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The Very Soil

An Unauthorized Critical Study of

Puella Magi Madoka Magica

Jed A. Blue

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# Introduction: The Measure of All Structures

*Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (hereafter generally *Madoka Magica* to distinguish it from the title character, Madoka Kaname ([1](#1__Although)), who shall generally be referred to as simply Madoka) is many things. It is, most obviously, an anime series of the magical girl genre by Studio Shaft, but beyond that it is a critique of and homage to that genre; it is an attempt at self-redemption by a writer lost in the dark; it is a Buddhist retelling of *Faust*. It is a study in contrasts, at once a feminist examination of questions of consent, privilege, and gender roles, and a sexist objectification of the underage female form. It is about sacrifice and selfishness, despair and hope, love and death, decay and life, and how all of these seeming opposites are really one and the same.

Most of all, though, it is about people, who make choices (frequently bad ones), and suffer, and strive, and succeed, and fail. It is about characters who love each other and hate each other and don't care about each other, sometimes all at once.

Over the course of this book, I will be talking quite a bit about grand themes, philosophies, and symbols, so here at the beginning I wanted to establish a reminder: This is a story about people, because all stories are about people ([2](#2___)).

## Why Madoka?

In a mere twelve 22-minute episodes and one feature film (there were three released, but the first two are arguably just compilations of the TV series with a few minor tweaks), *Madoka Magica* packs in an enormous amount of story, with rich characters, complex themes, and moments of profound sadness, apprehension, anger, and joy. Analyzing it is tremendously rewarding, as it reveals more layers every time it is examined. In particular, as very much a postmodern work itself, it greatly rewards analysis with a postmodern bent.

## Po-wha huh?

Postmodernism is a rather complex term to define, but I shall essay that task, at least to explain what I mean when I talk about it. Philosophically, as the name implies, postmodernism is a step beyond modernism.

In a nutshell, the core realization of modernism is that symbols are fundamentally arbitrary. That is, there is no relationship between the signifier (the thing that does the symbolizing) and the signified (the thing that is symbolized), except in the mind of the person looking at the signifier. So, for example, a red hexagon means "stop" not because there is some logical connection between redness, hexagonality, and stopping, but because somebody somewhere decided that red hexagons should mean stop, and convinced others to go along with it. This is the essential concept of social constructionism, that the concepts and symbols with which we understand our world are constructed from social circumstances and relationships. It naturally follows that these symbols are therefore as fluid as societies and relationships are, and do not have fixed, objective meaning ([3](#3__Vivien)).

Since all art (and language) is a series of symbols according to postmodernist thought, it follows that the meaning of any given work is in some sense arbitrary, a product of social construction rather than a logically necessary relation. Traditionally, art got around this by using agreed-upon, culturally defined symbols, such as words or representational images (using the image of an apple to stand in for an apple, for example). These act as guide rails of a sort, allowing the person experiencing the art to start with a few familiar symbols, then build from there. Modernism being largely characterized by a rejection of tradition and a sense of disillusionment and disintegration, modern art often dispenses with some or all of these guide rails, aggressively challenging the very idea that art has—or should have—non-arbitrary meaning. Examples include James Joyce's works, presenting stream-of-consciousness text without normal sentence structure, and Mondrian's paintings depicting abstract colors and shapes rather than representations of familiar objects. Paradoxically, however, modernism frequently seeks to recreate the order for which it feels that loss ([4](#4__Ross)), as Joyce famously depicts an ordinary day as an epic struggle, or Mondrian arranges his abstract colors into grid-like patterns.

Postmodernism, by contrast, rejects the idea that socially constructed meaning is the same thing as "no meaning." Modernism says "The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, so nothing means anything"; postmodernism says "The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, so we're free to decide what everything means." Thus postmodernist works do not need to reintroduce lost order, since it never existed to begin with. For much the same reason, the postmodern period has seen an embrace of pop culture as a medium for artistic expression ([5](#5__Murfin)). Modernism rejects traditional meanings, forms, and techniques in order to create a new order to replace the old; postmodernism combines the traditional and the new in order to pursue the odd or interesting ([6](#6__Ihab)).

Where modern art removes the guide rails, postmodern art tends to function by drawing attention to the guide rails. This is done primarily via a process of decontextualization and re-contextualization, removing familiar signifiers from their usual contexts and placing them within other contexts, for example by mixing elements from multiple genres, creating pastiches of familiar works, or breaking the fourth wall ([7](#7__Ibid)). The resulting sense of disorientation is generally then exploited either for humorous or horrific effect, or to provoke thought. (It can, of course, also be funny, frightening, and thought-provoking all at once.)

Postmodernism can be divided into "positive" strands that emphasize playfulness and freedom, and "negative" strands that emphasize disorder and cynicism or despair ([8](#8__Pauline)). *Madoka Magica* falls largely into the latter camp, and makes heavy use of postmodern techniques as part of telling its story, for example (as we'll discuss more in the [next chapter](#Chapter_1)) by having the witches take the form of alien, invasive art styles that overwrite the familiar anime style of the show.

## This Book

This book is divided into three parts. The first, "The Television Series," contains twelve chapters, each covering one episode of the television series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, and each titled with a fragment of a quote from Czech playwright, activist, and politician Václav Havel, followed by the title of the episode in parentheses. I have chosen Havel quotes for reasons that should become clear as we progress through the series. The title of this book is also from him: "Perhaps hopelessness is the very soil that nourishes human hope; perhaps one could never find sense in life without first experiencing its absurdity." ([9](#9__Bill))

Following this first part is an interlude, "One Perfect Moment," on the series' use of narrative elements of Goethe's *Faust*.

The second and shortest section, "The Comics," contains three chapters, each covering one of the manga spinoffs published during and after the broadcast of the television series. Each of these chapters is titled with a quote from the television series.

Following this part is a second interlude, "Corpse of Milk," on the significance of cheese and the alchemical concept of putrefaction in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica the Movie: Rebellion* (hereafter generally referred to as *Rebellion*).

The final section, "Rebellion," consists of seven chapters covering *Rebellion*. I have chosen to cover only this film, the third in the larger *Madoka Magica* franchise, as the first two are simply recaps of the television series, with little new footage, let alone story. *Rebellion*, by contrast, is a sequel to the television series ([10](#10__There)). Each of the seven chapters discusses a different possible target for the titular rebellion, and so all their titles are of the form "Against \_\_\_\_\_\_."

This book is an analytical work, not a guidebook. Plot, character, and production details are described where relevant to the analysis, but generally speaking this book assumes familiarity with the work under discussion. At time of writing, the television series is readily available in the U.S. on DVD, BluRay, and via the Netflix and CrunchyRoll streaming services; the comics discussed have likewise either been published, or are currently being published, in English translation in the U.S. *Rebellion* is rather more difficult to get ahold of following a brief and limited theatrical run; however, it is possible to import the Japanese BluRay, which has English subtitles, and a BluRay release with both English subtitle and dub options is due for wide release in the U.S. in April 2015. Given this assumption of familiarity, the works under discussion are not cited, as they are the topic of study. Citations are included as needed for references to works outside *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* and the spinoffs discussed in this book.

Finally, several chapters in this book, most notably [Chapters 2](#Chapter_2) and [9](#Chapter_9), delve into a feminist analysis of aspects of the series in particular and the magical girl genre in general. Throughout this discussion, please keep in mind that the feminist theory employed is Western in origin and derives from European cultural history and assumptions. As such, while it is applicable to the viewing experience of a Western audience, it is not necessarily applicable to the Japanese culture, which is both the originating culture of the series and its primary audience. The discussion in those chapters should thus be assumed also to apply to the series as perceived from a Western perspective, and is not necessarily generalizable to the Japanese experience.

## Acknowledgments

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Part One

The Television Series

# Chapter 1: A secret streamlet trickles (I First Met Her in a Dream... or Something)

*Puella Magi Madoka Magica* can be understood as three distinct arcs, each focusing on a particular character or pair of characters and exploring a particular theme, although the themes of all three can be found in the other two. The first such arc covers the first three episodes, and focuses on Mami. Through her, it works through a fundamental internal struggle of the series, between its position within the magical girl genre and its aspirations to be something new. This in turn can be viewed as a struggle between two competing shows, the fairly typical (albeit somewhat dark), heavily *Cardcaptor Sakura*-influenced series it initially appears to be, and the deeply unsettling offspring of *Revolutionary Girl Utena* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* it evolves into. To simplify still further, this can be understood as a conflict between a false show or mask (as epitomized by "Mata Ashita," the rather sweet and gentle ending credits sequence of the Blu-Ray version of the first two episodes) and a true show (as epitomized by the ending credits of Episode 3 on). In other words, what this first arc accomplishes is to set up a binary between the generic magical girl show audiences unfamiliar with series writer Gen Urobuchi likely expect, and the dark deconstructive series he is likely to create, before appearing to settle on the latter.

The first episode, and thus *Madoka Magica* itself, opens with a curtain rising. However, this is not traditional animation, but rather stop-motion animation of a paper curtain rising. Given that the difference between art and non-art is the frame—a story not framed as a story is a lie; a painting not framed as a painting is graffiti—a strong argument can be made that it is the frame that defines the art. This is, in essence, the institutionalist definition of art, that art is an artifact created by an artist and presented to an artworld public, that is, a public which has access to a theory of art and art history which permits them to recognize a work as art ([12](#12__Thomas)). In other words, art is that which codes itself as art in a way recognizable to its audience. In that case, we must consider the possibility that the stop-motion paper cutouts—and, more generally, the deployment of art styles far outside the norm for anime—are in some sense the definition of *Madoka Magica*, a representation of its individuality as opposed to its existence as an instance of a genre.

At the same time, the paper curtain evokes the Japanese tradition of *kamishibai*, paper theater, an early-20th century art form similar to Europe's traveling puppet shows, in which itinerant storytellers traveled from town to town, presenting tales accompanied by sequential illustrations displayed on a portable stage ([13](#13__Eric)). This form, in turn, was a major influence on the development of manga and anime ([14](#14__Ibid)). Through the use of papercraft, *Madoka Magica* is simultaneously laying claim to the origins of its medium and genre, and asserting itself as an individual work independent of its genre.

This interpretation fits quite well, as we shall see, but first we must deal with Madoka running through a distorted, vast interior space, a checkerboard that evokes the warped spaces of Escher. Blacks and whites are sharply delineated here, clear binaries, but this space is not real. Unlike the latter part of Madoka's dream, it does not appear to correspond directly to events we see on any timeline, but rather is a hint at the place where she will shortly encounter her first witch.

The latter part of the dream, however, is (as we eventually learn near the end of the series) actually a memory of a previous timeline. This is the reality of the series, as signified by the use of "Magia," the series' true ending theme. "Magia" will not play at the ends of this or the next episode; in the TV broadcast, the credits play over the final scene of the episode, while the Blu-Ray version has a seemingly cheerful (so long as one does not pay much attention to the lyrics ) song accompanied by happy images. "Magia" is not played as ending credits until Episode 3, the point at which the series abandons all pretense of being a "normal" magical girl show.

Visually, this portion of the dream is all grays of various shades, with little black, white, or color. In the center of the ruined city is an enormous dead tree, nature and civilization fallen together. Walpurgisnacht appears, her Harlequin form and massive gears implying artificiality and order, belied by wild shrieks of laughter. Everything is its opposite. Duality is an illusion; in *Madoka Magica* all binaries collapse into unity. We will return here.

The episode tries to contain the revelations of this short sequence. The scene is played off as a dream, in much the same way as *Cardcaptor Sakura*—one of *Madoka Magica*'s clearest influences—plays off its own portentous first scene ([15](#15___)). The opening credits which follow are also very typical for a magical girl show (again, so long as one ignores the lyrics), with Madoka's very *Sailor Moon*- ([16](#16___)) or *Cutie Honey*-esque ([17](#17___)) transformation sequence into a costume strongly reminiscent of several of Sakura's.

Indeed, most of the rest of the episode consists of playing up Madoka's life and personality to be as harmless and ordinary as possible. Her family is basically perfect, a warm and friendly-seeming stay-at-home gardener father and driven businesswoman mother, plus a typically adorable baby brother. She is nearly late for school and runs out with toast in mouth, just like the titular character in the first episode of Sailor Moon, among countless other examples. (Indeed, that precise image of a schoolgirl late for class, rushing out with toast, was used to convey the comfortable ordinariness of "normal" Rei in Shinji's fantasy sequence in the final episode of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* ([18](#18___)).)

Even the arrival of Homura, which shatters normality as far as Madoka herself is considered, is completely predictable from an audience perspective. The mysterious transfer student is a hoary enough anime trope to be invoked by name in the *Haruhi Suzumiya* novels ([19](#19__Nagaru)), which are in part a parody of the several anime genres that share in common more or less typical Japanese adolescents encountering the supernatural; it thus borders on cliché that Homura appears following Madoka's dream, and quickly excels in every area of high school life. Her chilly persona (which, as a defensive affectation, fits both the classic and modern definitions of the word) and effortless, bored-seeming accomplishments serve only to make her more predictably mysterious.

Save one, every intrusion of the world of the magical girls into Madoka's life is doubly generic—both not particularly distinctive, and typical of the genre. Her rescue of the injured Kyubey is yet another example, mirroring Sailor Moon's rescue of Luna ([20](#20___)), who likewise offered to unlock her potential in exchange for her fighting evil. Other than the one intrusion we're avoiding talking about, the most refreshingly non-generic moment in the episode is the intrusion of mundanity when Madoka describes her dream to Hitomi and Sayaka. In one of the most quietly brilliant scenes in the series, the three seriously discuss several explanations for the dream of various degrees of plausibility, from the reasonable suggestion that Madoka has seen Homura somewhere before to the absurdity of past life memory (which, of course, is the closest to the truth). Sayaka even notes how much like an anime the situation is in both the TV series and the film—a subtle foreshadowing that of all the characters to become magical girls, she is the one who is going to try hardest to uphold the idealized "warrior of justice" image that is the default anime depiction.

Which brings us to the least anime-like sequence in the episode, the witch attack. This is the ultimate intrusion of both the magical world into Madoka's safe little life, and of the non-anime into the anime. The stop-motion, papercraft explosion of bizarre and unsettling imagery forces Madoka and Sayaka to acknowledge the strangeness they had previously been shielded from, the wider, wilder world outside the one they know. The alien art style reinforces their disorientation and horror, while at the same time managing to be faintly absurd, even comical. The Anthonies in particular—mustachioed cotton balls reminiscent of the Pringles potato chip mascot—are both ridiculous and deeply unsettling. This is not an uncommon effect in postmodern works; the juxtaposition of elements from one context within another context creates a jarring, incongruous effect ([21](#21__Hassan)), and both humor ([22](#22__Brian)) and horror ([23](#23__Noel)) depend on similar sensations of incongruity.

Homura can do nothing about this intrusion except to say, "Oh no, not now." She recognizes that this is inevitable; as an agent of the true *Madoka Magica* (note that she is the only magical girl in Madoka's dream sequence) any attempt by her to preserve this safer, more comfortable false show is doomed to failure (as we will see again in both Episode 10 and *Rebellion*). That protection can only be accomplished—and only for a little while—by Homura's opposite number.

Enter Mami.

She positions herself immediately as Homura's enemy, threatening her in order to protect Kyubey, who at this point in the story is still the cute, lovable mascot-herald who awakens the girls to their magic. It is only when the series drops its mask that he will drop his and become a manipulative devil-figure, taking over the antagonist role. Mami and Homura share in common, as we will see, that they are experienced magical girls who wield guns, but are otherwise near-total opposites. Homura is new to the school, while Mami, as an upperclassman, has been there longer than Madoka and Sayaka have. Homura's guns are entirely mundane, modern weapons, while Mami's are magical flintlocks. Homura is all straight lines, dark colors, and purples; Mami is all curves (not just in her figure, but her hair as well), whites, and yellows. Homura is closed, mysterious, seemingly hostile; Mami is open and friendly.

Most importantly, Mami has the power to restore the false *Madoka Magica*, where Homura does not. Her first act, before we even see her, is to define a safe space around Madoka and Sayaka within the witch's labyrinth. She is able to drive off the agents of the true *Madoka Magica*, both the witch and Homura. Much later in the series, we will see an alternate timeline where Mami learns the true nature of witches, one of the key differentiators between the "true" and "false" *Madoka Magica*, and her response is both violent and highly efficient, killing the ruthless magical girl Kyoko with her first shot, immobilizing Homura as her second action, and very nearly killing her before being killed herself by Madoka. She is ultimately put down, but at great cost, forcing that particular timeline (which can be viewed in a sense as a discarded "draft" version of the final series) to ultimately be abandoned—the "true" *Madoka Magica* simply does not work if she's around.

Her role in this episode is to restore order, returning the art style to familiar anime norms, healing the injured Kyubey, and enabling him to take his initial position as the Luna-equivalent, offering magical power to Madoka and Sayaka. With her positive attitude, determination, and considerable power, Mami is a potent stand-in for magical girls past, and as we shall see over the course of this first arc, brings with her all the standard themes of the magical girl genre. So long as she stands in defense of it, the false series shall not fall.

She'll simply have to go.

# Chapter 2: Just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career (I Think That Would Be Truly Wonderful)

The magical girl transformation sequence has a curious history and function, which makes the recapitulation of Mami's transformation a fitting opening for *Madoka Magica*'s second episode. The sequence originates in Go Nagai's 1973 manga and anime *Cutie Honey*, itself interesting as a hybrid of magical girl and *shonen* (that is, "for boys") elements ([24](#24__Tomaki)). This sequence soon becomes an ubiquitous feature of the genre, and by the 1990s magical girl shows typically hybridize *shonen* elements ([25](#25__Sharalyn)).

Within most magical girl shows, the transformation sequence serves a number of functions. The traditional sequence (epitomized by *Sailor Moon*) involves colored silhouettes of apparently nude characters, on whom the magical girl costume forms. The magical girl frequently takes a sequence of poses as the camera spins around her, creating the effect of a lone nude girl dancing in the center of a multitude of Male Gazes ([26](#26__Ibid)). In story terms, this is an empowering moment, and the music that accompanies it usually evokes a similar feeling, but the camera simultaneously asserts the character as an object to be looked at; she is, in other words, empowered, but not too empowered. She is still performing femininity and submitting herself to masculine hegemony ([27](#27__Briefly)). The sequence thus serves to say, more or less, "Yes, this young woman is a powerful protector, but she is still not going to threaten the patriarchal status quo or your fragile male ego; she is here for your enjoyment." There is a reason the magical girl genre is increasingly associated with the stereotypical basement-dwelling pervert ([28](#28__See)).

In his *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saito defines the *otaku*—broadly, Japanese for "geek, nerd, fan," albeit with somewhat harsher connotations than the English equivalent—as someone who, among other criteria, possesses the ability to transform the fiction they consume into something they feel they own as a part of their identity, as well as being able to find sexual objects in fiction. In other words, a key element of *otaku* culture in Japan—one which can be observed in American geek culture as well—is this idea that the work in question and its characters belong to the viewer, and this is intimately entwined with the sexual desires of the (typically heterosexual male) viewer. In that light, the transformation sequence represents, as Saito notes, an accelerated maturation, which is to say a sort of tacit permission by the show for viewers to sexualize its characters. In Saito's eyes, the magical girl (or "fighting girl" as he calls it, extending the concept to cover characters in science fiction and other genres) is neither an empowering figure permitting an audience of girls to feel strong, nor a tool for teaching girls traditional feminine virtues; she is not someone for the viewer to become but rather someone for the viewer to possess, generally sexually ([29](#29__Saito)).

Mami's sequence is tamer than most, seeing as she never loses her school uniform, but still lingers on breast and buttocks, emphasizing her body and costume rather than her face. Mami is a feminine figure, maternal and kind even as she quite violently blows away the familiar threatening Madoka and Mami. This transformation is paralleled only a few minutes later by Junko, who starts her only scene of the episode in a mothering role, gently, kindly chiding Madoka for staying out late the previous night. As soon as she finishes putting her makeup on, however, she becomes the steely, ambitious executive, weighing her allies and options in a potential bid for dominance of her company. In both cases, the transformation sequence serves as a gateway from the traditionally feminine role of schoolgirl or mother to a traditionally masculine role as warrior or conqueror.

For Mami in particular, the transformation sequence serves as a way to interrupt the strangeness of the witch's labyrinth with a normative element of magical girl shows that reinforces both the norms of the genre and the social norms of patriarchal society. It may also be a performance for the benefit of Madoka and Sayaka, a familiar signifier that Mami is a heroic figure come to rescue them. Notably, however, when she transforms again near the end of the episode there is no such sequence, just a quick burst of light and ribbons after which Mami is in her magical girl costume. Where the full transformation sequence emphasizes that the schoolgirl exists within the magical girl, who exists for the consumption of the viewer (Madoka and Sayaka diegetically, and the Male Gaze extradiegetically), this abbreviated sequence does the opposite, reminding the viewer that the warrior exists within the woman and denying the viewer the opportunity to possess and consume her. Rather than reinforcing the social order, it undermines it, creating the suggestion that maybe the magical girl doesn't need to perform for a masculine audience or emphasize her femininity to gain their permission to fight; perhaps all she needs is a cause.

Certainly that seems to be enough for Sayaka. She is drawn in immediately by Mami's role as protector of the innocent, willing immediately to cheer for Mami and hate Homura. For Sayaka, the magical girl represents an exciting conflict between a clear good and a clear evil, one Sayaka is eager to join on the side of good. She wants to become a magical girl so she can fight for justice and stand by Mami's side, hence her decision to bring a weapon to the witch-hunting session. By contrast, Madoka is more interested in the experience of being a magical girl; she wants to understand Mami and Homura both, to make friends with them. She wants to become a magical girl so that she can feel "cool" and special, and to be like Mami, hence her focus on designing a costume. Put another way, Sayaka is focused on doing and Madoka is focused on being. Sayaka is active, but unfocused; Madoka is centered, but passive.

Regardless of their different interests in becoming a magical girl, both girls struggle with the question of the wish. Surprisingly for such young girls, the two meditate briefly on how privileged their lives are; as children, they have limited influence on the quality of their own lives, and so must acknowledge that the fact that they are safe, healthy, fairly well-educated for their age, members of their society's dominant ethnicity, good-looking, and well-off (the apartment-dwelling Sayaka appears to be somewhat less wealthy than Madoka, whose house is enormous, but based on later interactions with Kyoko, neither appears to have experience with food or housing insecurity) is down entirely to their luck in being born to their particular parents, not any special effort on their part. It is Sayaka who articulates this problem; as we will see later, she has seen in Kyousuke how easily random events can derail a life. However, Madoka shares her sentiments; both girls feel that they are simply too well-off to have any wishes worth the price Kyubey charges.

There is an underlying theme throughout this episode that posits magical girls as part of an ecosystem of sorts. Kyoko will state this outright in a few episodes, but already we have the basics: witches predate on humans, and magical girls predate on witches. Within this ecosystem, Kyubey is a scavenger, feeding on the byproducts of the predation, but socially he is pure predator, picking out the most vulnerable members of the group to target and use for his purposes. Based on Mami's, Homura's, and Kyoko's flashbacks to the circumstances of their contracts, it is clear that he seeks out girls who are in pain and despair, and thus likely both to be willing to take the contract and to turn relatively quickly into witches. Madoka and Sayaka's slowness to accept his offer is a product of their fortunate circumstances; it is quite difficult to manipulate someone who doesn't need anything.

This is usually not an issue with magical girls. Kyubey seeks consent from the girls who fight his war, and within the context of these first two episodes thus comes off looking rather better than his equivalents in *Cardcaptor Sakura* and *Sailor Moon*. Neither Sakura nor Serena was offered a choice in their respective shows; the former was told that as the one who released the Clow, it was her duty to recover them ([30](#30___)), and the latter simply informed that she was destined to become Sailor Moon. As is often the case in both media and real life, women are expected to simply accept that they will fulfill certain roles, regardless of their consent ([31](#31__Connell)). (Which is not to say that this doesn't happen to men, just that men in media are more likely to be offered a choice and more likely to resist their fight. Shinji in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* struggles constantly against his destiny as an Eva pilot; Serena/Usagi just goes along with being a magical girl.)

