

## The Sorcerer in *Sword Art Online*: A Glance at the Archetype

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By Todd Moffett

### ABSTRACT

Some villains in the anime *Sword Art Online* are influenced by the sorcerer archetype, drawn from legends of fairyland, medieval tales of hostile magicians, and the ancient figure of the shaman. The concentration of sorcerers in *SAO* makes it fertile ground for tracing the archetype in both Western and Japanese sources before turning to how *SAO* uses those influences in its world-building and in the development of its own brand of sorcerer.

**Keywords:** *Parzifal*, *Sword Art Online*, Clinschor, Nobuyuki Sugou (Oberon), Kirito (Kazuto Kirigaya), virtual reality games, anime, Japanese popular culture, Arthurian literature

## Los hechiceros en *Sword Art Online*: Una mirada al arquetipo

### RESUMEN

Algunos villanos del anime *Sword Art Online* están influenciados por el arquetipo del hechicero, extraído de leyendas del país de las hadas, cuentos medievales de magos hostiles y la antigua figura del chamán. La concentración de hechiceros en *SAO* lo convierte en un terreno fértil para rastrear el arquetipo en fuentes occidentales y japonesas antes de ver cómo *SAO* usa esas influencias en la construcción de su mundo y en el desarrollo de su propia marca de hechicero.

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**Palabras clave:** *Parzifal*, *Sword Art Online*, Clinschor, Nobuyuki Sugou (Oberon), Kirito (Kazuto Kirigaya), Videojuegos virtuales, anime, cultura popular japonesa, Literatura arturiana

## 《刀剑神域》中的巫师：原型一览

### 摘要

动漫《刀剑神域》(SAO)中的一些反派受到巫师原型的影响，这些原型来自仙境传说、关于邪恶魔法师的中世纪故事、以及古代萨满。《刀剑神域》中的大量巫师为追溯西方和日本的巫师原型提供了肥沃的土壤。本文探究了《刀剑神域》如何在其故事建构和独特巫师类型的发展中使用这些影响。

### 作者简介

南内华达社区学院的英语系教授Todd Moffett最近开始探究动漫世界。他没有实际的巫术知识。他曾在《大众文化评论》上发表过一篇题为“The Blacksmith”的文章。

### 关键词

《帕西法尔》，《刀剑神域》，Clinschor, Nobuyuki Sugou (Oberon), Kirito (Kazuto Kirigaya)，虚拟现实游戏，动漫，日本大众文化，亚瑟王文学

The anime *Sword Art Online* (SAO),<sup>1</sup> based on the light novels written by Reki Kawahara and illustrated by abec, has in its four current seasons become one of the defining franchises of the genre. It follows Kazuto Kirigaya, known better by his avatar, Kirito, as he fights to survive in several (take a deep breath) virtual reality massive multiplayer online role-playing games (VRMMORPG). To enter these games, players don either a NerveGear helmet or AmuSphere goggles to connect the simulations directly to the sensory centers of the brain and—beyond what the latest Oculus or Apple Vision Pro systems do—immerse themselves within self-contained worlds of lifelike detail. Kirito's first adventure, the story arc of Aincrad, takes place in a one-hundred-story floating castle created by inscrutable world builder Akihiko Kayaba, during which Kirito and partner Asuna Yuuki free 6,000 survivors from a lethal role-playing game. In the Fairy Dance arc, Kirito liberates Asuna from Nobuyuki Sugou at the sinister heart of the world of Alfheim. In the Phantom Bullet arc, Kirito, with new partner Shino Asada, tracks down Death Gun, who kills real-world players by destroying their avatars in the game of Gun Gale Online. In the Alicization arc, Kirito ventures with new Soul Translator technology to Underworld, where he meets and rescues an AI named Alice (the allusions to Lewis Carroll are intentional) first from the dominating and manipulative Quinella and then from the rogue gamer and gun-for-hire Subtilizer.

Being at the center of the *shōnen* (“boy”) and the *isekai* (“otherworld”) subgenres, Kirito's stories feature digital magic, swordplay, fantastic beings, and dangerous enemies. A cursory look at some of these enemies reveals them to be influenced by the archetype of the sorcerer, which, in turn, one may argue, is drawn not just from the beguiling legends of a fairyland, or from medieval tales of hostile magicians, but

also from the ancient figure of the shaman. The concentration of sorcerers in *SAO*, with the otherworldly settings of each story arc, makes the series fertile ground for analyzing the archetype. Since Kawahara was inspired by Western literature for *SAO*,<sup>2</sup> and since American viewers are a sizable part of its fan base, the roots for the archetype will be traced in both Western and Japanese sources before the discussion turns to how *SAO* uses those influences in its world-building and in the development of its own brand of sorcerers.

