notably, while the confessions often acknowledge the darkness of the series they do not generally valorize it or give it priority over other aspects. They may even underplay it in favour of finding other ways of engaging with the show. From the point of view of some seinen viewers a confession that “I would totally contract with Kyubey ... If I ended up saving even one person it would be worth it” may miss the point of the

series' subversion of such naïve idealism, but it nevertheless highlights the importance to the show of empathy and the wish to help others, aspects that a more cynical interpretation may fail to give due weight.

Reviews by younger female viewers are also to be found elsewhere on the internet. For example, the site Common Sense Media (“We rate, educate, and advocate for kids, families, and schools”) contains more than 40 overwhelmingly positive reviews of *PMMM* by children aged ten and up, each listing the age of the author, and some also specifying the writer's gender in the body of the review. The site's in-house review and rating of the show is also illuminating (Ward, 2012). Common Sense Media performs a gatekeeping role in vetting content marketed to children, and assesses that content according a number of criteria. *PMMM* contains little sexual content or “bad language”, and its violence tends to be silhouetted, stylized, or off-camera. These factors, along with the show's “Positive messages” (“The underlying message is that one should be grateful for what one has, and that a normal life is preferable to a magical one” [Ward, 2012]) and “Positive role models” (the tender-hearted Madoka herself) mean that *PMMM* passes Common Sense Media's inspection with high recommendations and few caveats, despite its reputation among seinen viewers for “really scary Freddy-Krueger-level shit” (MasterKingJC4ever, 2012). Existential horror and crushing despair are not, it seems, among the qualities that the site specifically tests for—a telling demonstration of the extent to which critical categories (especially when deployed in a gatekeeper role) are always open to subversion and evasion.

It should be noted that *PMMM*'s “dark” elements do not make it unique among mahou shoujo anime. Even *Sailor Moon* frequently featured death and grief, and other anime such as *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997) and *Princess Tutu* (2002–2004) anticipated *PMMM* both in their engagement with dark and depressing topics and in their willingness to subject the genre to critical examination. The emphasis evident in much seinen discussion of *PMMM* on its departure from mahou shoujo norms, and particularly the habit of praising the show by contrasting it with its supposedly-sentimental predecessors, has engendered a degree of resentment toward *PMMM* from long-term mahou shoujo fans who view such admiration as founded on an ignorance of the history and diversity of the genre. Others, more sympathetic to the show, have attempted to emphasize its continuity with previous developments (CJ Vs. Manga, 2015).

This discussion of *PMMM*'s reception by seinen and shoujo audiences has naturally involved some consideration of what these audiences perceive as the nature of address within the show, but it is now time to turn back more squarely to Barbara Wall's categories of single, double and dual address, outlined earlier. Does a text like *PMMM* challenge the applicability of Wall's terminology?

Address in *PMMM*

It is of course possible to argue that *PMMM* exhibits single address. For example, the fact that it originally aired late at night in Japan might be taken as evidence of an implied seinen viewership. As Stevie Suan notes, “the anime productions that

support Akihabara and the larger (otaku [fan]) industry—which might be commonly described as ‘late-night TV anime’ in Japan—are locally (and globally) considered very distinctive products from the other popular animations” (Suan, p. 64). In addition, some aspects of *PMMM* imply a viewership with knowledge of relatively obscure literary and philosophical materials. In Episode 2, for instance, the girls pass a wall bearing a quotation in German from Goethe’s *Faust*, an unlikely choice perhaps for a Mitakihara City graffiti artist, though an appropriate one given the nature of Kyubey’s contract. There are numerous such allusions in the series, executed through its plot, artwork and language, and discovering and discussing them has been a regular activity among seinen and adult fans of the series, the most sustained such analysis probably being Jed A. Blue’s self-published volume, *The Very Soil* (Blue, 2015).⁶

In other respects, however, the marketing and merchandizing of the series—both before its broadcast and subsequently—imply a shoujo viewership. The abundant “kawaii” merchandise associated with the franchise includes such items as ornamental Soul Gems, costumes and accessories, figurines, plush toys and stationery, just as one might expect with a conventional shoujo anime. When Madoka and the other girls appear in Japanese anime magazines they are typically engaged in innocent and wholesome pastimes (skating, playing on the beach) not to be found in the series itself—accommodating a desire, sometimes articulated in fan comments and fan fiction, to give the characters some relief from their canonical lives of suffering and engage with them as “normal” magical girls. The 2012 novelization of the anime, too, seems to be aimed at a younger readership, being written from Madoka’s first-person viewpoint in simple Japanese and making extensive use of furigana (the superscript used as a crib for children still learning kanji) (Ninomae, 2012).