Knowledge of later episodes, of course, makes Kyubey's duplicity obvious. He is not seeking informed consent at all, but rather tricking and manipulating women in truly appalling ways. Even within these initial episodes, familiarity with stories of trickster genies and deals with the devil (emphasized by the graffiti quoting Goethe's *Faust* that the witch victim walks past) suggests that Kyubey is not what he seems and not to be trusted. Kyubey's unreadable facial expression adds to this discomfort; it may initially seem cute or friendly, but as the viewer grows more suspicious of him, Kyubey's lack of affect begins to seem more like a mask that makes him harder to read, compounding the suspicion. Madoka and Sayaka are not living in *Cardcaptor Sakura* (no matter how much Madoka's waking at the beginning of the episode mirrors the second episode of that show ([32](#32__Namely))) or *Sailor Moon*, and the world of the magical girl will soon seep into and corrupt their safe, comfortable, privileged lives whether they make the deal with Kyubey or not.

Mami may seek to protect the innocent and maintain the norms of the magical girl genre, but she will fail. Though she transforms Sayaka's bat into a pink, cartoonish scepter of the sort that might appear in the typical magical girl show, the bat is useless against the witch at the end of the episode, and serves only as a means to temporarily lock Sayaka and Madoka away from it while Mami fights. "Magia," the harbinger of the dark version of *Madoka Magica*, plays throughout this battle, as the witch imposes its surreal labyrinth onto Madoka's world. Mami is able to defeat it once again, but it puts up an admirable fight that reveals both her overconfidence (as she falls for the butterfly rope trap) and constant awareness of her audience, for whom she is clearly performing rather than focusing on the immediate threat of the witch.

Mami, by the end of this episode, has firmly positioned herself as a protector and mentor to Sayaka and Madoka. So long as she is around, she will keep the "Magia" version of *Madoka Magica* confined and at bay, preventing it from overwhelming what might be called the "Mata Ashita" version of the show; that is, she will keep the emotional intensity, complexity, and menace of the witches back and maintain the stability and comfort of Madoka's happy, safe-for-preteen-viewers little life. However, this episode also establishes her weakness. It is no longer merely clear that Mami must go for the show to move on; it is clear how she will go, as a victim of her own confidence and tendency to showboat.

# Chapter 3:               By disrupting that order—a way of surprising (I'm Not Afraid of Anything Anymore)

If nothing else (and it is much else), *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is a meticulously structured series. Every moment of it is carefully placed to advance a complex story with extensive character development in a surprisingly small space. One example of that meticulous structure is the symmetry throughout the series, the way in which moments large and small repeat at precisely the right time to reflect one another.

Two episodes utterly transform the series. On a first viewing, these two episodes stand out as moments when what appeared to be a show about one thing suddenly becomes a different show entirely. As in a mirror, they are at precisely opposite ends of the series, the third episode and the third-to-last. This is the first of these episodes.

The episode opens with hints to the second and longest of the series' three major arcs, focusing primarily on Sayaka and Kyoko. Sayaka is visiting a boy, Kyousuke Kamijo, to give him the CD she and Madoka went shopping for in the first episode. As the two listen to it together, we see Sayaka remember her first encounter with true beauty and with the human power of creation, when she saw Kyousuke perform when both were small. We never learn precisely what is wrong with Kyousuke, only that he has lost some mobility in his hands and can no longer play the violin; regardless, what matters is that the beauty Kyousuke could once create is now beyond his reach, trapped in the past. This is the earliest emergence in the series of one of its major themes, a clear marker of its Buddhist influences: the inevitability of decay and loss. The beauty Kyousuke creates had to be lost sooner or later, because everything is; time is the destroyer of all ([33](#33__For)). The loss of Kyousuke's music is not qualitatively different from Mami's family's death in a car crash or the destruction of the universe by the unrelenting march of entropy; they differ only in scale.

But thankfully, the opening credits are here to save us from such melancholy thoughts! This is still the false *Madoka Magica*, after all, the safe, comfortable magical girl show with only occasional hints of darkness. Either the credits or Mami herself will always step in to save us before things get too dark.

But like teeth on the edges of the frame, darkness is creeping in around the show. Mami's flashback to her wish, to save her own life, contains so much unstated: Mami lives alone, with no clear source of money, and she was clearly in the backseat of the car that crashed. She wished hastily to live, and now she counsels Sayaka and Madoka to think carefully about their wishes and be absolutely certain they are wishing for what they want.

The strong implication is that she wished to live, when she could have wished for her whole family to live. The series' paratext suggests that much the same is true for Charlotte (or, at least, for the "witch of cheesecake" that appears to have been an early draft of Charlotte); she wished to share one last cake with her mother, when she could have wished for her mother not to die ([34](#34__Magica)).

But Charlotte is far from Mami's only parallel here. Last episode, we saw Mami's magical girl transformation paralleled with Junko's transformation into a different kind of warrior, the ambitious corporate climber. This episode, we see Junko laid low by an inevitable part of the life of the typical Japanese salaryman: the after work drunken bender ([35](#35__Notably)). As she staggers into the Kaname home, she both foreshadows that Mami will shortly fall to an inevitable part of the life of a magical girl (namely, the messy death) and provides the impetus for a crucial conversation between Madoka and her father.

Madoka asks a natural question: why does her mother enjoy her life? What dream is she living out by being an ambitious cog in a profit machine? Her father explains that Junko's dream is not to do something, but to be something; that she works for the sake of working, that what she values about the effort is the effort itself.

This mirrors the critical question Mami asks Sayaka. Does Sayaka wish to help Kyousuke, or to have helped Kyousuke? Does she want something for herself, in which case she should wish for that, or is it truly the helping itself that she wants? Just as Madoka is interested in being a magical girl, while Sayaka wants to fight evil, here Sayaka is focused on what she wants to do, rather than on what state of being she wants to achieve. She assumes that her action will bring that state of being about, but she is still failing to express the wish she truly desires.

Similarly, Mami reveals in her final conversation with Madoka that she hates the state of loneliness in which she finds herself as a consequence of her wish. Though she stated earlier that she prefers how things are now to the prospect of death, she still regrets that she couldn't have made a better wish, and she still feels terribly, utterly alone. But just as she will at the end of the series, Madoka reminds Mami that she is not alone, and promises to become a magical girl to help support her.

This is the moment at which Madoka kills Mami. The joy that Mami feels at knowing she is no longer alone causes her to showboat even more than last episode. She underestimates the threat Charlotte represents, and in so doing ensures her death. More importantly, just as with Kyousuke's music, her joy cannot last. It must end, decay, turn sour, because that is the inevitable consequence of existing within time.

Except for one thing: cheese.

We know from the paratext and from the *Rebellion* film that Charlotte is obsessed with cheese, searching for it endlessly. And what is cheese if not something good and life-sustaining that comes out of decay? It is rotten milk, raised into both a culinary delight and source of sustenance. It is a perfect example of the alchemical concept of *putrefaction*, the physical and spiritual notion that death is a source of life ([36](#36___)). Decay is repulsive, and yet the ugly, squirming mass of mold and maggots is teeming with life, able to sustain more beautiful and lovable creatures; without that decay, there would be no life.

In devouring Mami, Charlotte finds her cheese. This death and decay brings forth a new life, because it is the moment at which *Madoka Magica* transcends the norms of its genre and begins to fulfill its potential. Only a few short minutes after Mami first attacks Charlotte, everything has changed: Mami is dead. Homura has saved Sayaka and Madoka. Kyubey offers no comfort as they sob in the hospital parking lot. And as "Magia" finally takes its place as the true ending credits, one thing is clear: *Madoka Magica* has begun.

# Chapter 4: Always be somewhat suspect (Magic and Miracles Are Real)

The fourth episode of *Madoka Magica* begins the second arc of the show, but the main foci of that arc—Sayaka as a magical girl and the new character Kyoko—do not appear until the end of the episode. The majority of the episode serves instead as a coda to the first arc and an introduction to the second.

In addition, a case can be made that this is the first "true" episode of the series; that is, that this is the first episode which openly presents its dominant aesthetic, as opposed to attempting to pretend to be a more typical magical girl show in the first three episodes. It is thus also an introduction to the series itself, as it presents for the first time one of the most important themes of the series: depression.

There's a quote from series writer Gen Urobuchi that is often cited in reference to *Madoka Magica*, though the quote itself is from the afterword to the first volume of his earlier work *Fate/zero*. In part, the quote reads, "The truth is, I haven't always been this way. I have often written pieces that didn't have a perfect ending, but by the last chapter the protagonist would still possess a belief that 'Although there will be many hardships to come, I still have to hold on.' But ever since I don't know when, I can no longer write works like this." ([37](#37__Gen)) He goes on to talk about the inevitability of entropy and failure, in a way suggestive of some sort of depression—or at least despair.

Now, it is always dangerous to make guesses at an author's mental state or opinions based on their work. The implied author (the answer to the question "what kind of person would write this work" ([38](#38__Wayne))) is inevitably different from the actual author, who like all real people (and unlike fictional people such as either characters or implied authors) has an entirely unknowable subjective internality that cannot be perceived or deduced from without, but must nonetheless be assumed. It may well be the case, in other words, that Urobuchi is entirely content with his life, and writes about depressed characters and hopeless situations because he enjoys writing about them and knows he is good at it. We cannot know.

That said, *Madoka Magica* is quite easily readable as a story about depression. The magical girls all show different symptoms of depressive disorders, such as Mami's loneliness or Homura's lack of affect, and Sayaka's entire arc is a story of loss and mounting despair culminating in suicide.

Depression and loss are everywhere in this first "true" episode of the series. Much of the first half of the episode concerns Madoka's attempts to deal with the loss of Mami. At breakfast the morning after Mami's death, the yolk of her egg reminds her of Mami's hair, and the taste brings her to tears in a scene strongly reminiscent of one of my favorite lines from another well-loved magical girl series:

"But I don't understand! I don't understand how this all happens. How we go through this. I knew her, and then she's—there's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead... anymore! It's stupid! It's mortal and stupid! And... I was having fruit punch, and I thought, well, [she] will never have any more fruit punch, ever, and she'll never have eggs, or yawn, or brush her hair, not ever, and no one will explain to me why!" ([39](#39___))

But Mami's loss and Madoka's mourning of her are hardly the only examples in the episode. Equally powerful is Kyousuke's loss of his ability, the grief and rage he expresses at the music he can only listen to but no longer play. In response to the revelation that his doctors have advised him to accept that his disability is permanent, Sayaka chooses to become a magical girl to save him, even after seeing how truly dangerous it is. For all that she will reveal mixed motives later, in this moment she is selfless and heroic. Kyousuke's inability to feel the injury he inflicts on his arm, unfortunately, is foreshadowing; Sayaka will soon likewise discover a state of numb despair that locks out pain at the price of locking out everything else with it. Additionally, Sayaka's choice to become Mami's replacement—that is, barreling ahead to save others without first addressing her own grief and loss—foreshadows that same behavior.

And of course there is the suicide cult. We see little of Hitomi throughout this series, so it is not clear just how sudden this is, but the implication seems to be that the witch drew together vulnerable people into this suicide pact. What exactly made Hitomi vulnerable is never explicitly answered, any more than it is for the unnamed woman in Episode 2. There are hints, however: prior to this episode Hitomi is characterized as being always busy, not only with the exam prep classes expected of a high-achieving student but also Japanese upper-class cultural training such as traditional dance or tea ceremony classes. There is no further reference to these classes after this episode, suggesting perhaps that she was overstressed and lightened her burden after this incident. Another possibility is that it involved shyness regarding her attraction to Kyousuke, which was apparently unknown even to her friends prior to her ultimatum to Sayaka shortly after this episode, following which she immediately approached Kyousuke.

More focus is on Madoka's vulnerability, as the witch preys on her failure to help Mami. Given the man in the suicide cult who talks about his failure to run a factory, and the possibilities for Hitomi's vulnerability, it seems that this witch's *modus operandi* is to target feelings of failure and inadequacy.

Its choice of method, at least against Madoka, is to confront her with her inadequacy by means of presenting her with television sets playing clips of the prior episode. As the witch does so, Madoka blurs and distorts, the usual outline that demarcates the character-background distinction having evaporated. In other words, the witch confronts Madoka with the fact that she is a television character, stripping away her identity. She is not a person, but a thing, one element in a television show, and thus begins dissolving away into the background of that show.

But it is a curious truth that, for all their fictionality, the feelings engendered by fictional people are nonetheless real. Even knowing that Madoka is fictional, we still care about her and are happy when Sayaka arrives to rescue her. For now, at least, this is enough to restore her to "reality" within the show. Madoka is still a distinct entity, not a diffuse concept, at least within the confines of the show. Nonetheless, the first episode of the "true" *Madoka Magica* foreshadows its ending; Madoka will be diffused.

By the close of the episode, the next arc is set fully into motion: Sayaka is a magical girl, her costume suggestive of a heroic knight protector, as she sets out to save Kyousuke, Madoka, and the world from evil witches. Unfortunately, arrayed against her is her perfect foil, experienced where she is naïve, red to her blue, self-centered and greedy to Sayaka's self-sacrificing protector. Or so, at least, the two of them appear to be; as we will see, like so many pairs of opposites in this show, they are not so different after all.

# Chapter 5: The role of the writer is not simply to arrange (There's No Way I'll Ever Regret It)

In Episode 5, the beginning of the second arc continues to mirror the first arc. Just as Episodes 1 and 4 both served as introductions, Episodes 2 and 5 are both about positioning the characters and exploring the nature of this new world, which is a polite way of saying that this is an episode where not much happens.

The episode opens with a flashback to Kyubey and Sayaka performing the ritual that transforms her into a magical girl, presumably right after she assured Kyousuke that magic exists in Episode 4. While Kyubey has been creepy throughout the series so far, this flashback is the longest sustained depiction thus far of him as a (literally, here) dark figure, and the framing and lighting both are highly suggestive of a death scene. As Homura states later, Sayaka's fate is fixed at this point; she is, effectively, a dead woman walking. (Again, quite literally, as we will learn in a few episodes.) Further, by placing Kyubey in deep shadow with a large plant behind him, several shots look as if Kyubey has multiple tails, visually resembling the powerful, nine-tailed spirit fox, a (usually malevolent) trickster spirit ([40](#40__Karen)).

We also see for the first time how a Soul Gem is formed. The ritual suggests strongly that Kyubey literally pulls it out of the girls' hearts, making it from something that already existed within them. This accords with statements by Mami and Kyubey in prior episodes that they can sense great power in Madoka, even though she has yet to become a magical girl, and explains why Kyubey does not simply use his power to accomplish his goals: though enormous, his power is extremely limited. He can grant wishes, act as a telepathic switchboard, control who can see him, and (as we will learn later in the series) exist in multiple places at once, but cannot actually wield magic to alter reality the way the magical girls and witches do. A few of his comments even suggest that what wishes he can grant is determined by the power of the magical girl doing the wishing—given comments in later episodes that Sayaka is not a very powerful magical girl, it's possible that the reason she only wished for Kyousuke's hand to be healed and not the rest of his body is that she *couldn't* heal the rest.

Kyubey, in other words, is a facilitator. He enables prospective magical girls to tap a power that already exists in them, so that they can fight witches or each other for him. As we see in this episode, he is perfectly happy to construct a conflict, empowering Sayaka even though he knows Kyoko is coming, feeding Kyoko information while keeping Sayaka in the dark, all because the fight between them serves his ends.

As a consequence of Kyubey's manipulations, Kyoko takes over Homura's role in the first arc as the antagonistic magical girl of questionable morality. Kyoko is everything Mami warned about: highly willing to fight other magical girls, concerned only with the rewards of defeating witches, and uncaring about protecting the people of Mitakihara. Her willingness to let the familiar kill people until it becomes a witch, along with her comments regarding the food chain and her own constant eating, combine to suggest that Kyoko sees eating as an expression of power and embraces a might-makes-right philosophy regarding that power. In opposing her, Sayaka takes over Mami's role as the "good" magical girl, the one who fights to protect others and believes the strong have a duty to defend the weak.

By interrupting them, Homura reveals that she has taken over the other role Mami played in the first arc. Homura is no longer trying to erase the traditional magical girl structure and replace it with the show *Madoka Magica* will be; that has already been achieved. Instead, she is now trying to prevent the next logical development in the story, the Magical Girl Madoka promised by the title. She refuses to help Sayaka when Madoka begs her to do so, but when the only alternative is for Madoka to become a magical girl, Homura has no choice but to step in.

This leaves only Madoka and Kyubey. Madoka makes an interesting and deliberate choice to not change her role—just as she was Mami's unpowered sidekick and confidante, so she offers to be for Sayaka. Even if she is understandably terrified of becoming a magical girl, she is still willing to risk her life to stand by Sayaka's side—and as we see at the end of the episode, even willing to become a magical girl if need be. Kyubey likewise does not change his role, but rather increasingly reveals to the audience what his role is, moving from a figure of questionable morality and allegiance to an obviously manipulative figure who is increasingly positioned as antagonistic, actively assisting Kyoko and keeping her a secret from Madoka and Sayaka.

But what precisely is that role? Early in the episode, Sayaka takes Kyousuke to the roof, where his family give him back his violin and he plays "Ave Maria." What makes this notable is that elements of the scene keep comparing Kyousuke to Kyubey. First, this is the same location in which Sayaka made the pact to become a magical girl at the beginning of the episode, and although they are outside rather than inside the concentric rings of flowers, Sayaka and Kyousuke are in the same relative positions as Sayaka and Kyubey were in that flashback. Second, Kyousuke is shown as a silhouette in some shots, just as Kyubey is in the flashback, and in shots from Sayaka's point of view, Kyousuke blocks the view of where Kyubey was standing in the flashback. Most subtly, but also most importantly for understanding the function of the Kyousuke-Kyubey parallel, Kyubey reaches into Sayaka's heart to make her into a magical girl, just as Kyousuke's music reaches into Sayaka's heart, creating her feelings for him that motivated her to become a magical girl. And, of course, we will see in the next couple of episodes that Kyousuke is rather thoughtless in his behavior toward Sayaka, so he shares with Kyubey that they facilitated Sayaka's transformation into a magical girl while caring very little about her feelings.

Near the end of the scene, Kyousuke puts down the violin, and yet "Ave Maria" continues to play as the background music for the rest of the scene, transitioning from diegetic (that is, "in-universe") to extradiegetic sound. This ability to straddle the borders of diegesis has, up until this point in the show, been presented as an ability possessed by the witches. To convey their otherworldliness, the witch's labyrinths are generally given their own unique art styles, distinct from the show, with the result that we see the characters noticing, and reacting with terror to, changes in the art style—a diegetic response to an extradiegetic effect. Kyousuke is now reaching across that barrier in the opposite direction, one of only three non-witch characters to cross that threshold—and the only one without any apparent "magical" abilities.

This is because his music is an expression of emotion, and therefore magic; as we will see much later in the series, human emotion is the source of all the magic in the series. It follows that human art is therefore fundamentally magical; that artistic expression can reshape reality. Certainly it has done so here: Kyousuke's music is heavily implied to be the source of Sayaka's interest in him, which is the reason she became a magical girl. Every violation of the laws of physics performed by Magical Girl Sayaka is thus a consequence of Kyousuke's music.

But if Kyousuke can cross between diegetic and extradiegetic in a scene in which he is heavily paralleled with Kyubey, does it follow that Kyubey can do likewise? Indeed, he can, and is the second of the three non-witch characters to do so. Kyubey is an extradiegetic entity taking up residence in the story.

Consider: Kyubey creates magical girls to serve his own purposes, knowing that they will suffer—even relying on that suffering. He wants Madoka to become a magical girl, and shapes everything he does toward that end result, since he has a problem she can help solve. He sets up Kyoko to fight Sayaka for the same reason, once again caring nothing for how it effects them except insofar as those effects serve his goals. What are those goals? To bring tragedy and despair to the magical girls he creates.

In this sense he is heavily reminiscent of the villain of another magical girl series, Drosselmeyer of *Princess Tutu* ([41](#41__Princess)). In that series, Drosselmeyer is ultimately revealed to be an author with the power to bring his creations to life, which he uses to trap a town in a cycle of tragedy ([42](#42___)). However, the pure sacrifice of the duck he transformed into the title character brings about the end of cycle of tragedy and forces a happier ending, sending Drosselmeyer off into other wor(l)ds. Compare this plot to that same afterword of Urobuchi's we discussed [last chapter](#Chapter_4): "I am full of hatred towards men's so-called happiness, and had to push the characters I poured my heart out to create into the abyss of tragedy." And later, "Only a heavenly and chaste soul that can sing carols of praise towards humanity can save the story." ([43](#43__Urobuchi)) (And see also [Chapters 20](#Chapter_20) and [21](#Chapter_21) for more relationships between Kyubey and the probable source for *Princess Tutu*'s Drosselmeyer, E.T.A. Hoffman's character Drosselmeier.)

Among other things, *Madoka Magica* is a series about consent and autonomy. There have been hints toward this theme, but it becomes undeniable in the next episode. Given that, what better villain for such a series than the one who controls the actions of the characters? All of Kyubey's abilities align: to make magical girls, to know what they're thinking, to be everywhere in the story at once. All of his motivations—to make the magical girls experience emotional highs and lows, to keep the world of the story running as long as possible—are likewise consistent with the role he plays without knowing it: Kyubey is the author of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*.

# Chapter 6: Even a purely moral act (This Just Can't Be Right)

One of my professors in college once gave an odd bit of advice: If you ever have to write on a work, and you're stuck for a topic, look for the exact midpoint, then write about whatever you find there. I am not remotely stuck on topics for *Madoka Magica*, but seeing as the end of this episode is the midpoint of the series, it seems as good a time as any to discuss *Madoka Magica* and consent issues.

The final scene of this episode has the characters recoiling in horror at the latest revelation from Kyubey: that the bodies of magical girls are not alive, but rather simply shells, which can be repaired so long as the Soul Gem is intact. Only by harming that gem can the magical girl herself be harmed—but by separating the gem from Sayaka's body, Madoka has effectively caused Sayaka's (temporary, thanks to Homura's quick intervention) death.

There is a case to be made (not a very good case, but a case nonetheless) that the girls are getting worked up over nothing. Frankly, what Kyubey describes seems like a pretty sweet deal: the physical experience of the body is close enough to being alive that most magical girls never even notice the change, but it is perfectly healthy, more durable, and able to heal from anything. Plus, given the evidence from Kyoko, it seems likely that it can eat junk food forever with no consequences. I'd take that deal in a heartbeat.

Indeed, the Soul Gems seem fairly clearly to be a reference to the Russian folkloric character *Koshchyei Byessmyertnuy* (Koschei the Deathless in English), who hid his soul in his finger, which he then severed and hid inside an egg inside a duck inside a hare inside an iron chest, which he buried underneath a green oak on a distant island. Koschei is a villainous figure who menaces young women, and only if the hero can find the egg can Koschei be harmed ([44](#44__See)). The advantages to Koschei of doing this are quite clear, which is likely why his pop cultural heirs make use of similar protections (of which the Lich's phylactery in *Dungeons & Dragons* ([45](#45__Jennifer)) and Voldemort's horcruxes in *Harry Potter* ([46](#46__J)) are likely the most widely known examples).

But there is an important difference between Koschei and Sayaka here, which is that of *affirmative, informed consent*. Koschei, the legends imply, knows what he is doing and chooses to do it. Sayaka had no idea that her life was in her Soul Gem, that her body had been transformed against her will. In a later episode she will note that she does not believe her new body is capable of bearing children, which she perhaps wanted to do someday. Regardless, the horror expressed by Sayaka, Kyoko, and Madoka in this episode makes it clear that all three recognize this as a supreme violation.