### THE SHAMAN AND THE SORCERER

Through the ages, two of the sorcerer's defining powers have been necromancy and communication with—or control over—various daemons in various supernatural realms. Stories of a darkly cowed figure summoning a djinn by rubbing a lamp, or a demon by drawing a circled pentangle, or the shades of the dead by pouring out a blood sacrifice stretch back centuries. These stories in turn lead to one possible source for the archetype, a source highly relevant to the story arcs of *SAO*: the shaman. Traditionally, for humans and animals, the Other World is the land of the dead, but a place also where the souls of the living may wander in dream or illness (Eliade 215, 415). A prime function of the shaman is to rescue such souls before they come to peril by employing a special technique: the mastery of an “ecstasy” (Eliade 4) that allows her to make contact at will with the supernatural. There are two kinds of ecstasy. One, which occurs in Siberian shamanism and its offshoots, is the migratory “soul-flight” (Vitebsky 48) by which the shaman “is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld” (Eliade 5). The second, more prevalent in Japan, is the possession trance, during which a transcendental being enters an object controlled by the shaman or enters the shaman herself (Fairchild 41; Waida 461, 462).

One source of peril is the sorcerer, who, like the shaman, can communicate with the daemons and souls in the other realm. The sorcerer is an “inversion and perversion of the healing shaman” (Vitebsky 112), using his powers to harm the souls that have wandered into, or that he has lured into, the spirit realm (Vitebsky 100; Eliade 182). The harm sickens not only the souls but also the physical bodies of the victims (Vitebsky 45), who then must be rescued by a shaman who battles the sorcerer (Vitebsky 74). Sometimes the sorcerer can direct hostile spirits against people in the waking world. Sacrifices or cursed objects buried under or near a victim’s dwelling, darts embedded into a victim’s flesh, and effigies formed in the victim’s image may all be issuing points from which harmful spirits attack the living (Fairchild 35, 77; Kieckhefer 159, 162-3; Vitebsky 24; Aston 186-7), and Alaskan black shamans can reanimate animal “bones, skin, and sinews” to send them on “deadly missions” (Vitebsky 89).

There are countless legends of lost souls brought back to the mortal plane, one of the most famous being that of Orpheus and Eurydice. The Japanese have the identical tale of Izanagi’s pursuit of his wife Izanami to Yomi, the land of the dead. There are also several stories in which a shamanic hero rescues souls kidnapped by a sorcerer, one being the Hopi story “Son of Light Kills the Monster,” in which Man-Eagle seizes Son of Light’s wife and flies her to his lair above the clouds. With the aid of Spider Woman, the Piñon Maidens, and Mole, Son of Light finds Man-Eagle and defeats him in a number of contests (“Son” 211-16). However, the stories play out, in whatever culture or time they appear, they contain terrifying landscapes filled with danger and inhabited by actors with fantastic powers.

### THE REALM OF THE FAIRY QUEEN

Because the *isekai* genre in general tends to rely on a “vaguely medieval world used in fantasy novels and games” as the backdrop of its otherworldly setting (Alverson), the sorcerer’s environment also has relevance to a discussion of SAO. Being an operator in the Other World, the sorcerer may establish residency in that world or in a remote land which strongly resembles, or which connects to, a supernatural realm. In Western literature, an early example is Circe, whose house, isolated on a desert island, surrounded by humans she has transformed into animals, immediately stamps her as unearthly. In Japanese legend appears a similar figure: Himiko, the shaman-empress who led the Yamatai confederation at the end of the Yayoi period (c. CE 250). Recognized in the Chinese *Wei zhi* (*Record of Wei*), Himiko ruled through her younger brother and isolated herself in a heavily fortified stockade attended by a thousand women and a single male servant who brought her meals and acted as her medium of communication (Kidder 16).