Perhaps, then, we might consider *PMMM* as exhibiting double address? This would be to say that the show addresses itself to both an implied shoujo and an implied seinen audience (analogous to the implied child and adult readers of children’s literature criticism), but does so in parallel, constructing both a dark, psychological, depressing story and a tale of friendship, romantic love and idealism. Ultimately, however, such a model is unconvincing, because these readings do not run in parallel but actively engage each other. The dark and horrifying aspects of *PMMM* that one might see as addressed to implied seinen viewers are not independent of its shoujo-orientated aspects, but depend in large measure on their subversion; indeed, a full appreciation of *PMMM*’s “darkness” requires familiarity with (and some investment in) the conventions of mahou shoujo anime. Conversely, an implied shoujo viewer, engaged by the show’s initial promise of an idealistic fantasy adventure, must also have sufficient distance from that promise not to balk at the series’ abrupt turn from the mahou shoujo aesthetic and worldview.

This image of mutually exclusive implied readerships, defined by distaste for each other’s aesthetic and moral preferences, thus not only fails to correspond closely to the reality of *PMMM*’s viewership (a matter of reception), but leads to a

⁶ The original 4chan discussion conducted when the series aired from January 2011 can be found in the Archived.Moe website, beginning at: <http://archived.moe/a/thread/44782290>

degree of incoherence in the account of the anime itself (a matter of address). Double address, with its reification of the divisions between groups of implied viewers in terms of interests, desires, taste, knowledge, and capacity, depends on an assumption of difference, an assumption that often finds its way unacknowledged into critical discussion. Labels such as “a seinen ... disguised as a shoujo” (MasterKingJC4ever, 2012) take genre divisions for granted and indeed entrench them, but in doing so undersell the degree of overlap between the seinen and shoujo genres. Rather, I suggest that *PMMM* is both a shoujo and a seinen anime, and the seemingly strict divide between these genres, and between the tastes of the demographics to which they are supposed to appeal, is in fact fuzzy and highly permeable, despite the apparently firm genre (and corresponding audience) divisions of anime outlined earlier in this article. In my online survey (Butler, 2016), many respondents appeared to find little contradiction between considering *PMMM* a magical girl and a seinen anime, being happy to identify it to various degrees as both. (Although there was a statistically significant tendency for female respondents to emphasize its magical girl status, this may reflect their “angle of approach”, that is, the fact that they came to *PMMM* in the first place because they were mahou shoujo fans.)

One way to put this is to say that a lot of what appears to be double address in *PMMM* is in fact dual address. It is worth adding, however, that if it is an example of dual address it is a very self-aware one, that incorporates anime's conventional genre divisions into the structure of its narrative, to catch both viewers and characters by surprise. The *coups de théâtre* represented by Mami's death in Episode 3, the discovery in Episode 6 that “Soul Gem” is a literal rather than a metaphorical name, and the revelation in Episode 8 that magical girls are merely the immature form of witches (another fact lying in plain sight: as Kyubey points out, the Japanese word for “witch” [魔女, “majo”] literally means “magical woman”), all depend on the viewers as well as the characters misreading the situation. It is not only Madoka and Sayaka who are wrong-genre savvy, it is also the implied viewer of *PMMM*.