Kyubey's defense is that he doesn't understand why humans care so much about where their souls are located. This is irrelevant nonsense; it doesn't matter *why* they care when he clearly knows that they *do* care. Kyubey is deliberately concealing relevant information when he makes these pacts, and then blaming the victim when they reject him. In essence, he is justifying his actions by saying "Sayaka never said no."

"No means no" is often tossed around as a slogan in campaigns for women's rights, especially where issues of consent and bodily autonomy are concerned ([47](#47__Susan)). However, while certainly better than failing to acknowledge that no means no, this is an incomplete standard, as Kyubey demonstrates. More important than "no means no" is "yes means yes," which is what is meant by a standard of affirmative consent ([48](#48__Ibid)). An absence of objection is insufficient, because that could mean that the person was unable to object, just as Sayaka was unable to object to aspects of the deal she didn't even know about.

This question of respecting the choices and autonomy of others interacts interestingly with another scene in this episode, when Madoka talks to her mother (in the vaguest possible terms, of course) about Sayaka's situation. Two things are important here, the first of which is Junko noting that doing the right thing does not always lead to happiness or good outcomes. The significance there is that it is an outright rejection of consequentialism (the meta-ethical view that the morality of an action is determined by its consequences ([49](#49__Walter))) as an ethical position, which in general matches the stance taken by the show (hence the consistent depiction of Kyubey as a strong consequentialist).

The significance of rejecting consequentialism explicitly in the scene with Junko is that the ending scene on the bridge implicitly rejects it as well. Kyubey's position is a consequentialist one: the soul extraction is beneficial for the magical girls, since it enables them to fight witches and survive, but learning about it tends to make them unhappy, so the best thing to do is to extract the soul and not tell them about it. The music and the framing of the scene (particularly the way Kyubey is shot to be literally overshadowing the girls, despite his small stature) make it quite clear that the show is rejecting Kyubey's construction and empathizing with the girls' horror, which is to say rejecting the consequentialist perspective.

The second significant element of the conversation is the description of Sayaka as someone doing the right thing and making things worse as a consequence, because that description is hardly unique to Sayaka. It equally well applies to Homura, whose repeated attempts to save Madoka keep making her suffer more and become a more powerful witch in each successive timeline. Junko's advice to Madoka to make a mistake on her friend's behalf thus not only applies to throwing Sayaka's Soul Gem off the bridge; it is equally a description of her choice to become a magical girl (the very thing Homura has been trying to prevent) in the final episode. That this dual meaning is no accident seems clear given the musical choices; the music which accompanies Junko's advice in this episode, "Clementia," is reprised in the final episode's "Sagitta Luminis," which plays after Madoka makes her wish.

Further, this idea of saving someone by making a mistake for them is reiterated in *Rebellion*, where both Madoka and Homura take seemingly very ill-advised actions on each others' behalf—but more on that when we get there.

# Chapter 7: The only lost cause (Can You Face Your True Feelings)

Last episode, we saw how Kyubey denies the agency of the magical girls by restricting their access to information. This episode opens by continuing that thought, as Kyubey demonstrates to the audience and Sayaka how little he cares about her. As part of a demonstration of his claim that the removal of the magical girls' souls is beneficial to them, he uses Sayaka's Soul Gem to torture her, demonstrating that the pain of the first blow in her fight with Kyoko would have crippled her utterly if not for the buffer provided by the gem. His total lack of interest in her agony as anything but a teaching tool, however, belies any claim by Kyubey to have the benefit of the magical girls in mind.

The repeated use of the word "zombie" to describe the magical girls (which is original to the Japanese text—Sayaka can be distinctly heard using it several times in the Japanese dialogue in the episode) is telling here. The entire point of a zombie is that it is shaped like a person, but actually a thing. In philosophy, a "zombie" is a creature that acts like a human but has no internal experience or life—for example, poking a zombie will cause it to say "ow," but it has no internal sense of pain ([50](#50__Robert)). More familiarly, the zombies of movie fame are walking corpses, who can be fought and killed while technically being already dead. This allows the audience the visceral thrill of imagining fighting and killing other people, without having to worry about the morality of actually causing a human being to die ([51](#51__Tanya)). In other words, both the philosophical zombie and the movie zombie are extreme cases of objectification, in which a person's agency is stripped away leaving only a thing which can be used and abused with impunity. Arguably, the zombie myth even originates from feelings of being unfairly used, dehumanized, or stifled by an overwhelming and interloping alien power ([52](#52__Postcolonial)); certainly a reasonable description of Sayaka's current state and Kyubey's influence on her.

Objectification is rampant throughout the episode. Paralleled to Kyubey, who assumes he knows what is best for Sayaka and causes her intense suffering as a consequence, is Kyoko. Throughout Kyoko's story of how she became a magical girl, her family and the people around them are represented by dolls, puppets, and toys—like zombies, human-shaped objects that possess no agency. Kyoko made a wish that she believed was what her father wanted, but since she did not consult him, she got it wrong, and as a consequence brought pain not only to her father but to her entire family and ultimately herself. By failing to communicate openly with her father, and simply assuming she knew what was best for him, she treated him as the object of her observations, rather than as a subject capable of expressing his own needs and wishes. As much as unspoken communication and indirect communication styles are common in Japan ([53](#53__Senko)), this preference for indirectness ended up causing a misunderstanding of such proportions that it still haunts the seemingly-uncaring Kyoko.

However, Kyoko has learned entirely the wrong lessons from this experience. Rather than talking to Sayaka and trying to understand her, she assumes that she and Sayaka are the same, and that Sayaka's problem is that she wished for Kyousuke without understanding what Kyousuke wanted. Kyoko has come to reject empathy and human connection entirely, fixating on purely physical needs (namely, food) as a source of comfort while rejecting all human companionship and norms. This is unacceptable to Sayaka, because Sayaka's problem is ultimately not that she objectifies others.

Sayaka spoke with Kyousuke frequently while he was hospitalized; we saw him express quite clearly that he wanted his arm to heal, and that its inability to heal was a source of despair to him. Sayaka did not assume that she knew what Kyousuke wanted; she found that out directly from him. Rather, Sayaka's error was (as Mami hinted back in Episode 2) not understanding what she wanted—she wanted a healed and happy Kyousuke, yes, but specifically so that she could be with him. Sayaka's error, in other words, is that she is excessively self-sacrificing, in effect objectifying herself.

Kyousuke's self-centered disinterest in Sayaka doesn't help her mental state at all, of course. He never thinks to question why she visited him so frequently in the hospital; he simply accepts this as normal and thus does not stop to consider whether Sayaka might appreciate being told when he leaves the hospital or that he is returning to school. He displays no interest in her inner life or motivations, and as such does not think to consider her feelings; he treats her as a secondary character in his life, rather than the main character of her own life—much as he himself is a secondary character in the show.

The cure for all the objectification going on in this episode, of course, is for characters to treat one another as agents possessed of unique, subjective experiences. Key to this is open communication, which unfortunately is in short supply throughout the episode. Characters mostly talk at each other, missing entirely the effects their words are having; the only real exception is the conversation between Madoka and Sayaka in which the latter breaks down, sobbing that she cannot approach Kyousuke romantically because of her altered physical state.

The trigger for that conversation is a demonstration of how difficult it can be to understand and appreciate others' subjectivity. Hitomi does everything right when she approaches Sayaka; nothing requires Hitomi to delay approaching Kyousuke or give Sayaka the first chance, but Hitomi does so anyway because she knows how Sayaka feels and doesn't want to hurt her. Unfortunately, because she doesn't know about everything else Sayaka is going through—and Sayaka understandably chooses not to tell her—she has no idea that by giving Sayaka this ultimatum she is triggering all of Sayaka's newly acquired body image issues. Hitomi has no way of knowing how she is hurting Sayaka, and likewise has no idea why Sayaka doesn't make her feelings known to Kyousuke; Hitomi thus has no reason to believe that Sayaka has any objections to or issues with Hitomi and Kyousuke dating.

Interestingly, however, it is not the loss of her love interest that most hurts Sayaka, but rather the brief moment during this conversation in which she regrets saving Hitomi from the witch in Episode 4. Sayaka is holding herself to a ridiculously high standard here, and thus failing to recognize that brief ugly impulses are a part of the human condition, an element of the internal life that does not necessarily translate into outward behavior. Instead, Sayaka takes this momentary viciousness as proof that she has truly become subhuman, that she is a "zombie" rather than a person with an unusual physical configuration.

Ultimately, this tendency of Sayaka to objectify herself culminates in deliberately numbing herself so that she can fight witches with no sense of pain, relying on her healing magic to repair the damage they do to her. Her sense of self-worth has plummeted to the point that she no longer cares about self-preservation and is no longer willing to accept help. It is only a matter of time, in her eyes, before she inevitably loses Kyousuke, and she feels that this is only right because she sees herself as having become a thing. At this point, despair and deep depression are all Sayaka sees in her future, and fighting witches the only purpose she has left.

The stage is now set for the culmination of the middle arc of *Madoka Magica*. The first arc ended with the show escaping from the constraints of the magical girl genre. This second arc will end with the genre's death.

# Chapter 8: The constant increase of entropy is the basic law of the universe (I Was Stupid, So Stupid)

The eighth episode of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is an example of a hazard typical of shows which, like *Madoka Magica*, rely heavily on the "shocking swerve" ([54](#54__A)) to keep the plot moving: namely, an excellent character episode ends up largely overshadowed by a devastating plot development in its final moments. As such, we're going to largely ignore that plot development until [next chapter](#Chapter_9), and focus instead on the first 18 minutes or so of the episode.

Those first 18 minutes comprise one of the most focused episodes of the show; we spend all but a couple of scenes with Sayaka. Even one of those scenes is between Sayaka's satellite characters Kyousuke and Hitomi, and while it starts apart from her, its continuation is shown from her perspective. Almost all of the episode is thus dedicated to showing Sayaka's final breakdown, as the stress of being a magical girl, her complete loss of self-esteem after the revelation of what Kyubey has done to her body, and her refusal to purify her Soul Gem combine to utterly destroy her mental state.

This breakdown makes clear not only what has been going on with Sayaka, but a major component of what being a magical girl signifies in this world: to be a magical girl is to struggle constantly with depression—and the portrayal the show gives of depression is remarkably accurate to the lived experience of the disorder. The darkness which accumulates in each girl's Soul Gem as she uses magic is an external force that corrupts and distorts her worldview and thought processes, generating a cycle of despair that only darkens the gem faster and farther. Events in her life do not cause this cycle, but they can exacerbate and accelerate it ([55](#55__Compare)).

The common thread among all the magical girls we have seen is depression, though each expresses this state differently. Kyoko, for example, shows few outward signs of depression at first glance, but the previous episode made quite clear that she has totally cut herself off from humanity, burying herself in self-indulgence of her hedonistic impulses in order to escape the pain of her past. The images used in her flashback—in which she is frequently slumped over alone in a large space, or the only colored doll amongst a field of monochrome cut-outs—make clear the isolation she feels. Further, as someone who has experienced true hunger, she strongly associates food with comfort, as witness her offer of snacks to Sayaka shortly before the latter becomes a witch in this episode, to Madoka when they hatch their plan to try to retrieve Sayaka from her witch-state, and the piles of wrappers and containers in the apartment where she stashes Sayaka's body, both in the next episode. Food, for Kyoko, is a way to experience a connection to other people and the world that she consciously denies herself, as well as a means of self-medicating her feelings. In other words, the reason she is constantly eating may be because she has an eating disorder, one which could cause her serious harm if she were still fully human.

At the other end of the spectrum from Kyoko is Sayaka, who expresses her depression outwardly. In Sayaka's case, the frequent water imagery associated with her now carries a double meaning; she is, as her witch-form at the end of the episode suggests, playing the titular role of *The Little Mermaid*, referring here to the Hans Christian Anderson story about the maiden who sacrifices her physical form to be with the man she loves, only to have him (entirely unaware of her sacrifice) choose another ([56](#56__Hans)), as opposed to the now-familiar uplifting Disney movie about the otherkin who, through much hardship and sacrifice, is able to move into the species she believes she belongs in ([57](#57__Ana)). However, the imagery is equally a suggestion that Sayaka feels she is drowning, overwhelmed by a series of devastating losses and disappointments. At the start of this episode, she has already faced the disappointment of Kyousuke basically ignoring her from the moment he leaves the hospital, and of discovering that she's not the shining paragon of justice she hoped to become, but rather weaker than most magical girls. Compounding this, her depression distorts her perception, as depression tends to do, causing her to interpret everything that happens to her and that she does in the worst light possible. Thus, in her eyes, the changes to her physical form represent a total loss of humanity and strip her of all worth, Madoka's concern for her friend becomes reinterpreted as pity, and the misogynists on the train become representatives of a world not worth fighting to save anymore.

Central to Sayaka's collapse is her wish to heal Kyousuke, and the resulting lack of a relationship with him. It's an important choice that we do not hear his conversation with Hitomi; although the last episode and *Rebellion* both suggest that they do indeed start dating, Sayaka has no way of knowing this; she assumes that it's so both because she is putting the worst possible interpretation on everything that happens, and because her intense sense of inferiority leads her to elevate those around her. It is unthinkable to Sayaka that Hitomi won't get what she wants, because in Sayaka's distorted thinking Sayakas never get what they want and non-Sayakas always do. Sayaka's outburst on the train is likewise a response to her feelings about herself and Kyousuke; the talk of men callously abandoning women who care about them hits far too close to home for Sayaka not to lash out, and in (probably) murdering those men she is equally expressing her rage at Kyousuke, hence her comment shortly after that she no longer remembers what it was that she thought was worth fighting for.

Very different from Sayaka is the other collapse we see in this episode, Homura's. Like Sayaka, she is pushing against exhaustion. There have been moments throughout the series where we see quick flashes of Homura expressing anger or grief—and occasionally with other characters as well, such as during Sayaka's conversation with Madoka in the rain shelter. These scenes are somewhat ambiguous; they are clearly glimpses of the emotions Homura is trying to hide, but it is not entirely clear whether they are purely extradiegetic images for the audience's benefit or, given the revelation of Homura's true nature in this episode, glimpses of how certain scenes played out slightly differently in other timelines. In either case, her desperation and misery immediately after shooting Kyubey, when she pleads with Madoka to stop sacrificing herself and value her own life, is the first time we see her true face within the diegetic space of the show's depiction of this particular timeline. Even Madoka recognizes the significance of this moment, as it is the first time she fully recognizes that she has met Homura before.

The cool, efficient Homura we see the rest of the time is a portrait of "functional depression" or dysthymia, a less severe, but longer-lasting, form of depression than the more familiar major depressive disorder ([58](#58__American)). Like Kyoko, she is in a sense self-medicating, but in her case her "drug" of choice is the relentless pursuit of her cause. She has no hope, no belief that she can or will succeed or that anything will ever get better, but she is able to keep going because there are things she has to do. So long as she can keep moving, keep working toward this unachievable goal, she never has to think about how hopeless her situation is or how much suffering she has endured. So long as she keeps working, she does not need to think about how isolated she is, or that by working to save Madoka she has isolated herself from Madoka. As Sayaka astutely observes, Homura has given up on life just as much as Sayaka has; the difference is that Homura still has something she believes in. So long as Homura can continue to convince herself that nothing matters except helping Madoka, she can convince herself that her own feelings of despair and isolation do not matter, and thus keep herself from becoming a witch. In this sense Homura continues to be Mami's opposite number, since Mami likewise kept herself going through the isolation and loneliness of being a magical girl by dedicating herself to a cause.

Even Madoka herself shows hints of a generally depressed attitude, in particular a low self-worth and, as Homura points out, readiness to sacrifice herself for the sake of others (that is, valuing others above herself consistently). This bears little resemblance to the Madoka we will eventually see in other timelines, and suggests that, much as bits and pieces of other time lines bleed through Madoka's perception by way of dreams and quick flashes, so too has a little bit of the depression inherent in being a magical girl. The incompleteness and inconsistency of this depiction can thus be read as a consequence of the fact that she isn't actually a magical girl on this timeline.

These highly accurate and varied depictions of depression as lived from the inside are quite suggestive of the mental health history of the creators of the show, particularly Gen Urobuchi in light of his afterword to *Fate/Zero* Volume 1, as I quoted in [Chapters 4](#Chapter_4) and [5](#Chapter_5). Of course it is both unwise and extremely impolite to try to diagnose an artist through their work; it is critically important to distinguish between the *implied* author of a work, which is a construct created by the audience looking through the work in an attempt to see the person on the other side, and the *actual* author, who is a full and real person utterly unknowable to anyone except the people who actually know them. Indeed, in this case the actual authors are a multitude of people, including writers, directors, character designers, animators, and voice actors, while the implied author remains as always an individual. That said, the implied Urobuchi seems pretty depressed, in a state of despair sufficient that he cannot even imagine a positive world where good things happen or create art depicting such a world.

In the remaining episodes, it becomes clear that Kyubey's goal is to use the energies released by the magical girls and witches to combat entropy, holding back the inevitable decay of the universe by, in effect, transferring that decay from physical reality to the emotional state of the magical girls. The universe in which these characters live is suffused with decay, and that decay is equivalent to depression and despair. But that decaying universe itself exists within the mind of a depressed implied author straining to transcend his limitations; Kyubey's process, in other words, is an attempt to stave off and exorcize depression by transferring it from the mind of his author to the minds of the characters.

Yet this is also the episode in which the other characters, with the exception of Madoka, begin unambiguously treating Kyubey as an enemy. The end of the episode in particular makes it very clear, in framing, music, and timing, that Kyubey is a complete monster, smugly profiting from the torture of magical girls who had no idea what they were agreeing to. Even there, however, Kyubey's attempted manipulation of Madoka into wishing to save Sayaka follows immediately on the scene with the misogynists on the train, who talk about their plans to manipulate the women in their lives, whom they regard as inferior creatures. Sayaka's statement shortly after the Kyubey scene, that she no longer remembers what she was trying to save, thus embeds Kyubey's monstrosity within the question of whether humanity is really any better.

If Kyubey is the guardian and maintainer of the implied author's process of coping with depression, however, that paints the author in equally negative light, and further suggests that he is fully aware of and deliberately calling attention to how problematic this is. That, in turn, suggests that he is seeking another solution.

But to find it requires breaking the system he set up to begin with, which is to say the entire *Madoka Magica* universe. And to do that, he must first destroy the genre to which it belongs.

# Chapter 9: Gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance (I'd Never Allow That to Happen)

Magical girls have always been witches.

In the extradiegetic, historical sense, this is clearly true. The magical girl genre emerged as a direct result of the surprise popularity of *Bewitched* with a generation of Japanese schoolgirls ([59](#59__Sharalyn)). Samantha is the archetypal magical girl, conventionally attractive, traditionally feminine, with tremendous power tightly constrained within a limited sphere, and subject to the anxious masculinity that hedges her into that sphere. She can—and frequently does—assert herself, but ultimately she is trapped by the limitations of the norms of television in her time, bound to perform femininity with perfect makeup and hair, cute dresses, and a socially approved role as a wife and mother ([60](#60__Bewitched)).

While there are manga examples predating her, the first animated magical girl was likewise a witch, in *Sally the Witch*. Much, much younger than *Bewitched*'s Samantha, Sally of course does not take on a role as wife or mother, but instead performs a child's femininity, being sweet and cute and, despite her power, fundamentally harmless ([61](#61__Sally)).

So it went. By *Sailor Moon*, the norms of the genre were largely set. Magical girls, like witches, gain their power from otherworldly sources, whether granted by the ruler of the Mirror Kingdom, accidentally released from a mysterious book, or inborn as a result of their past lives in the royal courts of the Moon. Magical girls, like witches, have their familiars, sentient creatures taking on animal form. And of course, magical girls, like witches, wield tremendous and varied magical powers.

But curiously, those powers are always directed at enemies as otherworldly as the magical girl's origins—indeed, often the enemies are tied intimately to those origins. As a general rule, magical girls do not fight government corruption, corporate malfeasance, or even that mainstay of the masculine hero, street crime. Their power, in other words, not only comes from the fantastic, but can only be directed against the fantastic.

Which is the other sense in which all magical girls are witches. The figure of the witch is a symbol of the fear of female power; in a world where masculinity is identified with hegemony and dominance, femininity must be identified with powerlessness, submission, or restraint ([62](#62__Sandra)). The traditional expression of this idea in Japanese culture is the figure of the *ryosai kenbo*, the "good wife, wise mother," a feminine ideal for which Hitomi appears to be training in *Madoka Magica*. Possessed of tremendous social intelligence, the *ryosai kenbo* rules utterly in the domestic sphere, having mastered many arts, but all are for the pleasure or support of her family, particularly supporting her husband and raising her children. Said husband, meanwhile, is the only one who is allowed to assert power outside of that sphere ([63](#63__Kumiko)). Japanese folk and pop culture are rife with tales of the "bad" woman who wields power outside "her place," from the wife who turns out to be a shapeshifting kitsune ([64](#64__Smyers)) to the cannibalistic old mountain hag ([65](#65__Noriko)) to the seductive snow-woman who sucks the life-giving warmth from her paramour ([66](#66__Though)).

Of course the good girl/bad girl dichotomy is hardly unique to Japanese culture. In Western folklore and pop culture it is represented (among a multitude of other representations) by the passive princess waiting to be rescued and the wicked witch who threatens her and the hero alike. To wield power is inherently to be the bad girl, the witch, a menace to the status quo. ([67](#67__Gilbert))

The power of the magical girl is usually sanitized in two ways. First, as already mentioned, her power is not permitted to impact anything the viewer might recognize as part of reality, but is instead almost invariably focused on fantastical opponents. Second, as we discussed back in [Chapter 2](#Chapter_2), she is made to constantly perform femininity (remember, the counterpart to hegemonic masculinity is performed femininity), with frilly or skimpy costumes, elaborate poses, and of course the nude dance of the transformation sequence all serving to remind any potentially intimidated male viewers that she is still subject to the Male Gaze and still submitting to the social norms of the "good girl."

It is no accident that Sayaka's transformation into a witch immediately follows her using her powers on a pair of misogynists. She has stepped outside the boundaries of the good girl and challenged the status quo, and therefore is a bad girl, a wicked witch.

But this episode interrogates and ultimately subverts that binary in multiple ways. The most striking comes during Kyoko's fight with Oktavia, Sayaka's witch form; we see blue and red swirls of blood forming stylized images of Sayaka and Kyoko, which then swirl together into a rose, highly reminiscent of the opening to *Revolutionary Girl Utena* ([68](#68__Revolutionary)). That series also had a princess, the Rose Bride, who turned out to be a witch, and who (side by side with a swordwielding tomboy that positioned herself as the protector and rejected the usual feminine role) ultimately passed from submissive "good girl" to powerful and treacherous "bad girl" before finally breaking free of the entire system ([69](#69__Revolutionary)). That this is to be taken as a universal seems likely, given that said blood then splashes down in a shot framed to look like it is flowing from between Kyoko's legs.

In Western culture, the menstrual cycle has sometimes been posited as a particular punishment to women for their innate "badness," ([70](#70__For)) because of course it is the nature of performed femininity that to insist on being true to oneself is "bad" and leads inevitably to the label of witch. Thus all women have a "bad" streak, which is to say a coherent self that seeks expression.

But if magical girls and witches are truly one and have always been one, then what are we to make of Sayaka's transformation? Fortunately, the episode gives us the answer: it is the result of the system imposed by Kyubey. The magical girls' entire world has been imposed on them by the one significant male character, who holds total hegemony over them. His argument is that they have consented to take part in his system, which is of course absurd since he deliberately concealed crucial information from them; there are distinct shades of rape culture at work here, in the sense of the hegemonic male employing complex and nonsensical standards for what comprises consent, manipulating these definitions to place the blame on the victim.