A second source of the features that populate the sorcerer’s environment springs from a cache of stories in which a queen of the Sidhe, and mistress of a domain within a fairy hill, is under attack by the people of a neighboring hill. A young hero, led to the queen’s hill by “some animal or will-o’-the-wisp” (Campbell 7), beats off the attackers and then stays to become her consort. The legends of Tánhäuser, Oisín, Porsenna, Ogier-le-Danois, Thomas of Ercildoune, Fernando de Alma, and Conle the Redhaired share features of these tales but add a sinister twist (Baring-Gould 118-19, 305-309; Kieckhefer 53-54). The heroes are lured to a realm where all (except de Alma) become the consort of a fairy queen, and from which all return (except Conle, who is never seen by mortal eyes again) to find that decades and

centuries have passed, or that their actions in the other realm prevent them from reintegrating with the society they have left. An eighth-century Japanese version of this tale, “Urashima Taro,” relates how a fisherman spends three years with the princess of Ryugu, the kingdom at the bottom of the sea, but returns home to find that three generations have passed (“Urashima” 112-114). Another medieval Japanese tale, reversing the years-thought-days motif, tells of a middle-aged man who follows a *kitsune* (an evil fox spirit) to her sumptuous and “handsome” house; he remains her husband for thirteen years before returning to his family, for whom only thirteen days have passed (Ury 102-5).

Perhaps the most important feature of the landscape surrounding the sorcerer is the Cosmic Center. This feature is central to the art of shamanism, though it also appears in every major religion. Considered at once the Center of the World, the Cosmic Axis, and the Navel of the Earth (Eliade 266-69), the Cosmic Center is the connecting point between the three universal zones, upper, middle, and lower, and thus for the migrating shaman the pathway he takes to the spirit realms in the sky (269) or the earth (202). It is commonly represented by two landmarks: the Sacred Mountain and the Cosmic Tree (Eliade 269-70; Fairchild 29; Rutherford 103).<sup>3</sup> Being the Navel (or *omphalos*) of the Earth, the Center is the place where the universe (and humankind) was created, and where intrepid heroes may journey to obtain a portion of that creative power for their own uses. The journey to the Center, however, is fraught with difficulties, the pathway leading either into a labyrinth (Eliade 51), across a narrow bridge (Eliade 202, 482; Rutherford 103), over or through a treacherous body of water (Eliade 311, 355, 457; Vitebsky 71; Rutherford 103), or to the foot of a guardian monster

(Eliade 122) that the shamanic hero must defeat before accessing the Center itself.

### PRIOR ITERATIONS

Before examining the sorcerers in *SAO*, a brief look at some important transitional figures in Western and Japanese literature would be in order. In the West, two of the most recognizable characterizations of the sorcerer are (for women) the Witch and (for men) the Scholar-Priest. Circe, referenced above, is one such model for the Witch. She teaches Odysseus a form of necromancy, using the blood of sacrificed animals, by which he can summon the dead in Hades. Another Witch in the *Odyssey*, Kalypso, detains the hero on her island, a Cosmic Center located at the “navel of all the waters” (1.50), for seven years. The two goddesses entice the hero to stay with them not just with their magical powers but with their sexuality. That sexual initiative in women is already seen as taboo is evidenced by Kalypso’s famous complaint when Hermes arrives to demand Odysseus’s release: “[Y]ou are resentful toward the goddesses for sleeping / openly with such men . . .” (5.119-20).<sup>4</sup> By the end of the classical period, the view that characterized Witches—through and well beyond the Middle Ages—was that they were either sirens who used their wiles for “amorous purposes” (Kieckhefer 33) or hags who defiled graves or dismembered the living for body parts with which to create their dread spells (Kieckhefer 32).

Similar categorizations for the Witch seem to have surfaced in Japanese literature as well. Himiko, unmarried and of advanced age by the time of her mention in the *Wei zhi*, was known to be skilled in the “Way of Demons” and frequently depicted holding a mirror (Miller, “Rebranding” 182; Kidder xiii, 16), not only one of the regalia of Japanese royalty

