Fantasies of Europe, Fantasies of Japan: Isekai and the Narrative Logic of Japanese Occidentalism

Scott Ma

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Abstract

This article uses the framework of literary Occidentalism to study how an unequal power relationship is staged between Japan and Europe within isekai, a popular genre of contemporary Japanese fiction. Within the standard isekai plot, a teenage Japanese boy is suddenly transferred into a fantasy version of medieval Europe. There, the protagonist is bestowed superpowers that let him exert great agency over this second world, where he embarks on an exciting adventure and generally acts as he pleases. This superpower mediates and assures the protagonist's introduction of western modernity, under the mantle of Japanese custom, back to the West. By negating medieval Europe, 'Japan' thereby becomes its own fantasy, a site at once more modern than the West and yet identifiably Japanese. Engaging in close readings of two key isekai light novels, Yamaguchi Noboru's *The Familiar of Zero* and Nagatsuki Tappei's *Re:Zero: Starting Life in Another World*, this article specifies and identifies common narrative tropes within isekai such as an identification with Japan, a dismissal of Europe as irrational and misguided, a moralized rescue of Europeans with the protagonist's superpower, and a dismissal of potential counterarguments to the protagonist's moral presumptions.

Keywords Orientalism · anime · human rights · medievalism · modernity · popular culture · nationalism · light novel

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Introduction: Asian present, European past

This article argues that many stories categorized as 'isekai', a popular genre of contemporary Japanese fiction, use narratives that rely on biased comparisons of Japan and Europe, such that an idealized Japan is depicted as a solution to European moral crises such as racism and violence. The word 異世界 isekai translates as 'other world' and describes the genre's basic premise, namely the presence of two parallel worlds between which interaction is near-impossible.[1] Within its standard narrative, which this article critiques, a Japanese protagonist, usually a teenage boy, is transferred or reborn into a fantasy version of medieval Europe, itself derived from Japanese role-playing games (RPG). In this world, the protagonist is granted a superpower with which he defeats powerful enemies, building for himself a harem of enamoured women in the process. Countless variants exist: sometimes the protagonist is a woman or an older man; at other times, denizens of medieval Europe visit Japan; in other cases, Japan is only implicitly present, for both worlds are portrayals of medieval Europe. The story can be anything from romantic comedy to psychological thriller, and the hero's superpower can range from the familiar to the absurd.[2] Even parodic or critical variations, however, refer back to the tried-and-tested narrative of a Japanese boy bringing superpowers to a fantastical Europe. This article asks: why would isekai authors choose medieval Europe as their setting? How does the transfer between these worlds affect Europe's relationship with Japan? And what can isekai tell us about Japanese nationalism today?

I argue that the standard narrative in isekai is an instance of what Toshio Miyake describes as the literary structure of contemporary Japanese Occidentalism, which involves:

> an analogous tension, which wants to distinguish itself from the Occident and from its modernity, synonymous with the imperialist menace or primitive culture, and then [...] with epochal crises of values, to now propose a *return* to tradition or classicism in the style of Roman antiquity on a renaissance model: a *return*, that is, within this same Occident.
> (2010: 242, original emphasis)

Occidentalism thereby involves two elements. First, it criticizes the West for its history of imperialism, denouncing its racism as barbarous and backward. This denunciation of imperialism, however, leads to the risk of cultural relativity, a 'crisis of values' that must then be negated by the second element of Occidentalism, which rescues the West by restoring to it an essentialized version of *this same western tradition*. Japan thereby rescues the West from itself by embodying western traditions under the exterior appearance of 'Japan'. A similar approach characterizes the narrative logic of isekai, where a Japanese protagonist goes on an adventure in a fictionalized version of medieval Europe. In the process, the protagonist negates feudal cultural norms and replaces them with traditional western values such as individualism and human rights, now clothed in the garb of the Japanese tradition.

Scholars working on Japanese popular culture have noted how a complicit, Orientalist relationship between Japan and the West does not prevent Japanese from appropriating this positionality for their own, at times subversive, uses. [VoR p. 283] Miyake himself has studied how female fans of the *Hetalia* franchise read and produce homoerotic works featuring relationships between anthropomorphized European nations and Japan, such that masculine Eurocentrism remains an 'underlying criterion of reference' (Miyake 2013: n.pag.) for feminine enjoyment. Similarly, Rayna Denison (2018) has shown how the recent animated film *Summer Wars* repeats tropes associated

with traditional Japan such as the ie system and hanafuda to criticize Japanese patriarchy and American militarism alike. Such appropriations have a history that dates back as early as Japan's inter-war imperialism in the early twentieth century, when nationalist filmmakers tried to incorporate the content of 'traditional' (Miyao 2007) Japanese values, depicted by Hollywood, into the very medium of Hollywood cinema. Though the West may feminize Oriental countries such as Japan, Japanese people themselves may appropriate this Orientalism as a source of enjoyment, pride and critique, all the while maintaining the implicit centrality of the Occident characteristic of Occidentalism.