But remember, Kyubey is a signifier of the implied author, who is not truly Gen Urobuchi but a gestalt entity formed from the combined efforts of writer, director, character designer, animators, voice actors, composer, and so on, an entire industry of creators. He spent this episode tricking Kyoko into treating Sayaka as someone to be saved, when he knows that Sayaka cannot be saved—after all, if she's been a witch all along, what is there to save her from? After successfully manipulating Kyoko into taking over the protector role—the same role which Sayaka was trying to fill—he tries to persuade Madoka to sacrifice herself similarly.

There is a term in anime fandom for a character (or, more accurately, a character trait) that invokes this protectiveness: *moe*. From the Japanese word "moeru," originally meaning "to burn" or "to scorch," it lent itself to meaning a passionate, burning feeling of protectiveness aroused by a helpless or endangered other. For an extended period in the late 2000s, an aesthetic rooted in that concept grew to dominate anime in general and magical girls in particular, though Saito locates its origins a decade earlier with otaku reactions to the *Sailor Moon* character Hotaru Tomoe (making the term something of a pun on her name). ([71](#71__Saito)) According to this aesthetic, the value of a character lies in their ability to evoke this protectiveness in a presumed-male audience, and the features which evoke it are helplessness, "cuteness," emotional vulnerability, and weakness, all coupled with a conventional and generic attractiveness ([72](#72__Patrick)). This is, of course, an extension of the same process that put Samantha under the thumb of her milquetoast husband and forces Sailor Moon to strip naked before she can access her powers; it renders the character harmless and therefore a "good girl," non-threatening to the inherent anxiety innate to hegemonic masculinity.

Kyubey stands revealed as the representative of a system that robs women of their power and makes them perform for his benefit, while also placing them into a position where their suffering is seen as proof of their need to be protected, which robs them of their power still further. He is, in other words, serving as an avatar of gender roles themselves. However, he is simply an instance of a larger and vaster system, which extends far beyond him; *Madoka Magica* itself is enmeshed in a larger culture, and while it can criticize ugly choices made in the name of economic viability, it cannot entirely escape them.

Nonetheless, the episode remains remarkably consistent. Sayaka's attempt to save others, to be the protector, transforms her into a monster. Kyoko and Madoka's attempt to save Sayaka gets them killed. Kyubey's quest to save the universe perpetuates a destructive and miserable system. And as we will see in the next episode, Homura's attempts to save Madoka are likewise doomed.

To seek to protect or save another, it seems, is inherently to rob them of power. But at the same time, the series has repeatedly vilified Kyubey for his lack of empathy, so it cannot be endorsing Objectivism, Ayn Rand's philosophy that includes rejecting altrusm as being immoral ([73](#73__Neera)). Is there, perhaps, a difference between *helping* and *saving*? Or, as Urobuchi wrote in the *Fate/zero* author's notes, is it simply that we are helpless, and everything is doomed to become worse as all systems, universes, societies, and psyches alike, hurtle toward heat-death ([74](#74__Urobuchi))?

# Chapter 10: Definitely not the same thing as optimism (I Won't Rely on Anyone Anymore)

Let's start back at the beginning.

Among many other things, *Madoka Magica* is a critique of *moe*, the fandom within anime fandom that celebrates weak, usually feminine characters that evoke a feeling of protectiveness. As we saw in Sayaka's arc, this protectiveness is futile and dangerous, because to be protected is to be objectified, to be treated as other than a full human being possessed of free agency.

Just as magical girls are witches, to be a protector is to be a destroyer, and this is just as true of Homura (whose family name, Akemi, means "fire," suggesting a connection to the "burning" of *moe*) as Sayaka. Note the precise nature of Homura's wish: to *switch places* with Madoka, to be the one to protect her *instead of* protected by her. By setting herself up as Madoka's protector, she inflicts the status of protected on Madoka, which (as we learn next episode) is the very reason Madoka has suffered so much—but that should not be a surprise, as over-protecting someone can very easily lead to them losing confidence.

The series' Buddhist roots are particularly important here, because Homura is being trapped by her own conception—rather than consult what Madoka wants, she is imposing her own notions of what she believes Madoka should want, which is really based in Homura's own desires. Homura's desires thus lead her to suffering, as the Buddha taught that they would ([75](#75__Smart)). She is also being led astray by believing that the concepts she imposes on the world are themselves real; by contrast, the impermanent and ever-changing world (including the impacts of her own wishes and actions) denies the distinctions she tries to draw, such as future/past, alive/dead, and human/magical girl/witch. This is very much the Zen notion that language and thought interfere with our ability to see the panenhenic truth that, rather than consisting of independent entities and states, the universe is only the ever-fluxing one-in-all ([76](#76__Smart)).

Homura first struggles to save Madoka from death because she sees it as different from life; then she struggles to save Madoka from becoming a witch because she sees it as different from being a magical girl; finally she struggles to save Madoka from becoming a magical girl because she sees it as different from being an ordinary human. But because she fundamentally does not understand what kind of a story she's in—and it is telling that she went to a *Christian* school before coming to Mitakihara Middle School—she cannot recognize that her actions will only ever make things worse.

In short, this isn't working.

Let's start back at the beginning.

[Last chapter](#Chapter_9) I discussed the magical girl genre's origins, and how the good girl/bad girl (or magical girl/witch, or Madonna/whore) dichotomy constrains the expression of feminine power into either channels non-threatening to masculine hegemony or into outsider figures, whether the witch deep in the woods or the magical girl who only ever fights monsters no one else can see.

Episode 10 uses multiple timelines to spread Homura's character out, and show her evolution from the non-threatening form to the outsider. In the first timeline, she is a powerless innocent, weak enough to become a witch's victim—although, foreshadowing her eventual cold determination, despite her physical frailty she is the only witch victim in the series who does not actually succumb to the witch's mental influence. As the timelines progress, she becomes more powerful and more of a transgressive figure. At the beginning of the second timeline, she is clearly the weakest and least skilled of the magical girls; her power to stop time is purely a support ability with no apparent offensive application, and her ability to physically harm witches is minimal. By the end of the timeline, however, she is capable of making and using homemade bombs in combination with her time stop to kill witches, and Madoka is delegated to the support role. In the third timeline, Homura becomes more powerful and more transgressive still, moving from making bombs at home to stealing guns from criminals, making her a match for Oktavia.

In the fourth timeline, Homura finally becomes the figure we know, coldly detached, her girlish pigtails and glasses—both signifiers of harmlessness—abandoned along with her uncertainty, as she robs the ultimate symbol of hegemonic masculinity, the military, to fight alone.

But these images of Homura are spread out, not from past to future, but across multiple timelines, meaning that in some sense all these Homuras exist simultaneously. The "outside" in which the outsider fights *is* a channel non-threatening to masculine hegemony. The apparent binary between them is just as illusory as that between magical girl and witch; Mami and Homura are two sides of the same coin.

Which means that Homura is not a rebuke of the magical girl genre or a challenge to the safe, non-challenging framework within which it resides. She is simply another manifestation of that framework, an alternate form of the magical girl with whom viewers are comfortable.

In short, this isn't working.

Let's start back at the beginning.

In [Chapter 1](#Chapter_1), I posited that there are three arcs to *Madoka Magica*, each focused on a particular character or pair of characters and each emphasizing different themes. Episode 9 closed out the Sayaka/Kyoko arc, which was largely about exploring depression and closing the circle on the magical girl genre. Episode 10, thus, serves as an introduction to the final arc, which focuses primarily on Homura.

We thus get an episode dedicated entirely to her perspective, following her as she repeatedly travels back in time in an attempt to avert Madoka's fate. Throughout this, Homura appears largely immune to the despair that overwhelmed Sayaka in her arc; the only time Homura comes close to becoming a witch in this episode is in the third timeline, when she suggests that she and Madoka become monsters and wipe away the entire world and all its sadness, which foreshadows both Madoka's eventual wish and much of the plot of *Rebellion*.

What makes the third timeline special? In the first timeline, Homura only becomes a magical girl after Walpurgisnacht kills Madoka. In the second, Homura's lack of injury suggests that she had little or no part in the fight with Walpurgisnacht. In the fourth, Madoka only becomes a magical girl after Walpurgisnacht defeats Homura.

The timeline on which Homura comes closest to being a witch is the timeline on which she actually gets her wish, to defend Madoka during the battle with Walpurgisnacht. This is the balance of hope and despair which Sayaka spoke about; the heights lead directly to the depths.

Homura is usually immune to despair, because she does not hope in the usual sense. Instead of hope, she relies on her determination and her love for Madoka; since neither is an innately good feeling, neither brings despair to balance it. Put another way, she epitomizes the concept of hope as described by the Czech playwright, philosopher, revolutionary, and statesman Vaclav Havel: "[hope] is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." ([77](#77__Vaclav))

As she says at the end of the episode, she can keep going no matter how long it takes, so long as it is for Madoka. But what then to make of her breakdown in Episode 8? Madoka seems determined to sacrifice herself in every timeline, and this is the single greatest threat to Homura's plan. Homura is functionally depressed, which is to say that while she is functional, she is also depressed, and all it takes is a slight push downward to make her collapse.

In short, this isn't working.

Let's start back at the beginning.

Episode 10 presents us with a series of alternate timelines, adjacent to the events of the show. As each timeline reaches the apocalyptic disaster of Walpurgisnacht, Homura resets herself to the day she left the hospital and tries again. However, it appears that she is not just traveling back in time, but also across timelines, as elements seem to change from timeline to timeline regardless of Homura's involvement—for example, in the first timeline Madoka becomes a magical girl before Homura leaves the hospital.

Throughout these four alternate timelines, there are echoes (or omens, depending on your point of view) of events in the series' main timeline, from the shot of Madoka's shoes as she turns to face Homura in the school hallway in the first timeline (an echo of a similar shot of Homura turning in the same scene in the first episode) to Kyoko's refusal to accept that Oktavia has completely replaced the Sayaka she knew.

But more interesting are the subtler echoes. Homura's repeated awakenings in the hospital, for instance, echo Charlotte's Witch Seed hatching at a hospital in Episode 3, strengthening the parallel between them as harbingers of the true series and Mami's nemeses. Madoka's pleading with Homura to prevent her from making the mistake of contracting with Kyubey places Homura in the position of making that mistake in Madoka's place, echoing Junko's advice in Episode 6. Even Homura's gradual loss of innocence and transformation into a darker, more mature, and more transgressive figure parallels Sayaka's entire arc.

These echoes serve not only to make clear how the timelines relate to one another; they also recontextualize the events they echo. From Homura's point of view, these are not echoes but prefigurations (as, indeed, some are for the viewer as well, such as Mami being the first to attack the other magical girls, foreshadowing *Rebellion*); all this has happened before, and likely will happen again.

Two episodes utterly transform the series. On a first viewing, these two episodes stand out as moments when what appeared to be a show about one thing suddenly becomes a different show entirely. As in a mirror, they are at precisely opposite ends of the series, the third episode and the third-to-last. This is the second of these episodes.

If nothing else (and it is much else), *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is a meticulously structured series. Every moment of it is carefully placed to advance a complex story with extensive character development in a surprisingly small space. One example of that meticulous structure is the symmetry throughout the series, the way in which moments large and small repeat at precisely the right time.

In short, this isn't working.

# Chapter 11: Perhaps hopelessness is (The Only Thing I Have Left to Guide Me)

We begin at the end, with the wheel of fate ([78](#78__The)). It is everywhere in this episode. The great grinding gears of Walpurgisnacht are the cycles of hope and despair that transform the magical girls (back) into witches, and they are the endless cycles of reset time Homura creates. Both are the wheel of fate, as is the round clockwork buckler Homura uses to travel in time.

At the far end of the episode from them, Kyubey explains that Homura created Madoka. With every rebirth, Madoka carries the karmic burdens of the previous cycle into the next ([79](#79__This)). In other words, though Madoka carries no concrete memories from time to time, only a few vague impressions no doubt arising from her deep connections to the one person who does remember previous timelines, and though she is physically recreated in each timeline, she still maintains the connections to the world of the previous timeline. And since these worlds are being created and destroyed for her, it is the weight of the entire world she carries.

And it is a weight. In the end, these connections to a world hurtling headlong to destruction can lead only to suffering ([80](#80__Smart)). The rising entropy of the world feeds into Madoka, transforming her in successive timelines from an inexperienced, but outgoing and confident, magical girl to an uncertain and unpowered sidekick whose associated heroines keep dying.

And why does this happen? Because Homura tried to protect her. Homura is a Christian (or, at least, attended a Christian school). Like Kyoko, she has absorbed the belief that it is possible for one person to save another—that there is something to be saved from, and somewhere to be saved to. It is a fundamentally dualistic proposition—*here* is bad, but *there* is good. But as Kyubey has made clear with his talk of karmic balance, we are in a Buddhist world. What both Kyubey and Homura have failed to understand is that in a Buddhist universe, the decay of the material world is an illusion because all distinctions are illusions ([81](#81__Smart)). The past is the present is the future. Decay is life. Magical girls are witches. The material is immaterial, and the other is the self. Homura cannot save Madoka because there is no Madoka to save and nothing from which to save her. All things are One—and since this is a fictional story, that One is the narrative itself, and in turn the *gestalt* entity within which that narrative takes form, the implied author.

We no longer have a Mami to contrast with Homura, but we do have the woman who kept being paralleled to Mami in the early episodes, Junko, who has two very important scenes in this episode. In the first, she discusses Sayaka's disappearance and its effect on Madoka with Madoka's English teacher. In this scene, she seems to parallel Sayaka more than Mami: she is gently chastened for her inability to stand by and do nothing, for insisting on *doing* rather than *being*, and a shot from the teacher's point of view is bathed in blue light and framed to focus on her hair clip, with the result that she even looks like Sayaka.

Hovering above Junko throughout the conversation with Madoka's teacher is a reproduction of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. Notably, the position of the two characters aligns Junko with God and the teacher with Adam; at the same time, the red lighting on the teacher's side and blue lighting on Junko's causes God's red mantle (which has been compared by scholars to both a uterus ([82](#82__Adrian)) and a brain ([83](#83__Frank))) to be barely visible; it is instead Adam who appears wrapped safely in red warmth. This image foreshadows Junko's second scene in the episode, in the shelter, when she realizes that she has to stop protecting Madoka and start trusting her. It is a tragic scene, culminating in possibly the single densest shot in the series, a simple image of Junko's mom-jeans-and-sweater-clad crotch, lower abdomen, and hand, Madoka's mother reduced to a womb. The hand reaches out as if to grab Madoka, pull her inside—and then stops, and we cut back to Junko's face. The woman will not be idealized (read: reduced and objectified) as a mother; she overrides her own mothering tendency and makes the active choice not to act, to allow Madoka to risk the life Madoka owns. Watching, we feel Junko's pain as she lets go, but we also feel the profound respect and trust she is showing toward her daughter.

But Homura has been doing the opposite, pursuing a Christian ideal of salvation, in which the higher protects the lower, a permanent womb. She is trying to block Madoka from choosing the self-sacrifice she knows Madoka would make; if Junko is showing respect and trust toward Madoka, what is Homura showing toward her?

The answer, as of all people the supposedly unempathic and unemotional Kyubey notes (revealing once again that he has plenty of *intellectual* empathy, just no *emotional* empathy, a not entirely inaccurate first-order description of a sociopath ([84](#84__Note))), is that it has long ago ceased to be about Madoka. Homura herself described her journey to protect Madoka as a labyrinth, and the inside of her apartment resembles nothing so much as the surreal interior of a witch's labyrinth. Extradiegetically, magical girls began as witches; diegetically, they all end as witches. Homura can transcend time. In Homura, all things are one: the past, present, and future become a single wheel. She is, in other words, both magical girl and witch, trapped in a temporal labyrinth that is the narrative of the series itself. In that role as magical girl/witch, she brings both wishes and curses, at once protecting Madoka and ensuring her destruction.

But what transforms a magical girl into a witch is the transition from hope to despair, from the optimism that things will work out to the realization that death and decay are inevitable and inescapable, and Homura has never experienced that transition. Homura has never had hope. She was a weak and sickly child who became a magical girl out of desperation and a sense of duty, wishing to become not Madoka's savior but her protector. Even in her wishes, she does not imagine that she will actually *succeed*, only that she will try. She is entirely and innately hopeless, and as such she is immune to despair—because like all other binaries, hope and despair are one. Thus it is not hopelessness that finally breaks Homura; rather, the realization that she is making things worse causes her to doubt her path for the very first time. For her, it is the transition from determination to doubt that threatens to bring about her transformation.

And there laughing at her is Walpurgisnacht, the witches' Sabbath ([85](#85__On)), the wheel of fate, the Harlequin. A theatrical figure, the Harlequin fulfills the promise of the rising curtain at the beginning of the first episode—and, too, the theater plays the same show every night, with only slight variations, reflecting the wheel of fate and Homura's endless looping. In the harlequinades of the old *commedia dell'arte*, the Harlequin is a trickster figure, mocking all authority and order, and in particular making a mockery of tragic tales of doomed romance ([86](#86__Giacomo)). Like the Harlequin, Walpurgisnacht will dance forever with Homura, laughing at her and snatching away Madoka, her love, defying rules or containment, a living symbol of the irreducible unpredictability and chaos of life. There is no higher and lower in the face of a trickster, only people. Rules are broken. Systems come crashing down.

And it is in this moment that Madoka arrives to make her wish.

# Chapter 12: That nourishes human hope (My Very Best Friend)

In the final episode of *Madoka Magica*, failure is victory is loss is triumph.

We open with the same tableau that ended the previous episode. Four figures remain, the key players in this apocalypse, for apocalypse it is: Every timeline we have seen has ended with a fight against Walpurgisnacht. There is nothing beyond the fight with her, because Homura keeps resetting the universe before the future can occur. Homura is the first figure, broken and bleeding, the sad clown who is endlessly victimized by her desperate attempts to find meaning in an absurd and uncaring universe. Laughing at her mockingly is the instrument of her defeat, Walpurgisnacht, the Harlequin who signifies that absurdity. Between them is Kyubey, the director, author, orchestrator, the master manipulator who choreographs their dance to please his unseen audience and thus derive power and sustenance from their emotional arcs.

But then there is Madoka. She has been inert, the prize the others fight over, but now at last she makes her choice. And what a choice it is: death. She will become death, the destroyer of worlds, slaying all witches at the moment of their birth, until ultimately there are none left but she herself, and then she will kill herself.

But Madoka is not Sayaka. This is not suicide; this is the transcendent death, the death of the ego that gives access to eternity and unity ([87](#87__Smart)). There is no more Madoka; she is an existence without beginning or end, and within her all things are one.

First, however, a long-promised cake. That was the agreement between her and Mami, after all: that if Madoka could find nothing to wish for, they would share a cake. But Madoka just made her wish; why, therefore, does she have cake with Mami?

Because Madoka has solved the paradox. To become enlightened, to escape the karmic cycle of hope and despair in which the magical girls are trapped, one must shed all desire. But if one sheds all desire, including the desire to transcend, why would anyone transcend? Madoka has found the answer: the death of ego, the erasure of the self-other distinction, which eliminates desire because the subject doing the desiring and the object of the desire are one and the same. "If you meet a Buddha, kill the Buddha." ([88](#88__A)) Though she made the wish only moments ago (insofar as that concept can mean anything now that she exists equally throughout all of time), she no longer has any wishes, so she receives enlightenment and cake.

There is more to this scene than cake, however. Madoka is handed back her notebook of costume designs by Mami, the protector and signifier of the traditional magical girl show. When Mami died, Madoka stopped talking about becoming a magical girl as a way to find purpose; instead, it became a sacrifice she repeatedly considered making for the good of others. By returning the notebook, Mami is symbolically passing the role of guardian of the magical girl tradition to Madoka, while at the same time restoring the idea that being a magical girl can be a calling rather than a sacrifice.

Because if there is one thing Madoka most definitely is not, it's a martyr. She is not a Christ-figure, suffering and dying as a way of absorbing the sins of others; she explicitly destroys the witch-aspect of herself which carries that suffering. She is egoless and transcendent, and thus cannot suffer. Her role in this Faustian tale is that of Gretchen ([89](#89__Johann)), and as such she is more of a Marian figure, pure and unsullied, interceding to obtain a state of grace for others. Except even that is not quite accurate, because Madoka *doesn't* intercede or plead mercy for the magical girls. They still become witches and die; the only change is that their witch-forms do not exist in this world, because Madoka erases them at the moment of creation. They still suffer and still despair, still die—but such is the nature of living in this world. Madoka's role is as guide and teacher, a psychopomp who carries the magical girls out of the world before they can become a problem for it. With her in her pure land ([90](#90__The)), they learn, and perhaps someday transcend as she has. Meanwhile, on Earth, things are imperfect, but better.

"*Daijobu*." "It will be all right." This is what Madoka tells Homura just before she appears in the final form variously dubbed Madokami or Godoka by fans (though Madokanon ([91](#91__Kanon)) would be more appropriate, as she is more Bodhisattva than divinity). It is a powerful phrase in the iconographic roots of the show; in *Cardcaptor Sakura* it was the ultimate spell the heroine created at the end of the series, an expression of hope of nigh-limitless power ([92](#92___)). Madoka is already carrying out her duties as the warden and guardian and magical girls past. At the same time, however, her transformation sequence is brief, nonsexualized, and strongly implies her costume to be made from an Anthony—the familiars that dominated the witch's labyrinth in the first episode, the first instance of the strange and wild new aesthetic the show introduced.

Madoka is becoming a bridge between the old genre and the new. She speaks the assurances of the old genre to the representative of the new one. She gives her ribbons—chosen for her by Junko, who has repeatedly been paralleled to Mami—to Homura as well. It is not a complete restoration of the magical girl tradition—the new world is still dark, and being a magical girl is fraught with dangers and likely to end with death—but a partial restoration, acknowledging that there were good stories, good characters, and true themes to be found among magical girl shows past.

Chief among those themes is hope. Naïve hope, the optimistic belief that things will get better, is a trap, yes. Anyone sitting around and waiting for a savior or a lucky break is doomed to disappointment. It is the nature of an entropic universe that if things can get worse, they will, and things can always get worse. But there is another form of hope, the hope embraced in the end by Homura. If things can and will get worse, then that necessarily means that at this moment, the universe is not at maximum awfulness; there must be something good in the world right now. That good can be sought out. It can be fought for, preserved for a little while. Entropy can be reversed locally.

Madoka has attained enlightenment and divorced herself from this decaying world. But she has not abandoned it; the world she creates is better. Not perfect, because a perfect world is a world devoid of story, but better. The magical girls still inevitably die, but so does everyone else; what's important is that they now have a far better idea of how the system works and a much better relationship with each other and the Incubators—notably, the fact that wraiths drop a number of little magic-restoratives rather than one big one encourages the magical girls to work together. Teams are likely the norm in this new world, rather than solitary girls as in the old world, and since the Incubators can no longer derive energy from the despair of the witches, they have no incentive to make the girls suffer or hide from them how the system works.

Even Junko is shown in a new environment. We have seen her driven and determined before, concerned, caring, but this final sequence is the first time that we see her being happy. It's conceivable that this scene implies that Junko is a very different person in the new timeline, less driven and more nostalgic, but there's little reason to believe this is the case. It seems highly unlikely Madoka would replace her mother with a different woman, and far more likely that this is what Junko is like when she's relaxing and having a day out with her family. Her dynamic with Madoka's father is unchanged—he cares for Tetsuya while Junko deals with the outside world, in this case talking to Homura—and so it is likely that she is still the primary earner, the driven executive. It is simply that we can now see that she also contains within herself nostalgia and serenity and wistfulness; she contains contradictions, just as the magical girls/witches contain both curses and blessings, as this ending is both happy and sad, a win and a loss.

Seeing Junko and Tetsuya helps Homura to understand that there can be good things in what for her is a dark, Madoka-less world. She continues on, affirmed in her knowledge that Madoka is all around her, even if she cannot see her. She does not fight for hope in the normal sense, but out of love, and duty, and hope in the Havelian sense that whether or not she succeeds, her life *makes sense* as long as she fights. And so she fails to save Madoka, and in her failure succeeds in empowering Madoka to save herself. Madoka saves herself by sacrificing herself, and Homura loses her—but someday, when Homura expends the last of her energy and loses her last battle as a magical girl, she will be together with Madoka again.