but also a tool used by shamans to “see the world” or contact the souls of the dead (Eliade 154).<sup>5</sup> Another legendary shaman of Japan, Yamato-totohi-momoso-hime, was a forecaster of some skill who married a snake-god. However, her fright one morning upon viewing him in his true form caused him to abandon her. In remorse, she killed herself by plunging a chopstick into her pudenda (*Nihongi* 158-59). Another shaman, the Empress Jingu, would prophecy while her husband played the *koto* (zither). After her husband’s death, Jingu, while pregnant, sailed to Korea and won a great military victory; three years later, she gave birth to the next emperor (*Nihongi* 221-232). Perhaps the most powerful—and fearful—Witch of all Japanese literature is Tamamo no Mae, a nine-tailed *kitsune* of such deviousness that she could keep herself young and beautiful over the course of three thousand years. Posing as a courtesan or a young girl, she brought down, with her tastes for cruelty and sexual depravity, two Chinese dynasties and another in India before arriving in secret in Japan around CE 700. Four hundred years later, after becoming the consort of Emperor Toba, she tried to assassinate him but was caught and killed. The strife that she caused led to the Genpei War and the end of the long and peaceful Heian period (CE 794–1185) in Japan (Meyer, “Tamamo”). Admittedly, the examples glossed above for both Western and Japanese literature are a small part of their canons, but they do seem to point to an underlying trend: between the extremes of the Crone and the Siren, the Witches are sought for their power, celebrated (or feared) for their ability to bear special children, shunned for the frank expression of their sexuality, or demonized by being assigned some form of deviance.

The Scholar-Priest concedes no ground to the Witch in his own histories. In Western literature, the persona developed during the Middle Ages, when advanced forms of spellcast-

ing such as necromancy, alchemy, and sorcery were strongly identified with the clergy in part because such magic could not be studied or even known by anyone but “educated clerics” since the spells that invoked demonic spirits, often based on “church rituals,” were “highly structured” and could be found only in books written in Latin (Bailey 965-66). The characterization of the poet Virgil, who outgrew his origins as a mere scribbler to become both a fearsome spell-caster and the butt of a well-known escapade, may serve as an example. In classical and early medieval times, he was a beneficent figure, the prophet of Christ’s birth, the founder and defender of Naples, a healer with magical powers, a protector against the winds of Mount Vesuvius, and the banisher of harmful flies and snakes (Tuchel 252-53). He was also a craftsman of “magical artifacts,” at one time creating a mirror—note the similarity with Himiko—that could see events throughout the Roman Empire (Kieckhefer 113). But by the thirteenth century, he had acquired magical powers from demons (Kieckhefer 113), and in the bold and bawdy story of the Basket Adventure, he earns a reputation for sexual license, the tale telling of how, seeking the adulterous love of a beautiful woman, he agrees to ascend to her chamber in a rope-drawn basket, only to be left suspended halfway, the mockery of Rome (Tuchel 255-56).<sup>6</sup>

Virgil’s literary example gave rise to another Scholar-Priest who has had a strong influence on the modern characterization of the sorcerer, the villain of Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (c. CE 1210): Clinschor. He is described in the poem as a “cleric who [speaks] magic spells” (book 2, verse 66) and who “practice[s] the art of black magic [*nigrômanzî*], and with sorcery [*zouber*] . . . can compel both women and men” (12.617; McFarland 283). That he has some control over the daemons of the Other World is also attested to: “[He] has

power over all *les mauvaises* and *les belles gens* dwelling between the firmament and the earth, save those whom God desires to protect” (13.658). Wolfram makes Clinschor Virgil’s kinsman expressly by referencing Virgil’s magical abilities (13.656). Surprisingly, Clinschor never appears in the poem, never casts a spell, never confronts the hero, the Arthurian knight Gawain, who rescues the four hundred noblewomen and four queens that the sorcerer has lured to his magical Castle of Wonders. The dangers Gawain faces—the Wonder Bed, the five hundred spears and slings, the giant lion—are, like mousetraps, set to engage when activated.

What first strikes the reader about Clinschor is that unlike Circe and Kalypso, who seem like passive dwellers in realms not of their shaping, he actively engages in the type of world-building that inspires awe in the other characters. When Gawain first approaches the Castle of Wonders, he encounters the amazing sight of a citadel that seems to spin “like a top around [a] hill” (10.508), that is “built up with defenses” against “all sieges” (11.564). Clinschor also has placed atop the highest tower the unbreakable pillar that “[casts] its glow” for “six miles round the countryside” and gives the viewer a “true report” of anything that happens within that area (12.592). In these details appear the outlines of a man-made Cosmic Center: a Celestial City built on a hill, the spinning which suggests the turning about the Cosmic Axis, and a Pillar that grants far sight—Wolfram borrowing, from the legends of Virgil, the poet’s mirror as Clinschor’s *pièce de résistance* (Kieckhefer 113). The final barrier to Clinschor’s fortress is a river which Gawain must cross by paying a toll to the ferryman, Plippalinot, thus evoking not only the myths in which boatmen such as Charon and Urshanabi transport heroes to the Other World, but also the voyage across water that is a frequent occurrence in the shaman’s journey to

the land of spirits (Eliade 202, 311; Vitebsky 44; Rutherford 103). Just before the river crossing, as a confirmation that the terrain Gawain will enter is of an extraordinary quality, Plippalinot tells him, “[T]his whole country here is a land of fantastic adventure” (10.548).