This article examines the thrust of Occidentalism, as understood by Miyake, in two well-known isekai works. The first is Yamaguchi Noboru's *Zero no tsukaima* (*The Familiar of Zero*) (2004–17), which, along with Kawahara Reki's *Sword Art Online* (2002–present), is often hailed as a progenitor of the isekai genre, which experienced a rapid rise in popularity during the 2010s. This peaked from around 2017 to 2019, when a new English-language isekai manga was published roughly once every three days (Price 2021: 58). Many isekai works originate as free-to-read web novels published on the website Shōsetsuka ni narō ('Let's become novelists!'). In an interview, Yamasaki Shōko, the general manager of the planning department of the company operating Shōsetsuka, attributes the website's current association with isekai to the flurry of derivative fan-produced works based on *The Familiar of Zero* that were published on the site in the late 2000s (Kurata and Yonemura 2019). One author influenced by these derivative works was Nagatsuki Tappei (Iida et al. 2020), who began writing his own highly successful take on isekai on Shōsetsuka in 2012, titled *Re:Zero: Starting Life in Another World* (2012– present). According to the site Light Novel News Online in February 2023, *Re:Zero* is the fourteenth most popular light novel in terms of copies sold (LNN n.d.).[3]

Though numerous other isekai light novels feature in the best-selling charts, *Re:Zero* has been selected for analysis for its thematic contrast. Rather than being light-hearted and comedic as are most isekai, *Re:Zero* is dark and psychologically intense. Placing *Re:Zero* and *The Familiar of Zero* in opposition underlines how even strikingly different works within the isekai genre relate Japan to medieval Europe in a similar way: one that gives a biased privilege to Japan as a fount of peace and modernity. The existing scholarship on isekai has noted this inequality, where medieval Europe becomes a 'space of comfort as an alternative to "social reality"' (Levy 2021: 106) where young men 'triumph and become heroes in a parallel universe that welcomes and embraces them' (Cerdán-Martínez et al. 2021: 583). As Zachary Gottesman notes, isekai is characterized not only by a protagonist who escapes into a fantasy world, but also a 'pure empowerment fantasy for the basic features of contemporary living' (2020: 534). By identifying these critiques as existing within the framework of an Occidentalist narrative, this article makes clear their political and nationalist dimensions.

This article will first examine *The Familiar of Zero* before turning to *Re:Zero*, concluding with a summary of the findings, and comparisons with other [VoR p. 284] narratives similar and relevant to isekai. Within the two content sections, I briefly summarize each work before identifying successive Occidentalist tropes within the texts in the following order: a firm identification with Japan, a dismissal of Europe as romantic but illusionary, a moralized rescue of Europeans, thanks to the protagonist's superpower, and a dismissal of potential counterarguments to the moral presumptions that the protagonist initially brings with him to Europe. These patterns combine to weave an Occidentalist narrative built upon an image of Japan that overcomes contradictions such as modernity and morality. This fantasy Japan, embodied by the protagonist, performs a military and ideological takeover of Europe, introducing modern norms such as human rights and the rule of law,

often by force of arms. Through the protagonist's superpower, isekai thereby introduces 'European' modernity back into Europe through the vehicle of Japan, now unproblematically identified with a postmodern utopia.

A convenient adventure: Conquering medieval Europe in *The Familiar of Zero*

Europe, the underside of Japanese modernity

Yamaguchi Noboru's isekai *The Familiar of Zero* takes place in the world of Halkeginia, a fantasy version of medieval Europe. In Halkeginia, Louise de la Vallière is a teenager attending the Tristain Academy of Magic in the country of Tristain, where citizens are divided into noble and commoner classes based on their ability to use magic. A noble unable to control her magic, Louise is made fun of by her peers and dubbed 'Zero Louise'. One day, Louise and her classmates summon animal familiars, but while Louise's classmates summon various magical critters, Louise summons Hiraga Saito, a Japanese high-school boy. Neither Louise nor Saito is initially satisfied with this arrangement, but the two gradually fall in love. As the story progresses, Saito discovers his superpowers as Gandálfr, which let him wield any weapon to perfection without training, whereas Louise discovers her powers as a Void Mage, allowing her to defeat entire armies with a single spell. A secondary effect of Saito's superpower gives him immediate knowledge of how to use weapons accidentally transferred from Earth to Halkeginia, weapons that are always more powerful than anything in the magic of the medieval world. Throughout *The Familiar of Zero*, Saito defeats his enemies not only with swords, but also rocket launchers, tanks, an AK-47 and his signature Japanese Zero fighter jet. Because these superpowers are granted rather than earned, much of the story rests on the comedic interactions between the various girls vying for Saito's affection, the primary draw of the romantic comedy.

In *The Familiar of Zero*, medieval Europe is barbaric, violent and discriminatory, but thanks to Saito's superpowers, he faces little risk to his physical or social well-being. In the afterwords of the first set of books in the series, Yamaguchi speaks of the motivations behind his writing. In one afterword, he describes *The Familiar of Zero* as a 'comfortable adventure':

> It's not that I dislike adventures. It's just that I have no stage, it's cold outside, I'll get sleepy soon, I'd quite like to get a pizza once I'm hungry, and therefore, I have no choice but not to leave my room. If there was a stage for a convenient adventure ('tsugō no ii bōken'), I would jump at it. Men are always thinking in this way. But the basics of any adventure is agency ('shutaisei') and danger. Anyway, men want to decide for **[VoR p. 285]** themselves and to throw themselves into danger. Men are miserable beings who cannot enjoy themselves without feeling danger.
> (Yamaguchi 2005a: 262)