But this is not for Homura alone. Someone else has been working, trying to stave off decay, but increasingly concerned that their efforts are doomed. "In order to write a perfect ending for a story you have to twist the laws of cause and effect," Urobuchi wrote in the afterword we have quoted twice before, "reverse black and white, and even possess a power to move in the opposite direction from the rule of the universe." ([93](#93__Urobuchi)) The implied author of that note and this series is a deeply depressed individual, spiraling into a creative abyss brought on by despair.

"Only a heavenly and chaste soul that can sing carols of praise towards humanity can save the story." And now, in Madoka, all things are one. This is fiction, a creation within the mind of an author (even the *gestalt* implied author of a collaboration); the author is that one. Madoka loved something in the world enough to deem it worth saving, and she is part of that author. Homura will accept that love as reason enough to keep moving and working, and she is part of that author. Just as Homura is not suddenly all smiles and laughs in the new world, this is not a panacea—but it is enough to keep going for a while longer.

—Don't forget. Always, somewhere, someone is fighting for you.

—As long as you remember her, you are not alone.

The projector winds to a stop.

# Interlude 1: One Perfect Moment

It is nigh-impossible to discuss *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* for long without bringing up Goethe's *Faust*. Quoted directly in the form of graffiti of the German text appearing on a wall in Episode 2, Goethe's retelling of the ancient legend of a man who made a deal with the devil heavily informs the entire series.

A brief summary of *Faust*: Faust, an old man who is a wise sage but finds no joy in his life, makes a deal with the demon Mephistopheles to become young again and try living his life differently. Mephistopheles agrees to show Faust all the pleasures and joys of life he missed, but in return, if Faust ever experiences a moment of perfect happiness so great that he wishes to stop time and make it last forever, Faust will immediately die and go to Hell. The first part (published 1808, revised 1828) mostly follows Faust as he woos a young woman named Margarete (sometimes also known by the short form Gretchen). After he kills her brother, he leaves for a while to celebrate *Walpurgisnacht*, when German folklore says witches and demons have an orgy on Mt Brocken. He returns to find Gretchen is now mad and in prison, and she gave birth to his child but it was taken away. He tries to free her, but she is so delusional she cannot understand what is going on and he is forced to leave her behind as he flees the guards. ([94](#94__Goethe))

Part two (published 1832, the year of Goethe's death) is much stranger: Faust is now getting old again, a successful and wealthy man and a powerful sorcerer, and he has time-travel adventures, has an affair with Helen of Troy, and wins a war by bringing in an army of demons. At the end, he finally does something motivated solely by the good of another, instead of himself, and experiences a moment of perfect happiness. He dies, but because it was doing a good deed, he goes to judgment instead of immediately to Hell. Gretchen pleads with the Virgin Mary to let her guide him into Heaven, and Mary agrees. ([95](#95__Calvin))

References to *Faust* abound in the series. Beside the aforementioned graffiti, *Faust* quotes frequently appear as cryptograms inside the witches' barriers. More importantly, the story itself has many Faustian elements. Walpurgisnacht, for example, while it is referred to as an immensely powerful witch, appears to actually be an event involving many witches engaging in an orgy of destruction, just as in *Faust*. The witch's barriers are prisons created by overwriting reality with their own despair and madness, just like Gretchen experiences near the end of *Faust*'s first part. A moment of perfect happiness leads directly to Hell for Faust, and this happens to multiple characters in the anime: Mami goes in moments from the blissful discovery that she has friends and allies to her brutal death; Kyoko's father is happy to have a congregation that listens to him, only to commit murder-suicide when he discovers how Kyoko made it happen; Sayaka experiences the happiness of knowing she has saved Kyousuke, only for that to turn out to be the beginning of her descent to despair and witchery.

Even moreso, the story of *Madoka Magica* is arguably a retelling of *Faust*. Kyubey is clearly Mephistopheles; he first appears as a cute animal, and is soon revealed as a frightening, powerful predator who offers wishes in exchange for souls. Just as Mephistopheles wants Faust to experience a moment of happiness and then descend forever into Hell, Kyubey is preying on the emotional highs and lows of the magical girls, and wants the energy released when they descend into despair and become witches.

Since Kyubey's primary target is Madoka, it might be tempting to see her as Faust, but that would be a mistake. The anime more readily compares her to Gretchen; her witch form is named Gretchen Kriemhilde, for example. Kyubey spends most of the anime trying and failing to get her to take the contract, before finally succeeding, just as Mephistopheles is frustrated in his first few attempts to corrupt Gretchen so that he can make her fall for Faust. Finally, Madoka's wish to guide magical girls away from being witches parallels Gretchen's wish to guide Faust into Heaven. Madoka also takes on a role as a savior and protector, similar to that taken in *Faust* by the Marian, divine principle of the Eternal Feminine, with which Gretchen is associated ([96](#96__Elena)).

If not Madoka, who is Faust? Homura is a fairly close match. Like Faust, she makes a bargain with the devil to turn back time and correct the mistakes she believes she has made. (More literally in Homura's case, but then again Faust eventually time-travels, too.) Her closeness to Madoka and desire to rescue her also reflect Faust's feelings for Gretchen, and her power to stop time may be a reference to the conditions of Faust's curse. Finally, like Faust she eventually learns that her attempt to turn back the clock has only made things worse.

However, *Madoka Magica* also subverts *Faust*. In the end, Homura's wish is not a mistake but key to breaking the cycle, and Madoka/Gretchen appeals to Kyubey/Mephistopheles, not Mary or God, to gain the power to guide others to Heaven. That is because Madoka is neither a character from *Faust* nor a Christian figure at all. Her true role is as a character from another mythology entirely.

Just as *Madoka Magica* presents a typically magical girl "false" veneer before pushing it aside to bring in the "true" form of the show, it also presents a Faustian, Christian surface reading that masks an underlying, essentially Buddhist story. Most immediately noticeably, one of the central tenets of Buddhism is that desire leads to suffering ([97](#97__Smart)), and this is very much the case in *Madoka Magica*. All wishes lead ultimately to pain and despair; emotional highs are balanced by emotional lows.

Another key Buddhist concept that the series addresses by name is karma. Karma is a very complex concept, and different sects view it very differently. Broadly, however, the Buddhist view can be very loosely summed up as cause and effect: action plants seeds which grow (maybe in this life, maybe in the next) into consequences. Good actions lead to good consequences and bad to bad, but either way, it has the effect of trapping you in the cycle of karma, because those consequences lead to further action which leads to more consequences ([98](#98__Ibid)). The magical girl happiness-despair cycle works in much the same way, dragging the magical girls steadily down to witch-hood.

The weight of karma also binds people to a cycle of rebirth in Buddhist belief, forcing them to live over and over again, facing the burdens of the karma from past lives ([99](#99__Smart)), much as Homura is trapped in the looping timelines illustrated in Episode 10. Enlightenment, the understanding of the true nature of the world, is the only way to escape this cycle of karma—and it is only on the last cycle that Madoka learns both of Homura's time travel (the cycle of rebirth) and precisely what the Incubators are doing (the nature of karma). Finally, Walpurgisnacht strongly resembles a lotus blossom (a symbol of enlightenment ([100](#100__Most))) while at the same time the gear motif reflects the ever-grinding wheel of *dharma* ([101](#101__Smart)).

As noted earlier, Madoka resembles a figure from Buddhist mythology, the bodhisattva Kanon (Japanese) or Kuanyin (Chinese). Kanon was a young girl who nearly attained nirvana, but stopped just before she reached it. She transcended space and time to reach out to others and help them to Enlightenment, before finally ascending to nirvana herself. This helps explain the Virgin Mary connection, as well, as the similarity between Kanon and Mary is quite noticeable and frequently commented upon ([102](#102__Smart)).

Thus it is that after saving everyone across time and space as a bodhisattva, Madoka then crosses the threshold to the next level. She becomes a force of nature, an incarnation of hope, dissolving her consciousness, and attaining nirvana.

Or that would be the plan, anyway. As we will see, she takes something of a detour along the way.

Part Two

The Comics

# Chapter 13: Don't forget (Puella Magi Kazumi Magica)

There are three major tenets established over the course of the *Madoka Magica* television series that, together, pose something of a challenge for each of the three spinoffs I'll be addressing in this section. First, magical girls are and always have been witches, dating back to the origin of magical girls. Given the original nature of witches as an image of the patriarchal fear of feminine power ([103](#103__Gilbert)), this means magical girls within *Madoka Magica* are both inherently a challenge to the dominant power structure and easily readable as a corrupt and corrupting element. Second, the world of *Madoka Magica* is dominated by the Incubators' system, in which cosmic entropy is cleansed by converting it to the emotional decay of magical girls into witches without their consent—that is, the dominant power structure is exploitative of and deeply unjust toward women. Third, this power structure is highly stable, and is not overthrown until Madoka makes her wish and creates her new system.

Leaving for now the question of whether Madoka's system is any more just than Kyubey's (but see [Interlude 2](#Interlude_2) and [Chapter 17](#Chapter_17)), the third tenet means that any spinoff work set during the show's main timeline or any of the "prior" timelines in which Kyubey's system dominates must ultimately treat Kyubey's system as an inescapable and unchangeable fact. Add in the ways in which Kyubey's system constrains and exploits the power of the magical girls (the second tenet) and the equation of that power to a tradition that depicts feminine power as corrupt and dangerous (the first tenet), and it becomes quite easy for a spinoff to fall into the trap of depicting the magical girls as dangerous and Kyubey's system as a necessary evil to contain them, or worse, a net positive.

This is precisely the trap into which the manga series *Puella Magi Kazumi Magica* (written by Masaki Hiramatsu, art by Takashi Tensugi) falls.

*Kazumi Magica* opens with the titular Kazumi as a near-total blank slate, naked, sealed in a trunk, with no memory of her past. This is an extreme form of what the infamous *Turkey City Lexicon* ([104](#104__The)) refers to as "White Room Syndrome," in which a story opens with a lone character in a white room wondering how they came to be there; the *Lexicon* rather uncharitably, but perhaps accurately, makes the assumption that this is because the author has yet to figure out the setting or characters. It is unclear whether this critique applies to *Kazumi Magica*; on the one hand, Kazumi's lack of memory serves an important plot function, since it allows her to serve as a vehicle for the audience to discover the truth about her identity and the Pleiades magical girl team. However, *Kazumi Magica* was a fairly long-running series at 23 monthly chapters, and began well before the series ended. Many of the later revelations in *Kazumi Magica* logically depend on late-series revelation in *Madoka Magica*, and it is unclear whether these revelations were held back to avoid the spinoff comic spoiling reveals in its parent series, or because Hiramatsu and Tensegu were unaware of the relevant spoilers and had to alter their comic's course in mid-stream to avoid contradicting the parent series.

From here the comic moves into the reveal that Kazumi and her friends are magical girls, members of a seven-member team called the Pleiades, and supported by a seemingly friendlier variant of Kyubey named Juubey. As the comic unfolds, the reader learns that these Pleiades are far darker than they initially appear. Ultimately, it is revealed that they were originally a cooperative group of magical girls for whom Kazumi served as a mentor, but she eventually transformed into a witch. They combined their powers to transform Kazumi back into a humanlike form, and also killed and converted their local instance of Kyubey into Juubey, at the same time covering the entire city in a spell that renders the replacement Kyubey imperceptible. The Pleiades erroneously believe that Juubey can clean their soul gems for them, but in fact he only creates the illusion of cleansing; underneath, they are still slowly descending into witchery. Kazumi, meanwhile, is only the latest in a series of attempts to resurrect the original; each one eventually breaks down and becomes a witch. In the finale, all but two of the Pleiades are killed and a massive conglomerate witch created, but Kazumi comes to realize she is a different person from the original, and contracts with Kyubey to become a magical girl and save the city and remaining Pleiades.

What the rather convoluted story (made more so by the backstory being told in the order Kazumi discovers it, rather than the order in which it happened) does is literalize the unity of the witch and magical girl, which I discussed back in [Chapter 9](#Chapter_9). However, by doing so it does not attempt to redeem the witch; rather, it depicts magical girls as a kind of witch. Visually, this is shown in the contrast between what we might call Kazumi's "civilian" mode of dress, characterized in the second issue as being appropriate for a much younger child, and her magical girl outfit, which is significantly skimpier than the outfits in the TV series and resembles a sexualized version of a Halloween witch costume—broad-brimmed, high-peaked black hat, tiny black skirt, bare midriff, tight blouse. Contrast Madoka's frilly pink dress, Sayaka's boyish armor, or even the most sexualized outfits in the show, Mami's high-necked, corseted dress and leggings or Kyoko's mostly unzipped sweatshirt and skirt over pants, and the distinction the comic is drawing between the innocent child and the powerful, dangerous, sexual magical girl becomes clear.

This is the greatest contrast between the comic and the series: where the unity of magical girl and witch in *Madoka Magica* is part of a statement about the cycle of hope and despair, in *Kazumi Magica* it is instead an embrace of the Madonna/whore complex. Magical girls are, in this series, all hiding terrible secrets, either that they are witches (Kazumi) or that they have done terrible things in the past (the Pleiades). Without exception, every one of the Pleiades is haunted by some misdeed from before they became magical girls, engages in deceiving Kazumi, and helps hunt and imprison other magical girls before they can become witches. This transformation is not depicted as the gradual descent into despair we saw Sayaka experience in *Madoka Magica*, but as simply what happens when one uses too much magic; in other words, the witch is not a product of despair but of the exercise of feminine power. Even more blatantly, the early villains are magical girls with the power to directly transform women into pseudo-witches.

The true witches, when we eventually see them, are also quite different from *Madoka Magica*. There, witches were implied to be mindless, delusional, and trapped within their barriers; in *Kazumi Magica*, they can interact with and experience the world directly, and some have personality and intellect. They are thus not *Faust* references and women's despair made flesh, but grotesque transformations of the magical girls' bodies. Essentially the only difference, in *Kazumi Magica*, between a magical girl and a witch is that the magical girl is "cute" or "sexy," while the witch is deformed or physically monstrous. The ugliness of the witch, in other words, is not her association with ugly emotions, but that she is no longer attractive to the Male Gaze, which the comic employs far more frequently than the TV series.

The ending, too, denies the nature of the witch as depicted in *Madoka Magica*. Once Kazumi and her two surviving friends are again working within Kyubey's system, the comic has Kazumi's narration baldly assert that they will not become witches. The hope-despair cycle of *Madoka Magica* is denied entirely; instead, we have a depiction of feminine power as being permitted to continue only so long as it is constrained within a role of combating negative expressions of feminine power. As long as magical girls limit themselves to fighting witches and do not try to challenge Kyubey or his corrupt system, the comic asserts, they may continue to live and wield their power.

Ultimately, *Kazumi Magica* falls neatly for the trap of (hopefully unintentionally) asserting that Kyubey's system is necessary to constrain women from wielding power in ways that might challenge the status quo.

# Chapter 14: Always, somewhere, someone is fighting for you (Puella Magi Oriko Magica)

Like *Kazumi Magica*, the comic series *Puella Magi Oriko Magica* (by Mura Kuroe, based on a story by Magica Quartet, a collective name for *Madoka Magica* producer Atsuhiro Iwakami, director Akiyuki Shinbo, writer Gen Urobuchi, and character designer Ume Aoki) must grapple with the trap created by the three inescapable truths of the series—to recap, that witches are both a challenge to the dominant power structure and a corrupt element, that said dominant power structure, represented by Kyubey, is massively unfair, and that said power structure cannot be overthrown within a spinoff, because that overthrow occurs within the final episode of *Madoka Magica*. *Kazumi Magica* emphasized the first tenet, and so fell into the trap of vilifying opposition to the system. *Oriko Magica* instead emphasizes the third tenet, and so avoids that trap, but at the price of becoming a tragedy.

Much like *Madoka Magica*, *Oriko Magica* is divided into three arcs, tied together by the titular Oriko. The first is a red herring both in and out of the story: in what is revealed in the third arc to be a ploy to distract Kyubey, Oriko manipulates an abused, orphaned small child named Yuma into contracting as a magical girl. For the reader, this creates the expectation that the comic will largely be—as the first two chapters actually are—the story of the friendship and mentor-pupil relationship between Kyoko and Yuma. However, the second arc belies this expectation, as that story is abruptly cut off at the end of the second chapter; the third and fourth chapters instead follow Mami, as she investigates the serial murders of magical girls and engages in combat with the culprit, Oriko's friend and fellow magical girl Kirika. Despite Kirika's power to slow time, Mami is eventually able to severely injure her, and Kirika flees back to Oriko. The final arc picks up at Mitakihara Middle School, where Oriko and Kirika take over and create a witch's barrier over the entire school. This arc mostly follows Homura, as we learn Oriko's true goal is to save the world from the witch Madoka will eventually become by killing her now, and Homura of course soon confronts and battles Oriko. Kirika becomes a witch (unstated, but implied, is that she began transforming after her battle with Mami, and that the barrier around the school and familiars attacking the students are hers), and Mami, Kyoko, and Yuma fight her. Ultimately, Homura succeeds in killing Oriko, but Oriko kills Madoka in her final moments, causing Homura to reset the timeline.

Tragedy abounds in this story; nearly every character is undone by what appear to be positive impulses. Most obviously, Homura fails to protect Madoka and Oriko dies because they are both determined to protect what is important to them. Oriko cannot risk the destruction of the world by Madoka and thus sees no possible course of action except to try to kill her; Homura cannot risk harm coming to Madoka, and thus sees no possible course of action but destroying Oriko. The end result is that both fail: Homura resets the timeline, ultimately leading to the series timeline, Madoka's rewrite of history, and the destruction of all the timelines where witches existed, including Oriko's; Oriko, meanwhile, kills the Madoka of her timeline, making this yet another failure for Homura. But tragedy abounds for the other characters, as well. Madoka is only in position for Oriko to kill her because of her desire to help Homura; if she'd stayed within the protective barrier Homura made for her, she'd have survived. Kyoko tries to protect Yuma from the dangers of the magical girl life, but in the process makes Yuma worried that she's useless; Yuma then becomes a magical girl in order to be useful to Kyoko. And Kirika wished only to have the courage to stop being a loner, but in the process became a predator.

But perhaps most tragic in all of this is Oriko, who can see the future. The comic ends with a rather ambiguous scene: Kirika approaches a depressed-seeming Oriko, who reveals she has killed a large number of people. Kirika offers to share her burden, and the two go off hand in hand. *The Puella Magi Wiki* interprets this as another timeline or afterlife ([105](#105___)), but given that the comic has been interspersed throughout with flashbacks to how Oriko and Kirika met and became magical girls, what seems most likely is that this is another such flashback—or, more accurately, the "present" events of the comic are a vision Oriko has just had of her future. She sees that she will kill many, and that she and Kirika will themselves die, but also that this means her timeline's Earth will be spared destruction by Madoka's witch form, and she decides that it's worth it.

If this is what is happening in the final scene, then Oriko's calm determination throughout the series is explained: she is simply acting out her part in a play that has already been written. She knows when and how she will die, and has already decided to embrace her fate for the good of the world. In that sense, she becomes a fallen Madoka, much as Kirika is a fallen Homura. The latter pair share in common that they are utterly devoted to their loved one, willing to do anything for her, but where Homura usually avoids hurting humans or magical girls and instead focuses on fighting witches and Kyubey, Kirika hunts magical girls and only fights witches to directly protect Oriko. Similarly, both Oriko and Madoka are willing to sacrifice themselves to save the world, but Oriko is willing to kill, while Madoka's goal is to save everyone.

This, then, is the *Oriko Magica* solution to the trap: the unfair system of witches and magical girls cannot be broken within the comic, so focus on a smaller effort to save the world. Show how everyone is doomed by the system around them, and depict their failure to overthrow the system as a tragedy for all involved. However, the comic evades a second trap that might have opened here, that of implying that the system is unbreakable, by deliberately showing Homura resetting and ending on the relatively happy note of Kirika and Oriko sharing their burdens.

Homura continues to work toward the ending we see in the series. In the meantime, comfort can be found in one another. Though all magical girls will someday be broken by Kyubey's system, so long as it stands, as Yuma says, "Someday is not today."

# Chapter 15: As long as you remember her, you are not alone (The Different Story)

Symmetrically enough, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica: The Different Story* (by Hanokage based on a story by Magica Quartet) focuses on the last remaining of the three key tenets that spinoffs have to deal with, unfairness. Introducing no new characters, it instead takes a fairly narrow "what if" approach to the series.

The first volume of the series is largely a character study of Mami and Kyoko, serving as a prequel to both the anime and the rest of the manga in which Mami takes Kyoko, a newly minted magical girl, on as her apprentice. After the death of Kyoko's family, she and Mami have a falling out due to Kyoko rejecting Mami's philosophy of hunting both witches and familiars to protect others. The second and third volumes skip forward to a timeline, not shown in the series, in which Mami has taken on Sayaka as a new apprentice magical girl. In this timeline, Sayaka contracted with Kyubey slightly earlier and was thus able to rescue Mami from being killed by Charlotte. Kyoko returns, and she, Mami, and Sayaka clash over the proper way to live as a magical girl, while Sayaka descends into depression.

The comic focuses repeatedly on the essential unfairness of the magical girl system, but in a different way than *Madoka Magica*. The TV series primarily focuses on the unfair way in which Kyubey withholds key information from the contracting girls, such as the transformation of their bodies or the true nature of witches, but the former never comes up in *The Different Story*, while the latter is present but only briefly remarked upon. Instead, the series primarily focuses on the isolation imposed on the girls, and the effect this has on their psyches. Of course this isolation and the resulting depression was a major focus of the Sayaka arc of *Madoka Magica*, but in the TV series the isolation was at least partially self-imposed, as Sayaka deliberately pushed others away after learning how her body had been transformed. In *The Different Story*, isolation is instead inevitable, a built-in feature of the magical girl system.

Mami fights throughout the manga to try to find a way out of her isolation. She is desperate for friendship, but the endless work of being both a student and a magical girl means she has no time to spend with classmates. Her efforts to reach out to other magical girls are rebuffed because she "foolishly" fights familiars instead of focusing her efforts solely on witches and the resulting Grief Seeds. She does manage to befriend Kyoko, but loses her to the same philosophy espoused by the other magical girls. Later she manages to bond with Madoka and Sayaka, but then Sayaka becomes a witch in part because she pursued Mami's policy of hunting familiars. In the end, even after Madoka gives her a way out—fighting as a magical girl in her stead, allowing Mami to rest—Mami still feels alone and unworthy, to the point of suicide.

Mami's example is the most prominent, but the same holds for the other two girls who descend into despair over the course of *The Different Story*. Kyoko isolates herself almost completely after the death of her family, rebuffing overtures of friendship from everyone except Madoka. Sayaka, meanwhile, deliberately pushes away Mami, Kyoko, and Kyousuke in her shame at having abandoned Hitomi to a witch.

Arguably, all of this isolation is self-inflicted, but at the same time it is depicted as a consequence of the unfairness of the world in general and Kyubey's magical girl system in particular. The central argument between Mami and other magical girls throughout the manga is over whether the quest for Grief Seeds has to take precedence over other concerns, such as protecting others; further, Kyubey outright states that Sayaka becoming a witch is a direct consequence of the over-concentration of magical girls in Mitakihara, such that it becomes inevitable the weakest and least experienced will not be able to gain enough Grief Seeds. Mami's inability to hold together even a two-person team is no accident; it is a feature of a system designed to maximize the despair of magical girls in order to accelerate their transformation into witches. Two magical girls will inevitably compete over Grief Seeds, if something else doesn't tear them apart first.