I suggest that this implied viewer has internalized many of the generic conventions of shoujo anime, but also possesses the ability to enjoy (rather than be repelled by) their subversion, by means of the conventions of seinen anime. In other words, the generic and aesthetic repertoire of the implied viewer of *PMMM* is far broader than is suggested by either “shoujo” or “seinen”. This observation about address is echoed in the evidence for the show's reception: it seems that not only do fourteen-year-old girls and twenty-year-old men both enjoy *PMMM* but that there is substantial overlap in the ways that they do so, even if the latter group in particular sometimes feels the need to distinguish its mode of consumption from that of the show's young female fans. Ultimately, the show's demographic includes anyone who can appreciate a cleverly plotted, emotionally engaging and intellectually stimulating narrative. Akiyuki Shinbou's generic misdirection may have challenged marketing sense by appearing to pitch this work (through its character designs, trailer and marketing) to the “wrong” audience, but in doing so he created a work that had great success with a far broader audience. That strategy was a daring act of

trust, but paid both artistic and commercial dividends, and generated a rich and various fictive space shared by many viewers of all ages and genders.

The sophistication of *PMMM* in this respect is in many ways an object lesson to those who assume gatekeeper roles in the promotion of children's literature, but also to academic critics. "Implied child reader" and "implied adult reader" may be useful terms, even if these hypostatized constructs are inevitably informed by normative Western assumptions about what real children and adults are (and should be) like; but their having been coined in contrast to each other inevitably feeds a tendency to minimize the areas of intersection between them. I suggest that Wall's conclusion in *The Narrator's Voice* that dual address is "very rare" (35) can in part be attributed to this tendency to default to binary thinking.

Even in the West, the strictness of the division has been felt less acutely in other media. Within film studies, the term "undifferentiated address" carries much the same meaning as Wall's "dual address" (Brown and Babington, 2015, p. 8), and it is not difficult to think of numerous examples of "family films", from *The Sound of Music* (1965) to *Toy Story* (1995), that have offered similar pleasures to both adults and children without being burdened by any oppressive need to distinguish their audiences through separate modes of address. *PMMM* is unusual in its self-consciousness about genre divisions and the audience divisions they conventionally imply, but in subverting some aspects of its own genres it ultimately manages to subvert the divisions *between* genres, and indeed between viewers. In this way, I suggest, it also indicates the more general possibility (and necessity) of a productive relationship between investigations of reception and address. It may play on a discourse of difference, but ultimately *PMMM* argues for kinship.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- AniplexUS. (2011, 14 August). *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* Trailer. *Youtube*. Accessed 20 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/6CTHwEZK2JA>.
- Azuma, Hiroki. (2001/2009). *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Trans. J. E. Able and S. Kono. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blue, Jed A. (2015). *The Very Soil: an Unauthorized Critical Study of Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. [n.p.]: Eohippus Press.
- Booth, Wayne C. (1961). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bridges, Rose. (2014, 20 November). Fandom, "Deconstruction" and *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. *Rose's Turn*. Accessed 22 July 2016, from <https://roseturnblog.wordpress.com/2014/11/20/fandom-deconstruction-and-puella-magi-madoka-magica/>.
- Brown, Noel, and Babington, Bruce. (2015). Introduction: Children's Films and Family Films. In Noel Brown and Bruce Babington (Eds.), *Family Films in Global Cinema: The World Beyond Disney* (pp. 1–18). London and New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Butler, Catherine. (2016). *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. *SurveyMonkey*. Accessed 7 January 2017, from <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-L2L8GR3F/>.
- CJ Vs. Manga. (2015, 27 September). Is "Madoka" A Magical Girl Anime? *Youtube*. Accessed 24 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/2Mjv7wkHH00>.