In Yamaguchi's terms, modern man (by which he refers explicitly to the male gender) suffers from a conundrum. Life in advanced countries like Japan is comfortable and safe from war, but without everyday danger, men struggle to enjoy themselves. While men desire danger, they also fear it, and appreciate being able to order pizzas and live in rooms with air conditioning. Reading adventure books like *The Familiar of Zero*, therefore, allows modern man to live vicariously through the lives of fictional characters, to experience danger without putting oneself at risk. What is interesting about *The Familiar of Zero*, however, is that not only is the reader distanced from all risk, but Saito is as well. With his powers of Gandálfr and his origins in contemporary Japan, Saito *is* the modern man transported from Japan into medieval Europe. Not only does the male reader go on a comfortable

adventure, but this reader identifies with the fictional Saito, who is a Japanese going on this convenient adventure. The fantasy that the reader lives through is not that of a protagonist confronting great violence, but rather of a Japanese adventurer living comfortably in a land of great violence, able to witness great danger with little or no risk. This ability to live a comfortable Japanese life in premodern Europe is a paradoxical situation whose tensions and manifestations are repeated throughout the course of the series.

Correcting history, attracting a harem

Yamaguchi's Japan and Yamaguchi's Europe form a complicit pairing of unrefined, comfortable modernity and noble, dangerous feudalism, in which Saito uses his powers to advance the cause of the former. Yamaguchi set his story in medieval Europe out of nostalgia for what modern Japan had lost. As the author explains, '[feudal Europe] was an epoch when proud nobles lived for honour and died for honour' (Yamaguchi 2004a: 262). This romanticized view of Europe is derived from the seventeenth century, in particular from Alexandre Dumas's d'Artagnan romances. The map of Halkeginia closely mirrors that of Western Europe, and many characters in Tristain are fictionalized versions of real historical figures from seventeenth-century France.[4] By travelling to Europe, the modern Japanese reader rediscovers romance and danger while also recognizing the importance of remaining rational and safe, that is, to remain Japanese. The comparison with Europe allows Japan to be shorn of romance and for Europe to be shorn of reason, setting the stage for a foray into Europe in which Japan becomes the bearer of reason.

Over the course of *The Familiar of Zero*, Saito attracts a large body of male and female admirers, many of whom also admire the civilizational modernity he represents. Jean Colbert, for instance, is a professor at the Tristain Academy of Magic who shares Saito's hatred of war and destruction. He nevertheless also proclaims wonder at Japanese technology and later invents his own giant airship based on Saito's Zero fighter. At one point in the story, as Saito and Louise head off to war, Colbert pens Saito a letter containing the following utterances:

> In that world [Japan], flying machines like the one you are riding now soar through the sky, and technology has advanced in a way incomparable to Halkeginia. Right?
> **[VoR p. 286]** Well. […] I want to see that.
> I want to see it and use it to help my research.
> So, when you go east. […] I want you to take me with you.
> (Yamaguchi 2005b: 257)

Colbert and Saito treat Japan as a desirable source of technological advancement, assuming the superiority of civilizations with advanced technology. In Halkeginia, where magic resolves most inconveniences, Colbert is generally seen as an oddball for wanting to experiment with science and technology. Saito encourages Colbert's research, making Colbert more confident that his research programme is justified. Modern Japan introduces advanced technology and through technology, world peace, whereas premodern Halkeginia remains on the more primitive side. Colbert sees technological advancement as an objective good and Japan as the epitome of such advancement, gliding over the fact that in the contemporary world, military technology has not so much ended war as it has made it more invisible (Moyn 2021).

If Colbert treats Japan as a source of future technological advancement, the maid Siesta treats Japan, through Saito, as a source of a future without class hierarchy. As she tells him:

> Saito, it's because you have shown me 'possibilities'.
> Possibilities?
> Yes. That even as a commoner, one can defeat nobles. We, no matter what we might say, live our lives terrified of nobles. However, knowing that there are people who do not live like that, for some reason I am happy as if it were concerning myself. It's not just me, everyone in the kitchen is saying that.
> (Yamaguchi 2004b: 116)

In a stratified class society like Tristain, commoners like Siesta and Saito are treated with condescension by nobles for their inability to use magic, yet before meeting Saito, Siesta had difficulty imagining a society with any other social structure. It is, however, not only Saito's presence, but also his unbeatable power as the wielder of Gandálfr and modern war machines that permits Saito, a commoner, to defeat the nobles. Saito's superpower takes him on a carefree adventure that along the way challenges social norms through brute force and attracts oppressed women to him. But even women at the top of Tristain's social caste system find themselves attracted to Saito, particularly Louise, who recognizes her burgeoning love for him in the following way:

> Since when did I start to hold these sorts of feelings for Saito?
> Probably, since that time, Louise thought.
> At that moment, just about when Louise was to be crushed by Fouquet's golem, Saito had held her in his arms. Her heart had jumped. Though she thought she was about to die, her heart thumped. The time she was the happiest was when she was just about to be killed by Wardes, and Saito came tearing to her rescue […] but the point when her heart thumped the most was […] on top of the air dragon, when their lips touched. After that Louise could no longer look at Saito without blushing.
> (Yamaguchi 2004b: 78)

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In the violent medieval world of Halkeginia, constant dangers threaten the lives of even the fairest of maidens. Indeed, it was the whims of the monarch himself that caused the real-life Louise to fall from grace, and in *The Familiar of Zero*, it is Saito's superpower that allows him to repeatedly rescue Louise from the hazards of living in a barbarous world. Saito not only becomes a saviour of the other characters' lives, as he does in the case of Louise, but also shows the possibility of a better future to Siesta and Colbert by exposing unjust social norms and showing them the possibilities of a technologically advanced future. All this is made possible by a bestowal of great power onto Saito that is deployed in the furtherance of such 'good' ends as social equality, humanitarian rescue and technological advancement. Hardly ever is the true morality of contemporary 'good' placed into question, and when it is, the debate is always resolved as a fault of premodernity.