Kyoko's story projects that unfairness into a wider world. Her father, like Kyubey, equates magical girls and witches, but he takes it further: he sees no difference between the two. He rejects Kyoko utterly as soon as he learns what she has become, claiming that she has deceived him and corrupted his teachings. He cannot conceive of magic or feminine power as anything other than witchcraft, and refuses to listen to Kyoko's explanations, leading him to turn to drink, then abuse, and finally murder-suicide.

That the magical girls are not to blame for their isolation is emphasized by the common thread of erroneous guilt through all three. Mami blames herself for her family's death because she didn't wish to save them, even though it's hardly unreasonable for a dying person to be focused on the wish to live to the exclusion of all else. In contrast, Kyoko blames herself for her own family's death because she wished to save them, even though she was helping them, and it was only her father's choice to refuse to listen or try to understand that killed them. This kind of guilt is relatively common in people who experience grief, loss, and trauma, and is a major symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder ([106](#106__American)). Sayaka as well blames herself for not saving Hitomi from a witch, even though, as Madoka points out, she wasn't certain it was Hitomi at the time and had no way of knowing there was a witch involved.

All three girls isolate themselves out of guilt. Sayaka and Kyoko do so more obviously, by verbally (and sometimes physically) attacking those who try to befriend them. Mami also isolates herself, however, as she reveals in the final issue: she creates a false, "perfect"-seeming self in order to keep others from seeing her needs. This, as the reader knows from having seen Kyoko's perspective, only serves to heighten those others' feelings of inadequacy and isolation, perpetuating the cycle of loneliness and despair. Such self-isolation is another symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder ([107](#107__Ibid)), and the implication is thus that Kyubey's system is inherently traumatizing, subjecting every girl who passes through it to combat stress coupled with painful isolation.

Ultimately, Madoka finds a solution, wishing Sayaka back to life and taking Mami's place as a magical girl, but it is not enough. As the final sequence, which appears to be Mami's dying dream after her suicide, shows, only a world where all five magical girls—Mami, Kyoko, Sayaka, Madoka, and Homura—are able to work together and be friends with one another, and where Mami has a family as well, is enough to satisfy Mami's loneliness.

Unfortunately, such a world is not without issues of its own, as we will see in discussing *Rebellion*.

# Interlude 2: The Corpse of Milk

One of the most prominent themes in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is decay. Entropy, obviously, is a form of decay, and thus the magical girls/witches are presented as a weapon against decay. However, there are other forms of decay at work: the city steadily degrades over the course of the series, from the bright clean spaces of Episode 1 to the crumbling ruins of Episode 12. Most notably, the mental states of the magical girls themselves decay. This is most pronounced with Sayaka's descent, but there's plenty of hints that the other magical girls suffer from severe depression, such as the fountain of what appears to be Prozac when Mami and Madoka have their heart-to-heart or the way Kyoko constantly eats her feelings. The entire point of the witch system is to get the magical girls to decay emotionally until they become witches; in a sense, all that Kyubey's system does is shift entropy from the physical decay of the universe into the emotional decay of the girls.

This constant presence of decay ties neatly into the series' Buddhist roots. The first of the Four Noble Truths (the core philosophical tenets of Buddhism) is the inevitability of *dukkha*, which translates roughly to suffering. There are three kinds of *dukkha*: the ordinary, obvious *dukkha* of illness, aging, and death; the anxious *dukkha* brought about by trying to hold on to things that are subject to time and therefore constantly changing; and the underlying *dukkha* inherent in all material things as a product of their transience ([108](#108__Smart)).

This last corresponds more-or-less directly to entropy, the principle that all material things must inevitably wind down ([109](#109__This)). This inevitability of decay sounds like it ought to be a source of despair, but there are solutions. The primary Buddhist solution is detachment—to escape from this world is to escape the karmic cycle of inevitable despair ([110](#110__Smart)). This is the door Madoka, in her role as the bodhisattva Kanon, opened for the magical girls at the end of the series. But is it the only solution? Is there no way to be happy within this transient world?

Western culture initially answers "no" as well. Christianity offers escape from this world to Heaven as its solution, with the added notion that at some future point God will destroy this world of suffering and replace it with a better one. However, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance a concept arose which gives an alternate path out of decay and despair: *putrefaction*.

Putrefaction is an alchemical concept, an alternate term for fermentation, but it came to refer to the way in which death and rot bring forth life ([111](#111__Paracelsus)). Consider a rotting piece of fruit. It is revolting to human senses, black and ugly and foul-smelling, but it is also a riotous explosion of new life such as mold and maggots. These in turn serve as nourishment for "higher" forms of life, until ultimately even the most exalted creatures depend on rot for their existence.

This is more than just the life cycle of biology, it is one of the most profound spiritual teachings of the alchemists: Death brings forth life. Rot and creation are one and the same. Decay is evolution.

Or put another way, flowers bloom in cemeteries. One such flower is the red spider lily, a crown of which adorns Homura's witch form in *Rebellion*. Frequently a vivid red color, unlike most flowers it loses its leaves before blossoming; it is associated with loved ones separated by fate and death and frequently planted in cemeteries in Japan ([112](#112__Gerald)). The connection to Homura's pain, separated from her beloved Madoka, is quite obvious.

However, the act of planting the flowers shows that one still acknowledges the lost loved one; love can endure where material existence has decayed away. Indeed, it is that love—originating in a destroyed universe—that brings Madoka back to Homura's illusory world. With her she brings two other beings, Charlotte and Sayaka. Both return out of duty and loyalty to Madoka, but later state additional motivations.

Unsurprisingly, given that she has been obsessed with cheese throughout Rebellion, Charlotte comes back for cheese. Cheese is an excellent symbol of putrefaction, being a delicious and nourishing substance that is at the same time essentially rotting milk. Charlotte is not alone in her motivations for return; all three of Madoka and her servants have returned for something valuable that emerged from decay. In the case of Madoka, it is her relationship with Homura, which evolved over the course of multiple timelines in which Madoka decayed from a bright, cheerful magical girl to the largely passive figure of the timeline showcased in the series, while Homura decays from timidity to being completely shut off. Sayaka, on the other hand, comes for her relationship with Kyoko, a relationship rooted in Kyoko's attempts to reach Sayaka when the latter's mental state was decaying rapidly.

The products of putrefaction, in other words, can be valuable. Decay is not an unmixed evil.

What, then, to make of the fact that Madoka's perfect, decay-free nirvana necessarily contains no cheese, both because there is no way of making it and because Charlotte would have no reason to leave otherwise? In a world free of decay, free of putrefaction, none of the beauty and life created by rot can exist. Neither cheese nor fire-forged friendships exist in Madoka's realm, so it cannot be considered an adequate solution to the problem of decay.

Only time and the likely inevitable sequels to *Rebellion* can tell if Homura's solution is any better.

Part Three

Rebellion

# Chapter 16: Against Analysis

*Madoka Magica the Movie 3: Rebellion* is a difficult subject to approach. Like the series, it is semiotically dense (that is, the images and events it contains evoke a relatively high number of readings); however, where the series primarily takes place in fairly stark, sparse, almost sterile environments, to contrast the visual complexity of the witch's labyrinths, the movie is tremendously visually complex throughout. In other words, not only does each image have as much to unpack as any image in the series, it's also got quite a bit more imagery than its five-and-a-half episodes' worth of runtime would suggest!

Analyzing it is thus a potentially overwhelming task. To take the movie as an organic whole is nigh-impossible, at least in anything like chapter length; to do it justice, one must either pick a theme and follow its development through the film, missing out on all the other themes except perhaps for how they interact with the chosen theme, or one can pick a scene and examine it in all its complexities, missing out on all other scenes except insofar as they impact the chosen scene.

Consider a relatively straightforward question: What is the titular rebellion? Is it Kyubey against Madoka's new world? Homura against the world inside the labyrinth, unaware that she herself created it? Is it Homura against Madoka? Or is the film itself an act of rebellion, and if so, who or what is it rebelling against?

Even a question as seemingly simple as "What does the title mean?" leads only to more questions, and there are a multitude of supportable answers to each of them, each of which could fill an essay in its own right. Thus, the remaining chapters of this book comprise a series of essays on *Rebellion*. Some may be analyses of single scenes; others may trace themes or look at the evolution of a character. All, however, are explorations of a particular answer to the question, "Against *what*?" Such an approach seems to me the only viable way in which I can approach *Rebellion*, as this is a film that defies analysis.

And a near-synonym for defiance is... well, you get the idea.

So, then, let us consider a particular short scene that exemplifies how difficult this film is to analyze, specifically, the final post-credits stinger. Immediately prior to the stinger, the credits themselves depict a heavily stylized version of the movie's plot, with Homura and Madoka divided by the credit scroll itself. At the very end of the credits, however, they hold hands and run off together into the distance, a surprisingly hopeful end to the story given Homura's posturing in the final scenes before the credits. Is this foreshadowing, or just Homura's dream? Is the fact that they vanish into the distance evidence that they will escape, or evidence that the possibility of them being together is disappearing?

It doesn't matter, because the stinger contradicts the image anyway. (Or does it? If the credits are Homura's dream and the stinger the reality, or the credits are foreshadowing and the stinger her fears...) It's worth, here, examining the usual function of a stinger. Most commonly found in big blockbuster action franchises (the Marvel Cinematic Universe has raised them to an art form) or comedies, the usual function of a stinger is either to serve as a punchline to a joke set up earlier in the film (possibly the best example of this is the taxi passenger in *Airplane!* ([113](#113__Airplane))) or to build excitement for and drop hints regarding the plot of the next installment in the franchise (Samuel L. Jackson would like to talk to you about the Avengers Initiative ([114](#114__Iron))).

Here, however, the stinger's function appears to be neither. Rather, its main function appears to be to generate questions and cast doubt on the way Homura chose to present herself in the final scenes prior to the credits. Admittedly, it is a "punchline" in the sense of concluding a repeated motif throughout the *Madoka Magica* movies, specifically the two chairs in a field. In the opening credits of the two compilation movies, we see Madoka and Homura sitting side-by-side on white chairs in the middle of a field of grass and flowers, cuddling playfully. In the *Rebellion* stinger, Homura begins sitting in a similar chair, alone, positioned on the edge of a cliff. Chair, cliff, and half-moon are lined up to create the effect of a picture sliced in two, as if the other half of the moon and the other half of the world, including Madoka and her chair, have been simply cut away and replaced with empty darkness.

Is this Homura's decision to make even Madoka her enemy? Her regret? Or just a cruel reminder for the audience of what has been lost?

Homura, in the final scenes of the movie, appears to be in near-total control. An army of familiars obey her; she can rewrite Sayaka's memories and cut her off from her Oktavia form; she can block Madoka from her Buddha-nature, the Law of Cycles. She is the creator of this new world, having rewritten reality earlier in the movie; it is not too far-fetched to suggest that she is now the most powerful entity within the confines of the universe (it is up for grabs how she compares to the Law of Cycles, as the two entities she appears unable to completely control are herself and Madoka—note her apparent panic when Madoka begins remembering her Buddha-nature shortly before the ending credits).

Why, then, does she appear startled by the approach of Kyubey in the stinger? The expression on her face is readable as either apprehension or hope; given the associations of the chair, does she momentarily believe it's Madoka? Does she hope it is, or fear that it is? How can she not know that it's Kyubey?

And then there is Kyubey's state: disheveled, trembling. Extreme close-ups on Kyubey's eye were frequently used in the series and this film to remind the viewer that he is watching, and they thus served to make him a more ominous and menacing figure. This close-up, however, shows his fur matted, his eye dulled, darkened, and shaking. For the first time, he displays a change in affect, but this serves only to unsettle the viewer further—even Kyubey, in this scene, is transformed into something "wrong." He is no longer a menacing figure, but rather a pathetic one, beaten and broken by Homura's display of power in rewriting the universe. This is a worst-case scenario for him and his kind; Madoka came to fear and distrust him, but she has little capacity for hate. Homura is different; full of rage and sorrow, it would not be at all out of character for her to take that out on the Incubators in general and the instance of Kyubey in Mitakihara in specific.

But the logic of the stinger suggests that the extreme close-up of Kyubey's eye is foreshadowing—it is the most typically stinger-like of any shot in this sequence, reminiscent of a horror movie ending with the believed-dead killer's eyes snapping open. Unfortunately, he is as inscrutable as ever; is he plotting a counterstroke against Homura? Simply observing and biding his time? Or is he truly broken, his pathetic appearance evidence that his role as villain has been stripped from him by Homura?

And then there is the dance. Homura dances with her new Soul Gem, both the style and music reminiscent of her balletic transformation sequence near the beginning of the movie. The gem resembles the chess symbol for a king, a near-powerless piece which is nonetheless the most important in the game. Is this Homura as queen—the strongest piece on the board—dancing with the most important figure in her world, the now-impotent Madoka? This reading is supported by the fact that the Soul Gem in question was made earlier in the movie from the pieces of Homura's old Soul Gem and a spool of thread the same color as Madoka's hair, but only if we read that thread as signifying Madoka herself or her connection to Homura. An equally likely reading is that it represents Madoka-the-incarnate-person's connection to Madoka-the-omnipresent-intangible-abstraction, in which case Homura is not so much missing her "other half" as reveling in her imprisonment. The difference between the two readings, in other words, lies between reading Homura as putting on a bold face over confusion and pain, or as a creepy, controlling stalker.

At the end of her dance, Homura tips sideways over the cliff. Her pose as she falls recalls Madoka's similar sideways tip off her chair when Homura becomes a witch, which seems fairly clearly to be a reference to Madoka's self-sacrifice and Homura's growing regret at failing to stop her. So is Homura seeking to join Madoka by replicating her action? Sacrificing herself so that Madoka doesn't have to? *Mocking* Madoka's sacrifice as a signifier that she has descended so far into evil that even the love which motivated her descent no longer matters? Or is it a futile gesture toward an impossible suicide (it is unclear what would happen to the universe if Homura died, but virtually certain that at least Madoka would reconnect with the Buddha-nature Homura is determined to keep her from) by a character in the depths of despair? Or is this (as well as or instead of other readings) a reference to the Tarot card The Fool, which frequently depicts the titular Fool about to step off a cliff, accompanied by a small white animal ([115](#115__See))?

We could explore these questions in detail, certainly, along with other questions (for example, the significance of the moon being precisely halfway between the almost-new moon when Sayaka became a witch and the full moon when Homura became one). It would take thousands of words and produce no certain conclusion except that the scene is deliberately ambiguous, but it can be done. That's not the point. The point is that this is *ninety seconds* of a two-hour movie, and not even the visually or semiotically densest ninety seconds (those, I suspect, fall somewhere between Homura witching out and she and Madoka shattering the Incubators' barrier).

No, the point is this: This movie is *dense*, and it is ambiguous, and it thus poses a challenge to analysis.

Good. Let's do it anyway.

# Chapter 17: Against Love and Salvation

At the end of *Madoka Magica*, Madoka ascends to a higher plane of being, sacrificing not only her life but her entire existence to save the other magical girls from becoming witches. As becomes clear from both Homura's explanation to Kyubey in the final episode of the series and comments by Nagisa and Sayaka in *Rebellion*, the magical girls so rescued continue existing in some form outside the universe, with Madoka. Whatever form they are in, we know they are in some sense aware and able to make decisions, and it appears are simultaneously magical girls and witches (which, of course, they always were).

That this is presented, within the series and initially within *Rebellion*, as a positive development and more-or-less happy ending is perhaps puzzling. Arguably the entire point of Sayaka's character arc was coming to realize that it was a mistake to try to sacrifice herself to save another, while Homura's attempts to save Madoka were similarly depicted as making things continually worse for them both. It is not particularly surprising, then, that *Rebellion* calls that salvation into question.

The first segment of the movie, in which the magical girls are happy and get along, and the opponents they face are challenging but conquerable, serves as a parody of both worlds that can be understood as "Madoka's world." As a new enemy representing human misery, the Nightmares are a twisted reflection of the Wraiths. Like the Wraiths, the Nightmares are oddly similar to one another, but where the Wraiths are fairly creepy, attenuated humanoid giants, the Nightmares wear bear suits and fire stuffed animals from their arms. Defeating a Wraith earned many small rewards for cleaning the magical girls' Soul Gems, making magical girl teams viable, unlike in the prior, witch-infested timelines. But in Homura's fantasy world, defeating a Nightmare creates a diffuse glow that purifies the Soul Gems, making magical girl teams actively preferable to intercept more of that light. In addition, where the first we see of the Wraith world created by Madoka is the death of Sayaka and mourning of her teammates, Homura's dream world preserves both Sayaka's life and her wish, by pairing (or at least heavily implying that it pairs) her with Kyoko to allow Hitomi and Kyousuke to be together. Homura's fantasy world is, simply, happier than the one Madoka created!

It is also sillier, and not just because of the bear suits. The juxtaposition of the mundane and the eerie is the province of surrealist art, and it is here that the Wraiths, and by extension the city they haunt, largely fall. Men with missing or obscured faces are, for instance, a favored subject of Magritte ([116](#116__Siegfried)). Likewise, the witches, though more playful, are juxtaposed with extreme violence, both by the witches against humans and magical girls, and by magical girls against the witches. This combination of playful, often childish, imagery and violence forms a sort of brutalist surrealism.

There is, however, no violence where the Nightmares are concerned. They destroy property, seemingly, but there is no trace of damage when the magical girls are done, and against them the magical girls are shown deploying traps and bindings or firing weapons to drive the Nightmare into a trap, but never attacking the Nightmare directly. The actual defeat of the Nightmare seems to involve actions that are at once highly ritualized, yet seemingly arbitrary—a banquet catered by the magical girls in the cold open, and a nursery rhyme-like chant or game about food against Hitomi's Nightmare.

Oddly harmless violence, food, rhythmic verse, games, arbitrary rituals—these are all common features of nonsense literature ([117](#117__Wim)). At the core of nonsense is an interest in alternative logics, in circumstances (such as games, meals, etiquette) where ultimately arbitrary, yet internally consistent, rules guide behavior; like a dream, nonsense substitutes one set of arbitrary rules for another, and lets the consequences play out logically ([118](#118__Alison)). And yet within this nonsense, all five magical girls are alive and happy and thriving; it seems a world of nonsense is better than the world of Wraiths Madoka created.

Madoka's Pure Land, her heaven, is also depicted as inferior. As I argued in [Interlude 2](#Interlude_2), Madoka's "afterlife" is inferior to even Homura's dream world because it is a deathless world that contains no decay, no suffering, no putrefaction; both Sayaka and Nagisa chose to reify themselves alongside Madoka because they sought something that only existed as a consequence of decay and death, namely Sayaka's relationship with Kyoko and, for Nagisa, cheese.

Homura's dream world is also more directly a parody of Madoka's "heaven," in the sense that Homura snatched magical girls (as well as a handful of ordinary humans) into her world without their consent and now keeps them there, trapped and cut off from the universe, but artificially happy. She has "saved" them because she has grown to care about them by extension, as the people Madoka loved—and at least in the case of Kyoko and Mami, whom she ultimately trusts to kill Homulilly, come to respect and possibly even like them, as well.

To want to save someone is necessarily to want power over that someone. By becoming a knight protector, Sayaka made herself a judge (and in the case of those two misogynists on the train, likely executioner as well). By wishing to be Madoka's protector, Homura ultimately put herself in a position to repeatedly try to take the choice of becoming a magical girl away from Madoka. And by wishing to save all magical girls from their destiny of becoming what they fight, Madoka set herself up as a goddess.

To be a savior (as always, as opposed to *helping*, which involves the consent of the one helped and places the helper in a temporarily subordinate, rather than dominant, position), in other words, necessarily entails being a little bit of a tyrant. Since the savior is acting without the consent of the saved, they are very likely to get it wrong, as Madoka does with Homura. Look at the opening credits: Homura is depicted as a grey, troll-like figure kneeling while the magical girls dance. She is not capable of joining their happiness; the closest she is able to come is as the weak and shy "pigtails" version of her character during the first segment of the movie, and even then she is able to sense that something is deeply wrong. Once her hair is again loose, she is never genuinely happy again for the rest of the movie, for the simple reason that her untold ages of suffering, and the fact that she and she alone remembers them, have warped her emotionally to the point that she very possibly cannot be saved.

Instead, she acts in parody of Madoka, snatching people up and placing them in her labyrinth. But is it really any different from what Madoka did? Is Madoka's sacrifice an act of selfless love while Homura's is selfish? And which is the greater sacrifice—your existence or your soul? Is it worse to never have existed, or to become the enemy of all you once held dear?

The answer, of course, is that it's a silly question. All value is relative, so it is entirely a matter of perspective which is worse; very likely, each of the two girls feels their own sacrifice is the greatest they could make, since Madoka cares deeply about her connections to others, while Homura is more focused on her cause.

But, seeing in Homura's actions a twisted reflection of Madoka's, we see Madoka's in a new way as well. Can an act truly be considered selfless if it gets you everything you ever wanted? Madoka gets to be with, in her own words, "everyone"; all her loved ones are safe; she gets to defeat all the witches; she gets to become a magical girl; she gets to matter, quite possibly more than anyone else who ever lived. By contrast, Homura's choice to become a "demon" devoted to keeping Madoka in the world costs her the only thing she values, the chance to be together with Madoka in the end; now they must eventually be enemies. Isn't it therefore Homura who is selfless?

Of course not, because selfless love is an oxymoron. That is the point in depicting Homura's possessiveness, and through it revealing Madoka's selfishness. To love someone is to want to protect that person, possibly from themselves. It is to want to spend time with that person. It is to want that person to want you. Expressed in a healthy way and reciprocated equally, of course, love can be a wonderful thing; romantic or otherwise, it is the ultimate bond between two people. But like any bond, it can also be used to entrap, to control, to assert dominance—hence the existence of abusive relationships.

Throughout the series, we saw magical girls torn between acknowledging what they genuinely wanted and what they believed they should want. Mami tortured herself for wishing to live, rather than wishing to save her parents. Sayaka and Kyoko wished for others' benefit, rather than wishing for those others to appreciate the help, and suffered tremendously as a result. This is why Kyubey targets girls, because from the moment they are given their first doll they are indoctrinated to take care of others, socialized to think of themselves as caretakers, responsible for the wellbeing of others ([119](#119__Fujimura)). Society has done Kyubey's work for him, creating girls who will wish for what social pressure tells them they want instead of truly wishing for what they desire. (Not that it matters in the end, of course; the wish alone damns the magical girl to become a witch or die, though a poorly chosen wish makes the hope-despair cycle faster.)

So Homura sees no way to wish for what she truly desires, to be with Madoka. She wishes instead to take care of Madoka, first in the series at the end of the "original" timeline shown in the first part of Episode 10, and then in *Rebellion* when she becomes a "demon." In both cases, she ultimately sees no hope but to become "evil." *Rebellion* thus closes the largest cycle in a series full of cycles: the evolution of Homura Akemi from a dark, seemingly villainous character who disrupts the status quo to a dark, seemingly villainous character who maintains the status quo. More than ever, she is now Mami's dark mirror.

# Chapter 18: Against Madoka

Names have power.

There is an interesting pattern to the people Homura draws into her labyrinth: the magical girls make sense, as the main figures in her life and, at least in the most recent timeline, her teammates. Madoka's family are slightly more of a stretch, but they are people important to Madoka and therefore to Homura. Still more of a stretch are Hitomi and Kyousuke, but again, Hitomi is important to Madoka and Kyousuke is important to Hitomi, so it's not entirely unreasonable. But what possible reason could she have to bring in Kazuko (the homeroom teacher) and Nakazawa (an apparently random classmate)? And she does draw them both in—Nakazawa and the other magical girls are the only people seen to have normal faces when Homura begins doubting the reality of the people around her in math class, and both Nakazawa and Kazuko are shown unconscious on couches when the labyrinth is finally broken.