- Cleto, Sara, and Bahl, Erin Kathleen. (2016). Becoming the Labyrinth: Negotiating Magical Space and Identity in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. *Humanities*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5020020>.
- Crowe, Lathan. (2012, 21 September). ⑥ REVIEW: *Madoka Magica* まどか☆マギカ レビュー— Anime [SPOILER FREE], *Youtube*. Accessed 22 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/g-dMpk09ibo>.
- Departed Reflections. (2015, 21 February). A Reflection on *Madoka Magica* Review. *Youtube*. Accessed 22 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/jEMJTO2-Wrs>.
- Glass Reflection. (2011, 28 June). GR Anime Review: *Madoka Magica*. *Youtube*. Accessed 22 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/pWZPcfPOTt8>.
- Greenwood, Forrest. (2015). The Girl at the End of Time: Temporality, (P)remediation, and Narrative Freedom in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. *Mechademia*, 10, 195–207.
- Gubar, Marah. (2013). Risky Business: Talking about Children in Children's Literature Criticism. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38(4), 450–457.
- Iser, Wolfgang. (1974). *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Japan Media Arts Festival Archive. (2011). Animation Division. Accessed 18 November, 2017, from http://archive.j-mediaarts.jp/en/festival/2011/animation/works/15an_PUELLA_MAGI_MADOKA_MAGICA/.
- JaredMithrandir. (2015, 27 November). Is *Madoka Magica* a Deconstruction? *JaredMithrandir-Olorin*. Accessed 22 July 2016, from <http://jaredmithrandirolorin.blogspot.co.uk/2015/12/is-madoka-magica-deconstruction.html>.
- Katsuno, Hirofumi, and Maret, Jeffrey. (2004). Localizing the Pokémon TV Series for the American Market. In Joseph Tobin (Ed.), *Pikachu's Global Adventure: the Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (pp. 80–107). Durham NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Lelouch Killuah. (2013, 17 December). Anime Review #22 - *MADOKA MAGICA* [Deutsch/German] (*Puella Magi Madoka Magica*). *Youtube*. Accessed 22 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/BCEbBVpXwcY>.
- MasterKingJC4ever. (2012, 17 February). *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* Anime Series Review - A Seinen That's Cleverly Disguised As a Shoujo. *Youtube*. Accessed 25 July 2016, from https://youtu.be/PheY2xnm_n4.
- Magical Girl Confessions. (2011, 2016). Archive. *Tumblr.com*. Accessed 30 July 2016, from <http://magicalgirlconfessions.tumblr.com/archive>.
- Miller, Laura. (2011). Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan. *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 20, 18–29.
- Ninomae, Hajime (Kousaka Ichirou). (2012). 小説魔法少女まどかマギカ [*Madoka Magica* Novel]. Illus. Yuupon. Tokyo: Magica Quartet.
- Nodelman, Perry. (2008). *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins.
- Nomura Research Institute, Ltd. (2005, 6 October). New Market Scale Estimation for Otaku. [News Release]. Accessed 24 July 2016, from <https://www.nri.com/global/news/2005/051006.html>.
- Rose, Jacqueline. (1984). *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Rudd, David. (2013). *Reading the Child in Children's Literature: an Heretical Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saitou, Tamaki. (2000/2011). *Beautiful Fighting Girl*. [□□美少女の精神分析]. Trans. J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shinbou, Akiyuki (Director). (2011). 魔法少女まどか☆マギカ [*Puella Magi Madoka Magica*]. Tokyo: Studio Shaft.
- Statistics Bureau. (2007, 16 April). Population by Age (5-Year Group) and Sex, Monthly Estimates – Total population, Japanese Population. *E-stat: Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan*. Accessed 7 January 2017, from <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/ListE.do?lid=000001010879>.
- Suan, Stevie. (2017). Anime's Performativity: Diversity through Conventionality in a Global Media-Form. *Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12(1), 62–79.
- Sugarmist. (2016, 4 July). Top 10 Reasons Why I Love *Madoka Magica*. *Youtube*. Accessed 7 January 2017, from <https://youtu.be/D7MaLxQpYpU>.
- Time keeper. (2015, 26 July). *Madoka Magica* - Episode 3 Reaction Compilation. *Youtube*. Accessed 21 July 2016, from <https://youtu.be/AYIgv5OP9X0>.
- TV Tropes. (n.d.). Wrong Genre Savvy. *TV Tropes*. Accessed 21 July, 2016 from <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/WrongGenreSavvy>.

- Wall, Barbara. (1991). *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Ward, Rachael. (2012). Puella Magi Madoka Magica. *Common Sense Media*. Accessed 23 July 2016, from <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/tv-reviews/puella-magi-madoka-magica>.