Saito's appeal to his followers comports with another thematic motivation behind Yamaguchi's penning of *The Familiar of Zero*, namely the desire to correct history. Yamaguchi found medieval Europe not only romantic, but also profoundly unjust, and chose the real-life figure of Françoise-Louise de La Baume Le Blanc de La Vallière (1644–1710) as the female lead precisely so as to redeem her. The real-life Louise was a tragic figure. A mistress of Louis XIV, Louise eventually fell out of favour and ended her life in a convent. Following a citation from one of Dumas's novels describing Louise (Dumas 1975), Yamaguchi offers this interpretation of Louise's life:

> As I see it, she was probably a slender, beautiful woman. Someone who constantly compared herself to more full-bodied, voluptuous women, and even while she developed a complex, I can imagine the figure of a woman who died for love. […]

> I want to support that kind of girl. The historical Louise was an obedient woman who only waited, but this Louise is different. She is a woman who, even despite her circumstances, faces forwards and breaks into a run. With love and courage, she blows away her complex and her feelings of inferiority, a spell-casting magician ready to stand by her pride and honour.
> (Yamaguchi 2004b: 263)

In *The Familiar of Zero*, Yamaguchi uses medieval Europe to correct an injustice he felt while reading historical accounts and Dumas's novel. Placing himself in the shoes of the historical Louise, Yamaguchi asserts that she received an unjust fate. In his novel, Yamaguchi transforms his imagined historical Louise and gives her the powers of a Void Mage, which lets her use a special class of rare and extremely powerful magic. With these powers, Louise becomes respected by her peers, family and nation. As the story develops, Louise progressively overcomes her complexes, which arise from her small stature. Yamaguchi therefore writes an alternative history, but he also stages a moral narrative where a young girl discovers her self-worth. In making this judgement, previous eras of history are implicitly decried as unjust, for if Louise had lived in the right environment, she would have had the opportunity to develop and deploy her innate talents and abilities. Within the story, the protagonist Saito stands in for Yamaguchi, tutoring and protecting Louise on her route towards self-fulfilment.

As with Louise, the characters Siesta and Colbert are also given nurturing opportunities that supposedly reflect the conditions in contemporary Japan.

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By becoming a force for social justice, technological innovation, and physical protection, Saito indirectly promotes contemporary Japanese social values. This work is inherently comparative, with medieval Europe being positioned as inferior to contemporary Japan. Thus it might be argued that by transporting western values to an earlier West, Saito positions Japan and the contemporary Japanese as faithful to the inheritors of the western tradition.

Great powers and great duty

The characters within *The Familiar of Zero* do not always find Saito's arrogance appealing, and this creates conflict within the story. Saito's most frequent clashes are with Louise, who disagrees about the place nobility has in society. This friction is evident in an argument Saito and Louise have about Saito's participation in a war between Tristain and Albion. Louise argues that as a foreigner and a commoner, Saito has no obligation to put himself in danger for the sake of a country he was dragged into against his will. Saito responds firstly that he has a duty towards those who treated him kindly and secondly that with the power of Gandálfr and his Zero fighter, he has a responsibility not to stand by and watch his friends suffer. With the power of Gandálfr and Void magic, Saito and Louise ultimately turn the tide of battle against Albion, paving the way for Tristain's rise as a geopolitically important country that will later take part in a return invasion of Albion. Saito's logic, through which he rationalizes a gross subversion of international politics by claiming a duty to protect his friends, deserves closer analysis. As Saito states:

> It's [my Zero Fighter], a 'weapon' from my world. A tool for killing people. It's no toy. […]
> I don't know why, but I've accidentally received this power of a so-called legendary familiar. If I were, hypothetically, some common human being, then I wouldn't have thought of anything as excessive as lending my assistance. I would only have quivered and looked on from afar. However, things are different now. I have the power of 'Gandálfr' within me. I might be able to do something

> about this. If it's up to me, then Siesta [...] the people in the village might have a chance of being saved.
> (Yamaguchi 2004b: 223–24)

Saito contrasts his life in Japan with his situation in Halkeginia. In Japan, he was a 'common human being' without superpowers or advanced weaponry. In Halkeginia, on the other hand, Saito can 'do something about' a situation that threatens to harm those he loves. At the same time, Saito recognizes that his superpowers are not playthings, but weapons and that with great power comes great responsibility. He does not shy away from employing violence, but is also careful to minimize the number of people he kills and to use his superpowers responsibly. Note that though Saito emphasizes the difference between his past life in Japan and his current life in Halkeginia, he does not frame his decision in terms of nationality, but rather in terms of human duty: not just a Japanese person, but *anyone* with great power ought to use it well. Saito continues:

> I'm not a person from this world. I don't care how things end up. However, at the very least, I want to protect people who were kind to me. [...]
> **[VoR p. 289]** I'm terrified. Oh, I am forcing myself. However, it's like that prince said, the greatness of the thing that one must protect makes one forget about the fear of death. I think that's true. At that moment, when fifty thousand soldiers marched towards us in Albion. [...] I wasn't scared. I must protect her – as soon as I thought that way, it wasn't scary anymore. I'm not lying.
> (Yamaguchi 2004b: 224)

Here, Saito repeats his claim that the reason he must save others is not out of some national duty, but out of an underlying humanitarianism that transcends national or cultural identity. Saito professes disinterest in how the Albion-Tristain war pans out, even as he destroys the entire Albion fleet to defend Siesta, thereby leaving Tristain victorious by default. Saito uses his accidental arrival from Japan to rationalize a disinterest in Halkeginian politics, forgiving his own lack of self-awareness of how great power may become misused. The rhetoric of protection is in turn legitimized by the need to protect young women like Siesta and Louise, an ethical framing similar to how Yamaguchi seeks to protect the historical Françoise-Louise from an unfair historical destiny. Thanks to the powerful Saito's protection, these women are pulled out of history, able to develop free from the social norms and historical events that would normally have limited their lives and identities. The couple's quarrel concludes:

> What are you saying? You're nothing but a commoner. You aren't a courageous prince, you aren't even anything.
> –I know that. But this has nothing to do with whether I am a prince or commoner. Nor does the country one was born in, or one's epoch. [...] It has nothing to do with even the 'world'. It must be. [...] If one is a man, then without a doubt, one must think like that.
> (Yamaguchi 2004b: 224–25)

To rebut Louise, Saito finally argues that a desire to protect innocent women is a masculine urge that has nothing to do with culture, nobility or even the world. In doing so, he treats sexist assumptions originating from modern society as objective truth while denouncing Louise's argument as false conscience. If what Louise thinks is borne of romantic but misguided notions of Tristainian nobility, Saito's claim grounds itself in what he takes to be natural instinct, which he believes to be objective. Throughout this dialogue, Saito reveals himself to be an absurd figure: superbly powerful yet distasteful of war; acting to prevent injustice while ignorant of its geopolitical consequences; disdainful of *noblesse oblige* while obstinately sexist in his moral judgement. These internal

contradictions form the heart of isekai's interworld transference, and the protagonist's inevitable victory pulls the narrative in a conservative direction. These tensions become more evident in *Re:Zero*, the work to which we now turn.

Occidentalism in tragedy: Gaming Europe in *Re:Zero*

A departure from Japan …

In Nagatsuki Tappei's *Re:Zero*, protagonist Natsuki Subaru is an unmotivated high-school boy who finds himself suddenly transferred to the kingdom of Lugnica, a fantasy version of medieval Europe. A competition for the empty [VoR p. 290] Lugnican throne is taking place, and Subaru allies himself with the candidate Emilia, also his primary love interest. Like Saito, Subaru is granted a superpower, but Subaru's superpower is hardly 'convenient', for it allows him to rewind time to a regularly updated save point but only in the event that he dies. Though Subaru's ability to rewind time to the point of death makes him more invincible than Saito, his deaths are generally gruesome and often require him to live through nightmarish situations multiple times. The story follows the multiple timelines Subaru lives through as he strives to prevent the deaths of himself and those he loves from the barbarity of medieval Europe.

Like Yamaguchi's *Familiar of Zero*, Nagatsuki's *Re:Zero* sets the story in medieval Europe and references a collective imaginary world derived from popular culture. Nagatsuki's work is even more closely bound to Japanese subculture than Yamaguchi's. Nagatsuki does not reinterpret actual history, and, writing a decade after Yamaguchi, was inspired by other isekai works, including *The Familiar of Zero*. For Nagatsuki, the intertextual referencing between different isekai works is precisely his favourite part of the genre. As the author explained in an interview: 'The image can easily be shared and instantly be enjoyed. […] So long as one knows the common tropes that one naturally learns in the process of interacting with manga and games, no greater assumed knowledge is necessary' (Iida et al. 2020: n.pag.). Because Yamaguchi's Europe is entirely divorced from reality, it becomes all the more accessible to the Japanese reader familiar with the relevant subcultural tropes, in particular young men who read isekai and play RPGs. For these readers, medieval Europe becomes a familiar sandbox where a variety of different stories can take place thanks to minor differences in the configurations of the settings and characters. Like someone playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, the reader of an isekai already has a fundamental, if imperfect, understanding of the second world even before entering it. Where *Re:Zero* differs from such RPGs is the way in which, like in *The Familiar of Zero*, the protagonist does not fully identify with the fantasy character, but rather preserves the positionality of someone entering the fantasy world from Japan. From the moment Subaru is transported into Lugnica, for instance, he assumes that he has entered the plot of an isekai story, such that among his first reactions may be:

> 'This has got to be one of those […]' he said, snapping his fingers and pointing out toward the crowd of onlookers. 'One of those so-called "I've been summoned to another world" deals, right?' he said as an oxcart-like vehicle pulled by a giant lizard-like thing crossed in front of him.
> (Nagatsuki 2016a: 4)