The answer lies in folklore: a witch who knows a person's name can use it in workings of magic against that person ([120](#120__Arthur)). Consider again who Homura brings into the labyrinth, and then consider the series as a whole; the list of people Homura brings into the barrier is also the list of people whose names are said or onscreen during the series and which Homura might reasonably know. (Admittedly, Madoka's father's name is not spoken onscreen, but Madoka calls him Papa, and as there is no other living father in the series, "Papa" functions well enough as a name.)

Names have power because, in magical logic (which is, by and large, narrative logic), there is no signifier-signified distinction. The name is, in some sense, the thing named, and so to manipulate the name is to manipulate the thing ([121](#121__Ibid)). It follows, then, that if two things have the same name they must therefore be in some sense the same, that one can stand in for the other.

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that, when Homura grabs Madoka's arms and tears Madoka-the-girl out of Madoka-the-abstraction, it is an act of rebellion not just of Homura against Madoka, but of *Rebellion* against *Madoka Magica*.

And why shouldn't the film rebel against the series? Once, if a person wished to tell stories, they got up and told stories. Spoken aloud, these stories were ephemeral, changing with every telling. There were traditions, to be sure, but storytellers could be confident that their creative departures would not be seen as errors or betrayals but as the embellishments of a virtuoso performance.

Mass literacy struck a mortal blow against this form of storytelling, and radio, film, and television finished the job. This kind of storytelling lives on (as no art form ever really dies), but only as a curiosity, something to gawk at when attending a Renaissance festival or take your children to at the public library. Mostly, when we want a story, we reach for a packaged one, a book or a DVD.

This creates a challenge when an author wants to tell a cycle or series of stories, reusing the same characters or setting. The author wishes to explore and create, and in the age of oral tales was free to do so—no one particularly expected that the tales of Renard the Fox must be consistent with one another or complained, "Hey, when he seduced Leda, Zeus was a swan, how come he's a golden shower now?" After all, if the story of Leda can change with every telling, why expect it to still be the same when you hear a completely different story?

Oral tales are living, growing, changing things. By contrast, a written or filmed tale is dead, nailed to the page or screen, unable to change or grow, fixed permanently as it was in a single telling. The audience is permitted to change and grow, so that their perspective on the tale can alter with time, but the actual creator of the tale is denied that growth. Even when it comes to crafting a sequel, audiences—"geek" or "cult" audiences notoriously so—demand continuity, which is to say they demand fealty to the tyrannical reign of dead stories. It is a wonder that more creators don't rebel!

So *Rebellion* pays lip service to the series. All the events of the series clearly happened here and are given what the continuity-obsessed consider "respect," which is to say the letter of the law "Thou shalt not contradict the events of earlier entries" is slavishly obeyed. Even the structure of the film apes the structure of the show: it splits neatly into three parts, the first of which establishes a pretense of being a "normal" magical girl show that abruptly falls apart in a violent confrontation with Mami. The second (which, admittedly, has a stronger overlap with the first than in the series) then follows a magical girl as she slowly comes to the realization that she is what she fights against, and has been a witch from the start. Finally the third involves a tremendous battle against a city-scale witch, after which reality is rewritten and a new order established.

However, where the series followed Madoka, the film follows Homura, and therein all the difference lies. Madoka is a patient, careful, but very optimistic character—she waits until the very end of the series to act, but when she does so, it is decisively, and with every intent of ending what she sees as the primary problem of her universe absolutely and with finality. Homura is cynical, headstrong, and confrontational; she flings herself into conflict after conflict, until finally her own mirror of Madoka's actions is to create a world in which Homura's primary problem—Madoka's penchant for self-sacrifice—must be dealt with continually and continuously.

This does not necessarily imply that, for most of the film, Homura is in conscious rebellion against Madoka's order. Homura is initially positioned, just as in the series, as the one questioning and disrupting the status quo, true, but that status quo (as always, represented and defended by Mami) is Homura's own dream-realm. Homura is trying to return the state of the world to what she remembers, which is to say the world of the series. She only begins to rebel intentionally after Madoka tells her that, to her, being separated from her loved ones is tremendously painful—in other words, after Homura realizes that Madoka's self-sacrifice entailed actual sacrifice. To Homura, of course, the sacrifice of Madoka is unthinkable and unforgivable, even if it is Madoka herself performing the sacrifice.

Even then, however, Homura does not act on her desire to undo Madoka's sacrifice until very late in the movie, because up until that point she has no opportunity to do so. The character who is actually in rebellion against Madoka, and therefore against *Madoka Magica*, for the majority of the film is Kyubey, who has orchestrated the entire situation in an attempt to usurp control of the Law of Cycles and bring back witches. It is worth remembering here that in many respects Kyubey is an (unusually unflattering) authorial stand-in, and as such it makes sense that his rebellion against Madoka is the creators' *Rebellion* against *Madoka Magica*.

Kyubey's rebellion, however, is unsurprising—he is, after all, the villain of the series, and an unrepentant villain who is still around in the sequel can be assumed to at least try to resume their villainous role. Homura, by contrast, is spectacularly, obsessively loyal to Madoka, and so the film takes pains to meticulously lay out all the elements of her rebellion: She has motivation, in the form of her conversation among the flowers with Madoka and realization that she "never should have allowed" Madoka to sacrifice herself. She has inspiration, when Kyubey reveals that Madoka can choose to re-enter the world after all, and Sayaka reveals that Madoka's Buddha-nature, her memories and powers as the Law of Cycles, can be held in storage by another. And she has opportunity, when Madoka descends to take her life and prevent her from becoming a witch in the "real world"—as Kyubey says, that which can be perceived can be interfered with.

And so Homura rises as a devil-figure, tearing "God" from her heaven and bringing her down into the world. She is the ultimate bad girl, identified by *Paradise Lost*-quoting graffiti and Nietzsche-chanting, tomato-throwing familiars as Satan herself. She has claimed the labels "demon," "evil," and "enemy" for herself, and made clear that she plans to act them out—which brings us to yet another rebellion...

# Chapter 19: Against God

There is a recurring myth in the ancient Mediterranean. In it, the Shining One (Hebrew: *Helel*, Greek: *Phaethon*) tries to usurp the Sun or the supreme deity, and is cast down or punished for his presumption. This is a familiar myth in our culture, due mostly to the Greek version. The Semitic version is less well known, in large part because one of the few written references we have to it has been lost in translation:

"How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit." ([122](#122__Isaiah))

The English term "morning star" is being used to translate the Hebrew *Helel*. We can imagine the mythology here fairly easily—the brightest star in the sky, refusing to share its place with the other stars, and instead jumping up into the sky at dawn, ahead of the sun. Then at sunrise it is wiped away, only for the story to repeat the next day, an endless cycle of celestial hubris.

Of course, most of us are more familiar with another translation, the King James, and another variant of the myth, which uses the Medieval Latin name for the morning star: Lucifer.

And that's it. That is the entirety of the Biblical story of Lucifer. Everything else is folklore and tradition, which is to say, fanfiction: that Lucifer was an angel, that he is the entity referred to as Satan in the book of Job, that he is the serpent in Genesis, that he is the Beast or the Dragon in Revelation; none of this is actually stated in the Bible itself, which just gives the story of a proud figure who rises up and is cast down. (There is nothing wrong with this, of course. Sacred texts are just one element in the complex of ideas, behaviors, and institutions that is a religion ([123](#123__Smart)).)

If we are to look for such a figure of hubris in *Rebellion*, Kyubey is pretty clearly that figure. He explicitly states that his goal in placing Homura within the barrier is to "interfere with"—that is, control and usurp—Madoka, who created the present universe, and as a result he is furiously punished by Madoka's herald Homura for his crimes. The result is a new universe in which, the stinger seems to imply, Kyubey's power has been almost completely stripped by the presence of Homura as an active and engaged demiurge.

There is another reading available, however, if we look at one of the most famous "fanfiction" versions of Lucifer, *Paradise Lost*. In discussing Milton's epic poem, however, it is important first to understand what an epic poem *is*. Understood cladistically, we can view the epic as a genre mostly descended from the works of Homer; the usual definition provides a list of common generic traits in terms of subject matter and structure, of which the most important for our purposes are that it involves events occurring on a national, cosmic, or global scale; follows the exploits of a larger-than-life, often supernaturally empowered hero; and utilizes a distinctive style that elevates it above normal discourse. In addition, epics usually start with an invocation and declaration of theme, begin *in medias res*, and contain lengthy monologues, often at least one flashing back to describe events prior to the opening. ([124](#124__Roy))

Part of what makes *Paradise Lost* such a fascinating read is that Satan is consistently an incredibly vile character, a lying, cheating, self-serving manipulator—but he is also the epic hero upon whose adventures the story focuses. He is capable of being extremely charming and persuasive, to the point of convincing some very important critics (most famously Blake, who opined that Milton was "of the devil's party without knowing it" ([125](#125__William))) that his cause is actually right. Keep in mind, said cause is the conquest of the world and enslavement and extermination of humanity! (All of which he succeeds at. Satan's son-grandson Death and daughter-bride Sin create a bridge from Hell to Earth at the end of the story, the Fall subjects humanity to Sin, and Adam and Eve are punished with mortality, which they pass on to their descendants, killing us all ([126](#126__John)).)

These contradictions have the effect of making Satan a morally ambiguous figure in a sense—he is structurally heroic but diegetically villainous, essentially. But what does this have to do with *Rebellion*?

Well, consider: *Rebellion* opens with an invocation of the Law of Cycles and a statement of theme, the cycle of despair in an irredeemable world and the escape into oblivion. We are then dropped into the middle of a situation that does not follow from the end of the series at all, forced to wait until some lengthy exposition by Kyubey much later in the movie to find out what happened to create this circumstance. That our heroine is supernaturally empowered goes almost without saying, as she is a magical girl—but she is empowered beyond that by her status as the witch in whose labyrinth the action of the series takes place, and then later by her love, which transforms her into a demon. In the process, she expands the story to be cosmic in scope. And as for a distinctive style that elevates it above the normal discourse of anime film, well, see [Chapter 16](#Chapter_16).

So *Rebellion* is an epic. But more than that, it is the epic of how Homura went from being Madoka's "very best friend" in Episode 12 to calling her an enemy at the end of this movie. It is the epic, in other words, about how the closest and most loyal follower of the closest thing *Madoka Magica* has to a goddess fell to become a demon, and at the same time conquered the material universe with the stated intent of shepherding it to its destruction—yet throughout, remains a morally ambiguous figure, such that debates still rage across Internet fora as to her moral status.

Just as the series is not merely about a Faustian bargain, but actually in many ways retraces the story of Goethe's *Faust*, including some fairly obscure elements such as time travel, so too is *Rebellion* more than just a hubristic fall; structurally and in its juxtaposition of the epic hero with the moral fall, it resembles *Paradise Lost*.

# Chapter 20: Against Homura

There is a recurring image throughout the *Madoka Magica* movies, one we have briefly mentioned before: a rather sweet tableau of two white chairs on a grassy hill, Madoka and Homura sitting side-by-side in them. In the opening credits of the first two movies, they cuddle, sweet and adorable, and innocent. In the third movie, the image turns rapidly rather less sweet.

As she goes through the process of becoming a witch at the climax of the second arc of *Rebellion*, Homura returns to the chair scene. But this time, Madoka stands and casts herself sideways off the chair, splattering into a pink stain on the grass while Homura reaches for her helplessly. Homura crouches beside her, eyes wide in shock and horror, while a crowd of tall, attenuated Homuras surround her, gazing down. And then the vast fist of a raging Homura smashes the crouching Homura, railing and weeping beside the remains of Madoka.

Madoka is gone, her coherent identity replaced by a diffuse abstraction. Homura failed. Now Homura stands in judgment over Homura, and finds her wanting. Her rage and grief at last unleashed, she smashes her own identity to become an abstract and esoteric being herself: a witch.

Just like Sayaka, and presumably every other witch before her, Homura's witch form is an endless cycle of self-flagellation, a psychodrama in which she acts out the events that brought her to despair and punishes herself for her failures. She tries to shoot herself, and the self she shoots becomes the Madoka she had to mercy-kill. She cannot die, does not *deserve* to die the way that Madoka did, because she has failed to save Madoka.

Not only failed to save her; Homura is the reason Madoka is gone. Her looping through time empowered Madoka to become the Law of Cycles, which erased Madoka from reality. Her discussion of Madoka with Kyubey gave the Incubators the information they needed to construct the trap now closing on Madoka—and they used Homura to create that trap. Homura is Madoka's greatest liability.

Homura's witch form is among the most literal. She has the peaked black hat, the prominent nose and chin—other than being a skeleton hundreds of feet tall, she looks rather like the standard Halloween costume of a witch. Homura knew about witches and where they come from, and yet she still failed to avoid that trap, even embraced it deliberately in a bid to foil Kyubey. Unlike Sayaka, who believed herself a knight and so still looked like one as a witch, Homura knows what she is choosing to become. Likewise, she is deliberately sacrificing herself, as she tells Kyubey: she trusts Mami and Kyoko to kill her. Thus her familiars lead her to the guillotine, the mechanism of her sacrifice and instrument of judgment for her crime.

At the same time, she is surrounded by imagery related to the nutcracker. One type of her familiars is giant teeth with nutcracker jaws. Another resembles toy soldiers, but with their high fur hats resemble the traditional Christmas nutcracker as well (and in the original story "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," the nutcracker is immediately recognized as a soldier by the children ([127](#127__All))). An image of a grinning mouth clenching a walnut in its teeth appears when she first starts to realize that she is the witch in whose labyrinth the magical girls are trapped. And she loses half her head, leaving only the lower jaw—a mirror of the titular nutcracker of E.T.A. Hoffman's story and Tchaikovsky's famous ballet based on it, who lost his lower jaw. The doll-like appearance of many of her familiars (in particular, the ragdolls, named "Clara" in supplementary materials ([128](#128__Magica)), the name of the main character in the ballet), the image of Homura and her familiars breaking out of a glass-fronted cabinet, and prominence of clockwork also recall the original story of "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," in which the Nutcracker led an army of toys from a cabinet against the Mouse King's armies summoned by the striking of a clock.

At a basic level, the image of a nutcracker without a jaw is an image of uselessness, an object without purpose. There is a deeper resonance here, however, if one recalls the tale-within-a-tale of the origin of the nutcracker in Hoffman's story. The nutcracker was once the chosen one, described in what amounts to prophecy as the only one who could rescue a princess cursed by the Mouse Queen. He had to perform a complex ritual to save her, but just as he completed it, he tripped over the Mouse Queen, and so the curse fell on him instead. This is Homura, relaxing because she believed she had helped Madoka escape her fate, only to discover that she'd failed in the end because of the intervention of Kyubey. It is, in other words, yet another way to blame and punish herself.

Yet the magical girls refuse to cooperate. They refuse to join Homura in judging herself. They refuse to hate her and refuse to kill her. Instead, they work to free her, break the labyrinth and the Incubators' trap so that Madoka can take her off to magical girl heaven. Despite her raving and her pleading, they insist on forgiving her. They reject Homura's judgment, and demand that she reject it as well. They want her to forgive herself and free herself.

But Homura has been fighting Homura from the start of the movie. Throughout the first arc of the film, Homura seeks the mysterious and invisible tyrant who rules the seemingly happy world in which the magical girls find themselves, with the intent of destroying it. It is the discovery that she is that tyrant which leads her to call down a curse on herself and transform fully into a witch; all of this is part of her rebellion against herself.

That rebellion has not ended by the end of the film. Homura describes herself as evil and embraces the role of the scantily clad, black-winged devil-woman. But what difference is there between saying "I am evil," and "I deserve to be punished?" This is simply another expression of her guilt, a new way of tormenting herself.

She has elevated herself to a cosmic being, a demiurgic entity who appears to have near-unlimited powers over material reality and the people in it: she can rewrite Sayaka's memories, bring back the dead, construct an entire new history for Madoka's family in order to reverse the first episode. And yet she chooses to make a world where she is alone, isolated from the friendships she was starting to build with the other magical girls. She chooses to let Sayaka tell her off before the memory erasure.

The only real emotion Homura shows in the new reality she created is panic, when Madoka threatens to reconnect with the Law of Cycles. When, in other words, Madoka nearly brings about the return of a cosmic entity of hope and forgiveness, capable of ending Homura's suffering. Above all, Homura cannot allow that; she must suffer for failing Madoka, making things worse for Madoka. She must preserve Madoka eternally in a state of innocence and safety, cut off from her potential, because protecting Madoka is Homura's only concept of "good"—and so her failure to do so is her only concept of "evil."

It could have ended. If the other magical girls had simply killed her, she would be beyond further punishment, and her suffering would have ended. But they, in their cruel mercy, forced her to go on, forced her to find another way to keep protecting Madoka and punishing herself. She hates them for that, for failing to hate her as she hates herself. In her new world, she expresses her hatred by passive-aggressively mocking its targets. She breaks a teacup behind Mami, recalling her death fighting Charlotte. She taunts Sayaka as her memories decay, mimicking Sayaka's loss of self when she became a witch. She tricks Kyoko into wasting food.

And, in the stinger, she throws herself off a cliff next to a white chair, mirroring Madoka tipping off it earlier. Her hatred for herself has not changed. All that has changed is that now she has the power to make the magical girls hate her, to position herself as their enemy in the hopes that they will finish the job.

Ever since the movie aired, there has been debate over Homura's new status. Is she hero or villain? Here, then, is the answer to that question: Yes. Homura is both the villain of *Rebellion* and the hero battling that villain.

And here, also, is the answer to that question: No. Homura is the villain's victim, whom the hero must rescue.

Her witch's barrier expanded to encompass the universe. She is the entire story now.

# Chapter 21: Against Kyubey

Behind every story is at least one storyteller. As I argued back in [Chapter 5](#Chapter_5), there is reason to equate Kyubey at least partially with the creators of *Madoka Magica*, and in particular with Urobuchi himself. It is, therefore, interesting that despite Homura's protestations that she has become Evil at the end of the film, in much the same way Madoka became Hope at the end of the series, two earlier scenes imply that we should look past this to find the true villain, and thereby the true tyrant being rebelled against.

Relatively early in the film, after Homura has begun to realize that the magical girls' memories are being tampered with, she discovers that the space within which they are sealed resembles a witch's labyrinth. Recognizing Bebe as the witch Charlotte, she concludes it is her doing. There follows a scene in which Madoka, Mami, and Homura sit around Mami's table, which (as it was in the series) is shaped like an extended isosceles triangle. Madoka makes a comment which Homura then uses as an opening to begin questioning Mami about where Bebe comes from, to which Bebe responds with confusion and concern. Throughout the scene, Homura is attempting to confirm her suspicions that Bebe is the creator of the sealed space, and therefore the villain of this story—but the table is pointing directly at Kyubey throughout, as shown both in high shots that depict the entire group from above, and even more tellingly in shots along the center-line of the table, which emphasize it pointing *past* Bebe to Kyubey.

Correspondingly, near the end of the film, the magical girls initially appear to be fighting Homura's army of familiars. However, once they succeed in shattering the barrier, we are able to see massive Kyubeys looking down through their isolation field, the true prison containing the magical girls (Homura included)—once again, looking past Homura to see the true enemy.

In the [previous chapter](#Chapter_20), I briefly discussed E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Nutcracker and the Mouse Prince." Here it can be discussed more fully, because the final battle in many ways mimics elements of the battle between Marie's toys and the Mouse King early in that story: the toys are commanded by a broken-jawed creature, march forth from a cabinet, and battle an evil mouselike creature. Given his seven heads with seven crowns (features explicitly mentioned in the story), the Mouse King distinctly recalls the seven-headed, ten-crowned beast of Revelation 13, but in terms of *Madoka Magica* the many heads in one body serve as a reflection of Kyubey's single mind in many bodies. Just as the Mouse King is the enemy of Marie (Mary) and the Beast is an enemy of God, Kyubey is an enemy of Madoka (Kanon), and Homura acting as her knight is therefore the Nutcracker himself. Finally, the Mouse King demands to feed on Marie's candies and toys as a ransom for sparing the Nutcracker, much as Kyubey demands the magical girls sacrifice their lives and souls to feed his need for energy—food being the most basic source of energy for a living animal. (Including, notably, a sort of edible doll that is Marie's favorite and described quite similarly to the Nutcracker's true form/the "real" Drosselmeier's nephew, particularly with the phrase "rosy-cheeked." If the Nutcracker is Homura as she is now, the rosy-cheeked sugar doll is the original Homura, the weak girl that Madoka rescued only to unintentionally draw her into Kyubey's orbit.)

Most interestingly in this light, in "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" the figure of the storyteller is deeply ambiguous. Drosselmeier, who gives the Nutcracker to Marie as a gift and tells her the story of his origins and curse, is repeatedly implied to be untrustworthy or allied with the Mouse King. Most obviously, he either permits or causes the clock to strike, summoning the Mouse King to invade Marie's room and forcing the Nutcracker to raise the army of toys. Later, although Drosselmeier seems rather kindly in telling the injured Marie his story to cheer her up, he dismisses as dreams and fantasies her claims to have witnessed the battling toys or the Nutcracker's final slaying of the Mouse King.

Drosselmeier also inserts himself as a character into the story of the Nutcracker's curse, much as Kyubey inserts himself into Homura's witch barrier (which is only possible because it exists within Kyubey's isolation field). As he tells it, he is more or less the hero of the story-within-a-story, going on a quest to save the Princess Pirlipat from a curse. However, the Drosselmeier of the inner story is equally readable, especially once the reader begins to suspect the "real" Drosselmeier, as a villain, a classic fairy-tale wicked uncle who gets himself into trouble, and sacrifices his own nephew to save himself. We have only Drosselmeier's word for it that the ritual went wrong—perhaps it was always intended to merely transfer the curse from the Princess onto the Nutcracker? His story cannot be trusted—while Marie's experiences are always narrated in the same way as the straightforwardly "real" events of the story, despite occurring in times and places that make it possible to dismiss them as dreams, Drosselmeier's story is presented by a character, as a fictional tale to entertain a child. Within the context of the "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," Drosselmeier's tale of the Nutcracker is less likely to be "true" than Marie's dreams. The ending further implies her dreams are "realer" than his stories, as Marie is able to leave for the Nutcracker's world, and he describes Drosselmeier with contempt.

Whether Drosselmeier is more villainous than he presents himself is up to the reader's preference and interpretation. Certainly, however, there must be some reason that the Nutcracker, when Marie enters his realm and cures him (just as Madoka reaches through the cabinet and restores Homura from being a witch), is openly dismissive of Drosselmeier, warning Marie that he cannot deliver on the clockwork lake he promised to make for her, and that her power of creation is greater than his. And in the end, the happy ending for Marie is for her and the Nutcracker to escape "reality" into the Nutcracker's realm.

While the details of the plot do not mesh, in particular the order of events, the character parallels are quite clear. Homura is responsible for creating the imagery within her barrier, and the recurring theme of the Nutcracker in association with her suggests that she sees herself as that figure, taking the Princess' curse onto himself and living for the possibility of one day being rescued by Marie. Madoka is both the Princess and Marie (and it is notable that, in the Nutcracker's realm, Marie sees her reflection in a pool as the Princess—the two are quite possibly the same character in the Hoffmann story as well), while Kyubey combines elements of the Mouse King and Drosselmeier.

These mappings do not necessarily reflect the true natures of the characters, it should be noted, as they are drawn from the imagery of the witch's barrier, which has before been established as a hallucinatory maze that reflects the witch's state of mind, imposed on and replacing reality. But it gives a great deal of insight into Homura's motivations; the happy ending for Marie is to escape reality, not to some nirvana or heaven, but to the Nutcracker's world, where they can live together. Homura creates her world to be with Madoka, her Marie, in a dark and desperate attempt to complete her version of the Nutcracker. She is, more than ever, that dark and ugly being—and the only cure is for someone to love her as she is. For, in other words, Madoka to learn what Homura has done and has become, and still not give up on her.