The second detail that strikes the reader about Clinschor is his own dark sexual history. His violation of the “moral code of his world” has to do “with *minne* [courtly love],” and he is “punished for it with impotence” (McFarland 285). Queen Arnive, one of his prisoners, relates his backstory to Gawain, that for the crime of adultery with Queen Iblis of Sicily he has been castrated by Iblis’s husband, King Ibert (13.656-57). Clinschor, driven to learn magic to punish the “courtly society that . . . robbed him of his sexual power” (Clason 308), robs the women he has captured of their own sexuality (Tuchel 249). The worldview Wolfram establishes in the poem is the importance of love—the proper expression of *agape*, *eros*, and *minne*. Against this panorama, Clinschor’s crimes are of the worst kind, for he has used his powers not to promote these feelings in the universe of the poem but to suppress them.

The same model of the Scholar-Priest appears in Japanese literature at almost the same moment as Wolfram’s *Parzival*. Perhaps the most famous example is Abe no Seimei (CE 921–1005), considered Japan’s greatest *onmyōji* (“yin-and-yang master,” a practitioner of *onmyōdō* divination), who, like Virgil, would surely be surprised to see the extraordinary turn his life has taken in the tales that arose about him after his death. According to the *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Times Past*) and the *Uji shui monogatari* (*Tales from the Later Gleanings of Uji*), compiled late in the Heian and early in the Kamakura (CE 1185–1333) periods, he was born of an *onmyōji* father and a *kitsune* mother, and by the time he was five, he could

already influence *oni* (ogres) and perceive his mother's spirit form (Meyer, "Abe"; Meyer, "Kuzunoha"; Miller, "Extreme" 32). Fearing that her son would turn to evil because of her own *kitsune* nature, she abandoned him—though she also granted him the ability to understand animals (Meyer, "Abe"; Meyer, "Kuzunoha"; Miller, "Extreme" 33). By the time he is an adult, he can "channel or command" *shikigami*, or supernatural spirits (Miller, "Extreme" 33). Seimei demonstrates his powers by stripping one sorcerer, Chitoku Hōshi, of his *shikigami*, and in another incident, by interpreting the unusual behavior of a noble's dog to warn of a curse planted by another sorcerer, Ashiya Dōman, in the ground beneath the entrance to a shrine (*Konjaku II* 301-02, 306; Mills 339-40, 411-12; Meyer, "Abe"). The contests between Seimei and Dōman gain much attention in the stories, Dōman himself being an *onmyōji* of some fame but also of much arrogance, bent on causing trouble for Seimei, challenging him to a number of magical duels and eventually bringing their rivalry to a fatal climax by seducing Seimei's wife, stealing his book of magic, and cutting his throat (Meyer, "Abe"; Mills 412). Seimei, though, after being resurrected by a Chinese mage, avenges himself on the lovers by cutting their throats in turn (Meyer, "Abe"). Seimei lives on as a hero to this day, having been transformed from a middle-aged man into the *bishōnen* ("beautiful boy") protagonist of Baku Yumemakura's *Onmyōji* novels (Miller, "Extreme" 31, 33); it's Dōman, with his penchant for magical mischief and his errant sexuality—another story of adultery, no less—whose characteristics resurface in the modern-day sorcerers.

### THE SETTING IN SAO

The mood of the series is established in the very first episode. The viewers, along with the unsuspecting gamers, learn that

all ten thousand contestants have been sealed in the world of Aincrad by Akihiko Kayaba. On the evening that the game opens, he informs the players that they cannot log out, and that they cannot lose their hit points and leave the game by “dying” in the virtual world. If they do, a microwave burst from their NerveGear helmets will destroy their brains. The same will happen if someone in the real world tries to remove the helmets. The only way to escape Aincrad alive is for the players to clear all one hundred floors of the bosses that await. Unfortunately, four thousand players either perish in the game or die in the real world when they can no longer care for their comatose bodies; Kirito, Asuna, and many other survivors are transferred to hospitals, still wearing their NerveGear helmets. After two years pass within SAO, Kirito and Asuna discover that Kayaba has an avatar—Heathcliff—in the game as well. By killing Heathcliff, they clear the game.