Soon after, the story's narrator explains:

> As for why Subaru was so quick to accept and understand his current situation, the fact that he was a modern Japanese youth poisoned by anime and games had something to do with it, and for that he was very thankful.
> (Nagatsuki 2016a: 5)

Subaru also immediately complains to himself that 'the lack of a main heroine in this otherworldly summoning setup was a big hole in the plot' (Nagatsuki 2016a: 7), an oblique reference to stories like *The Familiar of Zero*, where a cute otherworldly heroine summons the Japanese protagonist. Thanks to his [VoR p. 291] knowledge of Japanese culture, mere minutes after he is transported into medieval Europe, Subaru gains knowledge of not only the world he is in, but also the plot he ought to belong to. If *The Familiar of Zero* is a story where the protagonist self-consciously remains Japanese in medieval Europe, in *Re:Zero*, medieval Europe is even more of a Japanese cultural fabrication. If Saito is initially perplexed by his summoning and Halkeginian norms such as magic and social class, Subaru does not hesitate to use popular culture to explain not only Lugnica, but also the narrative trope that brought him there in the first place. From the beginning, then, Subaru does not take the existence of the second world seriously. The discord between Subaru's confidence that Lugnica is no more than a fantasy and the painful reality of his helplessness within it form the story's tragic and narrative thrusts.

This element of tragedy sets *Re:Zero* apart from most other isekai, whereas in *The Familiar of Zero*, the protagonist's superpower lets him or her fend off enemies with ease. Though Subaru initially believed himself to have been placed within a similar situation, his assumption is quickly disproved when, immediately after being transferred to Lugnica, he picks a fight with a group of thugs only to be beaten up (Nagatsuki 2016a: 8–10). Where Saito can use the power of Gandálfr to act upon on his saviour complex with a minimum of risk, Subaru, bereft of physical power, can only save his friends by manipulating other more powerful characters to act on his behalf. Though a condition of Subaru's superpower forbids him from explaining the mechanics of his skill to others, he can use information gained from previous timelines to make decisions in the current one. Other characters, however, may not believe the future knowledge that Subaru conveys to them, and often show disdain at Subaru for his paternalistic attitude. Repeatedly witnessing tragedy frequently pushes Subaru to the limit. More so than Saito, Subaru must negotiate between his desire to save his friends and his desire to flee painful deaths. Nagatsuki describes *Re:Zero* as 'a story about not giving up' (Nagatsuki 2016a: 230), and indeed Subaru requires great fortitude to defend his friends.

… a wavering of self-confidence …

On the surface, Subaru may seem like a more compassionate character than Saito. Because Subaru is physically weak, he must spend more time sympathizing with how others feel. Subaru's home country of Japan, furthermore, is only rarely mentioned within the story. Unlike *The Familiar of Zero*, the enjoyment in *Re:Zero* is derived less from unequal comparisons between Japan and Europe than from how Subaru solves perplexing puzzles and averts impending disaster. An examination reveals, however, that the stories' narrative elements are similar, and that Subaru exhibits the same Occidentalist assumptions as Saito. If *Re:Zero* almost never overtly discusses Japan, Japan's existence as the morally superior society is implicit, and necessary to how Subaru legitimizes the way in which he wields his own power. The moral conflicts within the stories are also parallel. Just as Louise brings to the forefront the contradictions within Saito's Orientalist logic, characters in *Re:Zero* criticize Subaru's arrogance, perhaps to an even greater extent because of Subaru's relative helplessness. Just as in *The Familiar of Zero*, however, Subaru's invincible power always guarantees him ultimate victory.

Like Saito, Subaru feels a duty to use his power justly. Also mirroring *The Familiar of Zero*, the consequences of this duty involve saving European characters from unexpected death and correcting discriminatory medieval [VoR p. 292] social norms. In one scene where Subaru gazes at the corpses of

his slain enemies, for instance, he feels 'seized by modern Japanese notions of life and death' (Nagatsuki 2018b: 68), which he contrasts with the thinking of the warriors of Lugnica, who are accustomed to seeing death on the battlefield. Elsewhere, when Subaru is asked why he risks his life to save some village children, he answers that, 'I know their faces, their names, and what they want to do in life. I'm not some stranger anymore' (Nagatsuki 2017a: 101). In another dramatic scene, an acquaintance is killed, and Subaru decides to turn back time by committing suicide. Before throwing himself off a cliff, Subaru strengthens his resolve by telling himself that, 'I'm the only one who can do it' (Nagatsuki 2016b: 240). Though the character and mechanism of Saito's and Subaru's superpowers differ substantially, both use their superpowers to prevent what they see as unjustifiable deaths, and both feel that their great power burdens them with a duty to use it in this morally correct manner.