But Drosselmeier may well have the last laugh. As a storyteller within a story, he is necessarily therefore at least in part a reflection of his own storyteller, Hoffmann—and Marie and the Nutcracker are still within Hoffmann's domain at the end of the story, as witness that he is able to keep writing about them until he chooses to stop. Kyubey is Drosselmeier is Hoffman is Urobuchi; he appears to have been defeated, but he seemed defeated at the end of the series as well. The final shot of his staring eye reminds us: as long as we are watching, he is watching. As long as we are willing to accept further stories of Madoka, Homura, and all the rest, Kyubey retains the power to threaten them.

# Chapter 22:               Against Ourselves

The precise moment at which *Rebellion* turns us against ourselves is about a fourth of the way through the film. Up until that point, it has depicted the happy world that, as any viewer with a trace of empathy must concede, the characters have more than earned. Throughout the series, we followed these young women, suffered with them, hoped against hope that they would be able to find some form of happiness.

In the end of the series, arguably, they did, but there is little denying that the ending to the series is bittersweet. Homura is alone, the only one who remembers Madoka. Madoka is gone forever, never born to begin with. The rest of the magical girls still fight, still suffer, still sink into the uttermost depths of despair to become witches—but are mercy-killed by Madoka just as they do.

Sayaka still died for a boy who barely noticed she was there. Mami and Kyoko are active as magical girls, so we can presum Mami's parents are still dead and Kyoko's family still perished in a murder-suicide.

The end of the series was an honest ending, not a happy one. It depicted the creation of a new, better world, but far from a flawless one.

That flawless world is what we see in the first segment of *Rebellion*. All five magical girls are alive and working as a team. Their interpersonal difficulties are reduced to flirtatious teasing between Sayaka and Kyoko. The psychic damage of Homura's time-travel shenanigans seems healed: Homura is back to her shyer, less confident, but more pleasant and cheerful glasses-wearing pigtailed self, and Madoka is both more cheerful and more confident, more like the version Homura first met at the beginning of Episode 10.

The Nightmares are almost laughable as a threat. If Hitomi's Nightmare is anything to go by, they pose no physical threat to the girls, don't torture them psychologically, and can be reduced to literal moe-blobs. What's more, they release a massive abundance of Soul Gem-cleansing light when killed, which as I've noted before not only permits, but encourages, the girls to work together, and in addition provides more than enough energy to keep them from blackening their Soul Gems and dying. Instead, the girls get to be magically powerful and visually impressive, fighting as a team against just enough difficulty to feel useful without ever experiencing the horrors of the series.

This is what we, collectively, as an audience, wanted. Oh, most of us understood that the ending as it stood was probably aesthetically better, but enough fanfiction by those too inexperienced to know better or too invested to care exists to make it clear: we wanted better for these girls. And here the movie comes, and gives us exactly what we asked for—until Homura starts to figure it out.

Like *Paradise Lost* before it (as discussed in [Chapter 19](#Chapter_19)), the show tricks us into rooting for someone who is trying to destroy our paradise. Homura knows this happy world is untrue, and therefore we know that by investigating it she will destroy it. From her initial conversation with Kyoko, the world becomes less and less realistic, until by the time the two realize they are trapped in the city the world is an abstraction of red field and white lines, the bus the only recognizable object. Soon after, Homura becomes the familiar glasses-less, straight-haired, darkly stoic girl we remember from the series, and the familiar sight excites us even as it means the happy world is deteriorating still faster.

Later, we see the battle teased throughout the first three episodes of the series, as Mami and Homura come to blows. The resulting battle is visually stunning, as Homura and Mami both employ their respective powers and extensive arsenals to the fullest. It is exciting, dramatic, well-animated and -scored—and horribly, horribly wrong. As a set piece, it is a long sequence that advances the plot little, the characters and themes not at all; it is exciting, but blatantly gratuitous, a pure piece of audience pandering of the sort the show deliberately shied away from most of the time. And then Homura shoots herself in the head, and Mami dissolves into ribbons, the pandering turned suddenly to horror.

Getting what we want is a disappointment and leads to horror. Nowhere is this as clear as in the film's climax, when Homura and Madoka are reunited and it all goes horribly wrong, resulting in a world where all the girls are free and alive and Madoka doesn't have to be a magical girl—a corrupt world ruled by a demonic demiurgic Homura who is holding Madoka prisoner.

We bought our tickets, sealed our contracts, and got our wishes, and they turned to ashes around us. Desire leads inevitably to suffering.

Why? Because we might wish for happiness, but we *need* truth. This is not to say that despair is truer than happiness, but rather that the truth of *Madoka Magica* is entropy and the inevitability of decay, and the series has consistently equated physical entropy and decay to the feelings of depression and despair. To end straightforwardly, uncomplicatedly happily, to give us what we wish for without corrupting it or snatching it away is to deny itself.

So the film forces us to reject our own desires for the series. Those who revel in its darkness and spiky difficulty must endure being pandered to with fanservice, pushing them to deny their own fandom. Those who embrace the fanservice must face where it leads. Both must deal with the deeply ambiguous final arc of the film, as Homura creates a world simultaneously darker and brighter than the world of the series, yet more coherent than the dream-world of the film.

Thus, the series places the viewer into the position of the magical girls. Pursuing our desires for the series leads to it becoming tragic. Our wishes transform into curses as down the spiral we go, until we find ourselves, at the climax of the film, wishing for Homura the witch to tear apart the world—and then when she does, we must live with the reality created by that wish.

By turning us against ourselves, and showing how our wishes for the series betray us, the film makes one last effort to push empathy onto us. Like the series in its first few episodes, it offers spectacle and fanservice to draw us in, and then, once the trap is baited, it makes us feel for the characters. Even more so, however, it makes us feel *as* the characters—empathy as opposed to sympathy—by placing us into a situation analogous to theirs. That moment of confusion, of alienation, of *wrongness* when Homura pulls Madoka apart? That is a small taste of what it feels like to be a magical girl.

I said above that this is a series about entropy and decay, depression and despair, and it is. But it's easy to forget that it's about other things, too, and by turning us against ourselves it reminds us of those other things.

This isn't *just* about Buddhism, or German literature, or the magical girl genre. It isn't *just* about entropy and suffering, or *just* about thematic complexity or the possible psychological issues of its implied, *gestalt* author. It isn't even just about characters, blobs of light and color created by animators and voiced by actors. It's also about us, our fears and hopes, our wishes and despair, our capacity for empathy.

In the end, as in the beginning, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is a story about people.

# Notes

1. Although Japanese naming conventions place the family name first (e.g., Kaname Madoka), the official translation of *Madoka Magica* consistently uses the English convention of given name first, then family name. To avoid confusion, this book follows the order used in the show. For consistency, the English order will be maintained even when referring to characters in other works or real people.

2. "The objects of imitation [in poetry] are men in action." Aristotle, *Poetics* (trans. S. H. Butcher) (The Internet Classics Archive, 2009). <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>. Note that in Part 1 of *Poetics* Aristotle establishes that he includes drama and narrative as a part of poetry, and the way in which he uses "object of imitation" is what we would today call the subject of a work.

3. Vivien Burr, "Where do you get your personality from?" *An Introduction to Social Constructionism* (London: Routledge, 1995).

4. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, "Modernism," *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).

5. Murfin and Ray, "Postmodernism," *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Note however that Murfin and Ray accentuate the negative and experimental aspects in their definition, and downplay the same pluralism which Hassan regards as a central feature.

6. Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodernism," *Exploring Postmodernism: Selected Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism at the XIth International Comparative Literature Congress, Paris, 20–24 August 1985*, Mattei Calinesku and Douew W. Fokkema ed. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987). Hassan provides a list of eleven overlapping criteria; the definition I provide draws heavily on his "Constructionism," "Decanonization," "Irony," "Carnivalization," and "Hybridization" criteria.

7. Ibid.

8. Pauline Marie Rosenau, "Affirmatives and Skeptics," *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*, Walter Truett Anderson (ed.) (Fontana Press, 1996).

9. Bill Shipley, "Vaclav Havel: Ambassador of Conscience 2003: From Prisoner to President—A Tribute," *Art for Amnesty* (Amnesty International, 2003). Accessed via Archive Today, <http://archive.today/B9l16>

10. There is some ambiguity early in the film, which looks like it could be a very odd "alternate timeline" similar to the ones explored in the manga discussed in [Part Two](#Part_Two) of this book, but marketing materials prior to the release of the movies referred to two recaps and a "continuation" of the *Madoka Magica* story. In the film itself, several characters are able to remember events from the final episode (which takes place after the point at which Homura reset all prior timelines, the fight with Walpurgisnacht), such as Mami and Homura talking about Wraiths, Kyubey remembering Homura telling him about Madoka's sacrifice to create a new system, and Madoka appearing at the end in "Madokanon" form.

11. The chat in question is archived on my blog, JedABlue.com, at  <http://jedablue.com/2014/06/25/the-nutcracker-the-mouse-king-and-the-puella-magi/>

12. Thomas Adajian, "The Definition of Art," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/art-definition/>

13. Eric P. Nash, "Raising the Curtain," *Manga Kamishibai* (New York: Abrams Comicarts, 2009).

14. Ibid.

15. "Sakura and the Mysterious Magic Book," *Cardcaptor Sakura: The Complete Collection* (NIS America, 2014).

16. "The Crybaby: Usagi's Beautiful Transformation," *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon* (Vis Media, 2014).

17. "The Black Claw Grips the Heart," *Cutie Honey: The Complete Series* (Discotek Media, 2013).

18. "Take Care of Yourself," *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Platinum Complete* (ADV Films, 2005).

19. Nagaru Tanigawa, *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

20. "The Crybaby."

21. Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodernism."

22. Brian Boyd, "Laughter and Literature: A Play Theory of Humor," *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 28, Number 1 (April 2004).

23. Noël Carroll, "Horror and Humor," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 57, Number 2 (Spring 1999).

24. Tomaki Saito, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson (trans.) (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minneapolis Press, 2011).

25. Sharalyn Orbaugh, "Busty Battlin' Babes: The Evolution of the Shojo in 1990s Visual Culture," *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson, and Maribeth Graybill (ed.) (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

26. Ibid. This concept of "Male Gaze" refers to a tendency in the framing of shots in film and television such that the camera emulates the prurient gaze of a heterosexual male viewer, for example by lingering on a woman's curves. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (ed.) (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

27. Briefly, hegemonic masculinity refers to a cultural tendency to equate masculinity and power. Expressions of power such as violence, dominance, and assertiveness are seen as inherently or appropriately masculine. By contrast, performed femininity refers to a cultural tendency to equate femininity to a performance, a sort of social game by which women can create a constrained, but relatively safe, space for self-expression at the price of playing to the assumptions of hegemonic masculinity. See R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

28. See for instance *Anime News Network*'s dismissal of *Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha* as "*otaku*-targeted entertainment taken to its logical extreme," noting in particular its "*moe* character types... and cheesecake service shots." Carl Kimlinger, "*Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha* DVD Box Set: Review," *Anime News Network* (December 15, 2008). [http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/review/magical-girl-lyrical-nanoha/dvd-box-set](http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/review/magical-girl-lyrical-nanoha/dvd-box-set%20)

29. Saito, Beautiful Fighting Girl.

30. "Sakura and the Mysterious Magic Book."

31. Connell, Gender and Power.

32. Namely, like Madoka, at the beginning of her second episode Sakura wakes in her bed just as she did in the beginning of the first episode, and initially assumes the events of the prior episode were a dream—until she realizes that one of the stuffed animals by her bed is not a stuffed animal at all. "Sakura's Wonderful Friend," *Cardcaptor Sakura*.

33. For a brief description of the Buddhist concept of impermanence designed to be readily accessible for Westerners more familiar with Christianity, see Ninian Smart, *Buddhism and Christianity: Rivals and Allies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993).

34. Magica Quartet, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica Production Note* (SHAFT, 2011). The book is available only in Japanese; however, a rough translation of the relevant page is available at the unofficial *Puella Magi Wiki*: [http://wiki.puella-magi.net/Puella\_Magi\_Production\_Note#Witch\_of\_cheesecake\_.28early\_concept\_that\_later\_became\_Charlotte.29.](http://wiki.puella-magi.net/Puella_Magi_Production_Note%23Witch_of_cheesecake_.28early_concept_that_later_became_Charlotte.29.)

35. Notably, this is a stereotypically masculine-gendered activity, emphasizing the gender-bending aspect of Junko's characterization. See Romit Dasgupta, "Working with homosociality," *The Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

36. "For putrefaction is the change and death of all things, and destruction of the first essence of all Natural things; whence there ariseth a regeneration, and new generation a thousand times better." Paracelsus, *On the Nature of Things*, excerpted in Stanton J. Linden (ed.), *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

37. Gen Urobuchi, *Fate/zero* Volume 1 (Type-Moon, 2006). The book is available only in Japanese; an unauthorized translation of the relevant section is available at the pirate translation site *Baka-Tsuki*: <http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Fate/Zero:Volume_1_Postface_1>.

38. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

39. "The Body," Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Series (Fox Searchlight, 2010).

40. Karen A. Smyers, "Symbolizing Inari: The Jewel," *The Fox and the Jewel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

41. Princess Tutu: Complete Collection (Æsir Holdings, 2011).

42. "The Spinners," *Princess Tutu*.

43. Urobuchi, *Fate/zero* Volume 1.

44. See for example Frazer's version of the tale. Sir James George Frazer, "The External Soul in Folk-Tales," *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Franklin Center, PA: Franklin Library, 1982)

45. Jennifer Clarke Wilkes and Jon Pickens (ed.), "Lich," *Dungeons & Dragons: Monster Manual: Core Rulebook III v.3.5* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2003).

46. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Arthur A. Levine, 2005).

47. Susan Caringella, "Affirmative Consent Reform Models," *Addressing Rape Reform in Law and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

48. Ibid.

49. Walter Sinnot-Armstrong, "Consequentialism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/>

50. Robert Kirk, "Zombies," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zombies/>. See also Dennet's counter-arguments to the zombie concept in Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

51. Tanya Krzywinska, "Zombies in Gamespace: Form, Context, and Meaning in Zombie-Based Video Games," *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette (ed.) (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008).

52. Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon posits that the zombie is an expression of native populations' feelings in response to the depersonalizing and confining pressures imposed by colonizing powers. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* Richard Philcox (trans.) (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

53. Senko K. Maynard, "Japanese Communication in Global Context," *Japanese Communication: Language and Thought in Context* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

54. A style common, but hardly unique, to Japan, where it has a long history in the form of a rhetorical and narrative structure called kishotenketsu. This in turn is based on a type of four-line Chinese poem, in which the first line (ki) introduces a topic, the second (sho) develops it, the third (ten) introduces a surprise turn or apparent non sequitur, and the fourth (ketsu) integrates that surprise into the original topic in order to arrive at a novel or unexpected conclusion. See Maynard, "Japanese Communication Strategies: Collaboration toward Persuasion," *Japanese Communication*.

55. Compare American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision: DSM-IV-TR* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2000).

56. Hans Christian Anderson, "The Little Mermaid," *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar (ed.) (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999). Excerpted from Anderson, *Eighty Fairy Tales*, R. P. Keigwin (trans.) (Pantheon Books, 1976).

57. Ana Mardoll, "The Little Mermaid," *Ramblings*. <http://www.anamardoll.com/2012/05/disney-little-mermaid.html>

58. American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-IV-TR*.

59. Sharalyn Orbaugh, "Busty Battlin' Babes."

60. *Bewitched: The Complete Series* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2013)

61. *Sally the Witch* (Toei Animation, 1966)

62. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "[Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother]," *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Excerpted from Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

63. Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow, "The Japanese Ideology of 'Good Wives and Wise Mothers,': Trends in Contemporary Research," *Gender and History*, Volume 3, Issue 3 (1991).

64. Smyers, "Symbolizing Inari: The Jewel."

65. Noriko T. Reider, "Yamauba, the Mountain Ogress: Old Hag to Voluptuous Mother," *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010).

66. Though at least this last may be merciful, if she chooses. Lafcadio Hearns, "Yuki-Onna," *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Project Gutenberg, 1998). [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1210/1210-h/1210-h.htm#yukionna](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1210/1210-h/1210-h.htm%23yukionna)

67. Gilbert and Gubar, "[Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother]."

68. Revolutionary Girl Utena: The Student Council Saga (Right Stuf, 2011).

69. Revolutionary Girl Utena: The Apocalypse Saga (Right Stuf, 2011).

70. For a detailed exploration of menstrual taboos and misogyny, see Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988 (Revised)).

71. Saito, Beautiful Fighting Girl.

72. Patrick W. Galbraith, "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 3 (October-November 2009). Note in particular the section titled "Otaku discussions of moe."

73. Neera K. Badhwar and Roderick T. Long, "Ayn Rand," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ayn-rand/>

74. Urobuchi, *Fate/zero* Volume 1.

75. Smart, "Buddhism," *The World's Religions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (2nd ed.)).

76. Smart, "The Formation of Zen," *The World's Religions*.

77. Vaclav Havel, "The Politics of Hope," *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, Paul Wilson (trans.) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

78. The wheel of *dharma*, fate, is a classic symbol of Buddhism. See Smart, "Buddhism."

79. This is, generally speaking, how reincarnation works in both Hinduism and Buddhism—no physical or mnemonic trace of the previous life is maintained, but its karmic burden endures. See Smart, "The Ingredients of Indian Religion," *The World's Religions*.

80. Smart, "Buddhism."

81. Smart, "The Formation of Zen," *The World's Religions*.

82. Adrian Stokes, *Michelangelo: A Study in the Nature of Art* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1955).

83. Frank Lynn Meshberger, "An Interpretation of Michelangelo's Creation of Adam Based on Neuroanatomy," *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, Volume 264, Issue 14 (October 10, 1990).

84. Note in particular item 1 in the ICD-10 description of dissocial personality disorder, "Callous unconcern for the feelings of others." World Health Organization, *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 10th edition (World Health Organization, 1994).

85. On the eve of the festival of St. Walpurga (May 1), *Walpurgisnacht*, German folklore holds that witches and demons meet and dance on Mt. Brocken. See John Michael Cooper, "The Cultural and Religious Prehistories," *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Night: The Heathen Muse in European Culture, 1700-1850* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007).

86. Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia Dell'Arte*, trans. Lovett F. Edwards (New York: Octagon Books, 1982).

87. Smart, "Buddhism."

88. A saying attributed to Lin-Chi Yihuan, an influential Tang Dynasty monk. See Burton Watson, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A translation of the Lin-chi lu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

89. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (Hazleton, Penn.: Electronic Classic Series, 2005). <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/goethe/goethe-faust.pdf>. This PDF, produced by Pennsylvania State University, covers only the first part of Faust.

90. The Pure Land schools of Buddhism, broadly and briefly, teach of the Buddha Amida, who created a "pure land" to which the faithful will ascend upon death, and from which it is much easier to attain nirvana. Smart, "The Pure Land Movement and the Mappo," *The World's Religions*.

91. Kanon being an important female Bodhisattva. See Smart, "The Pure Land Movements and the Mappo."

92. "Sakura and Her True Feelings," *Cardcaptor Sakura*.

93. Urobuchi, *Fate/zero* Volume 1.

94. Goethe, *Faust*. <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/goethe/goethe-faust.pdf>. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the plot of Faust in this section refer to this version.

95. Calvin Thomas, "Introduction to Faust," *The German Classics of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* Volume 1, Kuno Francke (ed.) (Project Gutenberg, 2004). Accessed via <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11123>.

96. Elena P. O'Brien, "The Meaning of the Eternal Feminine in Goethe's Faust," *Electronic Theses, Treatises, and Dissertations* (2012). Paper 5076. <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/etd/5076/>

97. Smart, "Buddhism."

98. Ibid.

99. Smart, "The Ingredients of Indian Religion."

100. Most particularly in one of the sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra. See Smart, "Nichiren and Japanese Nationalism," *The World's Religions*.

101. Smart, "Buddhism."

102. Smart notes the similarity between the figures of Kuanyin and Mary in Buddhism and Christianity, for example. See Smart, *Buddhism and Christianity*.

103. Gilbert Gubar, "[Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother]."

104. The *Turkey City Lexicon* is a glossary of critical terms specific to science fiction, developed by and circulated to writers' workshops. Lewis Shiner and Bruce Sterling, *Turkey City Lexicon—A Primer for SF Workshops* (Science Fiction Writers of America, 2009). <http://www.sfwa.org/2009/06/turkey-city-lexicon-a-primer-for-sf-workshops/>

105. "Puella Magi Oriko Magica," *Puella Magi Wiki* (2015). <http://wiki.puella-magi.net/Puella_Magi_Oriko_Magica>

106. American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-IV-TR*.

107. Ibid.

108. Smart, "Buddhism."

109. This is of course an extremely simplistic view that conflates entropy with the second law of thermodynamics, but will suffice for discussion as it is the view that *Madoka Magica* itself takes. And while simple, it is not inaccurate; see Martin Goldstein and Inga F. Goldstein, *The Refrigerator and the Universe: Understanding the Laws of Energy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

110. Smart, "The Ingredients of Indian Religion."

111. Paracelsus, On the Nature of Things.

112. Gerald Klingaman, "Plant of the Week: Red Spiderlily," *University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Services* (2000). Archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/61fHvTrxK>.

113. *Airplane!* (Amazon Instant Video). [http://www.amazon.com/Airplane-Kareem-Abdul-Jabbar/dp/ B001K37CT8/ref=tmm\_aiv\_title\_0?\_encoding=UTF8&sr=&qid=](http://www.amazon.com/Airplane-Kareem-Abdul-Jabbar/dp/%20B001K37CT8/ref=tmm_aiv_title_0?_encoding=UTF8&sr=&qid=)

114. *Iron Man* (Amazon Instant Video). [http://www.amazon.com/Iron-Man-Robert-Downey-Jr/dp/B001KZG99A/ref=sr\_1\_2?ie=UTF8 &qid= 1419703982&sr=8-2](http://www.amazon.com/Iron-Man-Robert-Downey-Jr/dp/B001KZG99A/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8%20&qid=%201419703982&sr=8-2)

115. See for instance this image from the influential Rider-Waite tarot deck: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Fool\_%28Tarot\_card%29#mediaviewer/File:RWS\_Tarot\_00\_Fool.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fool_%28Tarot_card%29%23mediaviewer/File:RWS_Tarot_00_Fool.jpg)

116. Siegfried Gohr, *Magritte: Attempting the Impossible* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2009)

117. Wim Tigges, "The Themes and Motifs of Nonsense," *The Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988)

118. Alison Reike discusses this "category mistake" as one of four major types of nonsensical language, of which the other three are more straightforwardly wordplay, while the category mistake can appear on both linguistic and narrative levels. Reike, "Secret Sense, Coherent Nonsense," *The Senses of Nonsense* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

119. Fujimura-Fanselow, "The Japanese Ideology of 'Good Wives and Wise Mothers.'"

120. Arthur Edward Waite, *The Book of Black Magic and Ceremonial Magic* (revised) (San Diego, California: The Book Tree, 2006).

121. Ibid.

122. Isaiah 14:12-15, *New International Version* (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2011).

123. *Smart*, "The Nature of a Religion."

124. Roy Flannagan, "Paradise Lost: Introduction," *The Riverside Milton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998).

125. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (reprint) (New York: Dover Books, 1994)

126. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. Reprinted in and annotated by Flannagan, *The Riverside Milton*.

127. All references to the story of "The Nutcracker" in this chapter and the next refer to E.T.A Hoffmann, "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," L.R.C. (trans.) <http://www.springhole.net/writing/the_nutcracker_and_the_mouse_king/index.html>

128. Magica Quartet, Puella Magi Madoka Magica Production Note.

## About the Author

Jed A. Blue is a third-generation geek and lifelong animation buff. He has a degree in English from George Mason University, and lives in Washington, D.C., where he works as a technical writer. He can frequently be found giving panels on animation, literary and film criticism, and related topics at fan conventions along the East Coast. His favorite meguca is Homura, his favorite captain is the Sisko, and his favorite Doctor is Sylvester McCoy.

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