Subaru also challenges racial and class discriminations common in Lugnica but uncommon in Japan. Emilia, for instance, is a silver-haired half-elf who looks similar to the widely reviled Witch of Envy. At the opening ceremony of the royal selection, Emilia's candidacy for the crown of Lugnica is openly protested against by others in attendance, including other candidates and the Sage Council, which officiates the selection and provisionally leads the country. Candidate Priscilla Barielle, for instance, demands that Emilia apologize for having been born (Nagatsuki 2017b: 135), whereas a Sage Council member named Bordeaux describes Emilia as a 'half-demon', loudly proclaiming that it is 'inconceivable' to place someone related to the witch of 'despair, chaos, and annihilation' on the throne (Nagatsuki 2017b: 160). In response to these repeated insults of Emilia's dignity, Subaru, who has snuck into the opening ceremony against Emilia's wishes, shouts vulgarities at the dignitaries present and demands that they all apologize (Nagatsuki 2017b: 160). Not only does Subaru make an embarrassment of himself, but he also ignores the perfectly valid concerns raised, such as Emilia's familial relationship to an abhorred witch and the potential civic unrest her election would cause. Like Saito, his strong sense of justice leads to rash actions based on his gut instinct to criticize what he sees as misleading superstition. Unlike Saito, though, Subaru does not have the power to prove his moral judgement right through armed feats.

This weakness becomes clear later in the same scene, where Subaru announces himself to be Emilia's knight. When his lack of qualification is brought up, Subaru insults the knights of the royal guard, mocking them for erecting standards of custom, bloodline and training as requirements for membership. In an exchange with the knight Julius, Subaru protests that:

> Bloodline. […] It's not like a person can do anything about something like that…!
> Indeed. It is just as I have said. People are separated by birth. It was the same in your home. Just because two people have been born does not make them equal.
> (Nagatsuki 2017b: 174)

Subaru brings with him the meritocratic ideal of contemporary Japan, which assumes that all elite positions should be open to all members of society irrespective of standing. He demeans medieval societies like Lugnica, which **[VoR p. 293]** have their own modes of social order. For his impudence, Subaru is battered in a duel with Julius and suffers a falling-out with Emilia. This falling-out culminates in the following exchange, where Subaru's hubris is most clearly revealed:

> The fact that he had saved everyone at the loot cellar, and at the mansion – all that had been possible because of him. These were the deeds Subaru ought to be proud of, and rewarded for. He'd come that far. He'd done so much. He added, 'You have to owe me something for everything I've done for you –!!'.

(Nagatsuki 2017b: 220)

Though Emilia does not know it, Subaru experienced countless gruesome deaths to save her life. Because the depicted timeline was one where all disastrous events were avoided, however, Emilia cannot recognize Subaru's sacrifice in the way he desires. These heights of arrogance then plunge into the depths of despair, when, following a chain of pitiful deaths, Subaru bemoans:

> I'm always nothing but talk! I'm full of myself even though I can't do anything! I'm worse than useless, but I'm still a world-class complainer! Who the hell do I think I am?! How dare I live such a shameful life this long?! Right?!
> (Nagatsuki 2018a: 199)

Here and in other scenes, Subaru comes to the realization that for all his talk about human equality and noble arrogance, his own arrogance represents a significant flaw. Worse, compared to Lugnica's elegant and skilled knights, Subaru is uncouth and useless in battle. These two scenes exemplify the various tensions implicit within the protagonist's dual positionality as being both a hero with an invincible superpower and a common individual in Lugnica. If the former scene shows his desire for recognition as a superhuman saviour, the latter scene reveals his inability to achieve anything without grovelling before others. In Lugnica, Subaru is simultaneously a mere human even less powerful than those around him and a superhero with a transcendental agency allowing him to alter history as he wills. He is, in other words, like Saito, both European and Japanese, a contradictory and intertwined identity of which the story demands a resolution.

… and a domination of Europe

As argued above, medieval Europe serves both as a sandbox for the Japanese imagination and a second world with its own social norms that can humiliate the powerless Japanese protagonist. As in *The Familiar of Zero*, however, this double identity as both European and Japanese always resolves in favour of the latter in *Re:Zero* thanks to the protagonist's unbeatable superpower. After the Knights of the Royal Guard challenge Subaru's self-proclaimed knighthood, following another series of heroic rescues, Emilia eventually knights Subaru (Nagatsuki 2021). People in Lugnica simply have no choice but to laud Subaru as a hero for his fearlessness of death and strange ability to predict the future. Though Subaru cannot dominate Europe with brute force as Saito does, his superpower solidifies for him a place among Lugnica's elites and earns him followers from among those whose lives he has saved. If Subaru's **[VoR p. 294]** introduction of Japanese ideas into Europe is more gradual and less violent than Saito's, he introduces them all the same.

As in *The Familiar of Zero*, the question of morality is almost never addressed in *Re:Zero*. At best, Subaru weighs his humanitarian duty against the pain of repeated death, a balance always concluded in favour of the former. Subaru treats Lugnica as would the player of a video game, who loads save points to repeatedly challenge the same adversary, armed with knowledge of their weaknesses gleaned from prior encounters. Though he professes love and friendship for the people of medieval Europe, Subaru treats them in practice as non-playable characters who must be understood and manipulated to achieve his further goals. Saving Emilia becomes a technocratic endeavour, similar to how a player might rescue a princess locked in a castle by pressing the correct series of buttons. His priority, indeed, is not a question of human good, but rather of human management. Subaru ignores structural problems, and the decision is not whether friends ought to be saved, but rather whether it is too arduous to warrant the effort. If *Re:Zero* is a story about not giving up, this vain hope that some solution exists downplays any examination of the abstract social and epistemological factors

that cause issues to appear as such in the first place. An encounter with medieval Europe never forces Subaru to think critically, but rather prompts him to double down on the assumptions he carried with him from Japan.[5]

Conclusion: Contemporary Japan as fantasy

The narrative relationship between Japan and medieval Europe is starkly similar in *The Familiar of Zero* and *Re:Zero*. The Japanese protagonist teleported into a medieval world encounters romantic nobility and life-threatening danger. Granted a great superpower, he self-consciously uses it to achieve worthwhile ends, above all, an end to discrimination and the protection of his friends. In doing so, the isekai narrative turns the tables on Orientalism, positioning Japan as modern and medieval Europe as primitive. Like the Europe that Occidentalism criticizes, the Europeans in fantasy Europe are racist, discriminatory and violent, yet the universal values that Japan introduces to Europe, such as peace and equality, are also commonly described as 'western'. Japan thereby brings a restoration of the West to the West *through the medium of Japan*, teaching the westerners how to be liberated individuals living in friendly, rational and civilized communities. This dual opposition between Japan and medieval Europe is tense and can even be meaningfully explored within isekai, but necessarily leans in Japan's favour due to the protagonist's valuable superpower.

The holder of this superpower may be explicitly identified as Japanese, as is the case in *The Familiar of Zero*, or his Japaneseness may be implicit and incidental, as is the case in *Re:Zero*. This difference is superficial, however, for in both cases nothing differentiates between being Japanese and being modern. After all, what Japan brings to medieval Europe – human rights, safety, advanced technology – is commonly found in all developed countries. Relics of this equation between 'Japan' and the entire modern world litter isekai. In one scene in *The Familiar of Zero*, Saito soaks in a Japanese-style hot tub while drinking green tea and feels nostalgic for his 'mother country' (Yamaguchi 2004b: 88). In a scene in *Re:Zero*, Subaru guides a confused Emilia in an impromptu radio callisthenics session one morning, described as 'genuine warm-up exercises from my homeland, passed down through the [VoR p. 295] generations' (Nagatsuki 2016b: 19). Modernity and Japanese uniqueness are indistinguishable in isekai stories, and it is no coincidence that Saito's signature weapon is a Japanese Zero fighter.

In contrast to the definition of Occidentalism Miyake provides, the two isekai texts examined differ slightly. Though Japan distinguishes itself from the Occident in isekai, this criticized Occident is principally premodern rather than modern, and the modernity eventually brought to the West does not claim to restore the West so much as elevate it to the immaculate standard of Japan. Perhaps these differences are products of an unconscious disavowal of what the Japanese protagonist performs in practice, that is, a military and ideological takeover of Europe, a disavowal permitted by the addition of fantasy elements. More significantly, though, the critical two-step movement of a critique of western discrimination followed by a restoration of a just, Japanese world order is shared between Miyake's theory and the isekai narrative. Within isekai, it is arguably not the medieval Europe of magic and elves, but rather this imagination of a futuristic Japan that has overcome the intrinsic contradictions of morality and modernity that serves as the *true* fantasy.

A comparison between isekai and other relevant narratives is a potential direction for research. Isekai appears to be the inverse of Joseph Campbell's archetypical 'hero's journey', for instance (Campbell 1968). Though an isekai hero also passes through a 'threshold of adventure', this hero desires nothing from this other world and frequently has limited desire to return to Japan. It could

also be an instance of a longer history of nihonjinron which, as anthropologist Funabiki Takeo argues, explains away Japanese anxieties about its 'particular historical existence' (Funabiki 2010: 39–40) outside the Eurocentric history of modernity. The medieval European setting, in contrast, is likely more driven by convenience than narrative, for it lets amateur authors omit wearisome world-building by relying upon existing collective imagery (Iguchi 2011). The role of technology, lastly, is curious. 'Japanese' technology plays an important role in some isekai like *The Familiar of Zero* and a negligible one in others such as *Re:Zero*. Though Subaru may bemoan the lack of Japanese convenience in Lugnica, he does not need technology to remain Japanese, the latter being primarily an issue of moral good and the correct use of invincible power.

Notes

1. This is the definition given by the web novel website Shōsetsuka ni narō ('Let's become novelists!'), from which many isekai novels originate. See https://syosetu.com/site/isekaikeyword/. Accessed 23 June 2022.
2. In Eguchi Ren's isekai novel *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill*, for instance, the protagonist's superpower is to cook food, which accidentally makes him all-powerful.
3. A light novel is a Japanese form of pulp fiction often written for a middle- to high-school audience, though the audience demographic varies significantly based on genre.
4. The curious reader is advised to consult the novel's page on TVTropes, under the category 'Fantasy Counterpart Culture': https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/LightNovel/TheFamiliarOfZero. Accessed 24 June 2022.
5. These characteristics are similar to what Wendy Brown describes as the 'normative order of reason' under neo-liberalism, which 'transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic' (Brown 2015: 9–10). Subaru's adventures teach us that no matter how high the hurdle may be, with sufficient data-gathering and analytical skills, the savvy planner will find the correct path to a happy ending, even if this path is not initially obvious.

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Contributor details

Scott Ma is a doctoral student in the Department of History at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. He studies the post-war history of Japan, focusing on education and popular culture. His writing has appeared in *Rethinking History* and the *Journal of Japonisme*.

Contact: Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Zurich, Rämistrasse 64, 8001 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: scott.ma@uzh.ch

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1511-1972

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