This formula, with modifications, repeats through the four major story arcs listed in the introduction. The key feature of SAO’s formula, the feature that most directly connects the VRMMORPG worlds to the worlds and figures of the sorcerer, is the headsets—the NerveGear helmet or the AmuSphere goggles—and the Soul Translator, which, because they induce a condition identical to the shaman’s trance, all must use to visit the virtual realms. Since each of these realms is analogous to the Other World, every player is like a soul who wanders in that world, and as they fight, love, live, and survive in the games, the players are motionless, senseless, and helpless in real life. Whether the trance is migratory or possessive is an interesting question, but one not necessary to answer because in whatever form the condition takes, it presents the same danger for all who enter it—it brings them to the attention of the sorcerers who can attack them not just in the games but in the real world as well.

Another major feature of the VRMMORPG realms is that their world-building relies on the landscapes in which the shaman and the sorcerer operate. For one thing, the same time distortion—and the danger it presents—found in the stories of the fairy queen governs at least two of the worlds, Alfheim and Underworld. Alfheim’s sixteen-hour clock forces players to convert time much as people do when moving between time zones. In Underworld, years pass while Kirito adventures there, but only days pass in Japan for those observing his progress. In the fourth season, Kirito and Asuna, after rescuing Alice from Subtilizer,<sup>7</sup> must spend two hundred virtual years in Underworld—a wait that might kill them—before returning to their bodies.

The major landmarks of *SAO* also strongly recall the Cosmic Center and the fortresses of the earlier sorcerers. Kayaba has built the castle of Aincrad on the model of the Celestial City. The floating castle recalls several images of the palaces of the gods drifting in the clouds, from the New Jerusalem of Judeo-Christian belief to the dwellings of the Japanese gods in Takamanohara (the heavenly plains), to Man-Eagle’s house, to the city of Laputa in Hayao Miyazaki’s film *Castle in the Sky*. Inside, it resembles Clinschor’s Castle of Wonders, its labyrinth of dungeons, cities, forests, and other obstacles containing floor bosses and traps that spring when activated. At the top, it connects the universal zones, in this case the world of Aincrad with the real world. Kirito and Asuna, after defeating Heathcliff, are afforded what amounts to a shaman’s journey to heaven and an encounter with a deity: a view of Aincrad’s disintegration, and a meeting with its creator—Kayaba himself—as they stand among a beautiful array of sunset-tinged clouds (“End” 15:08).

In the Fairy Dance arc, the virtual world of Alfheim has a

centerpiece modeled on Yggdrasil. Called the World Tree, it towers over nine fairy nations, its roots plunging into the dungeon of Jotunheim.<sup>8</sup> The World Tree, like Clinschor's castle, is well defended. It is not possible to climb the tree, and an invisible shield blocks the game-player fairies from flying to the top. At the crown of the tree sits the palace of Nobuyuki Sugou's avatar, the fairy Oberon, which like the top floor of Aincrad connects with the outside world. The entry point to the palace, located in the central city of Alne at the foot of the tree, is heavily guarded by nonplayer fairy knights.<sup>9</sup> Within the bowels of this palace—its own corridors recalling the labyrinth—Sugou, like Clinschor, has imprisoned a host of victims—three hundred comatose Aincrad survivors whose minds he has captured through their NerveGear. He has hidden them in a laboratory where he conducts illegal experiments on their brains. The reduction of his victims into brains, which float in tanks atop rows of pedestals, recalls how Circe transforms her own victims into animals, a stroke of dehumanization that exemplifies both their personalities and the danger they represent to the heroes. In addition to the brains, within a giant birdcage outside this stronghold, Sugou has confined Asuna in the guise of Titania, a situation that suggests both Son of Light's rescue of his wife and the storyline of the fairy queen in need of a protecting hero.

In the Phantom Bullet arc, the world of Gun Gale Online (GGO) presents a vastly different landscape. When Kirito enters the game, he finds a mash-up of ruins—temples, forests, deserts, roadways, cities, Wild West saloons—which serve as cover for the players to blast away at each other with assorted firearms. The central metropolis is a bleak jumble of smoky skies, gray skyscrapers, and grimy streets, a demonic modulation of the Celestial City. In its marketplace, the players can cash in their winnings for supplies, weapons, or even,

if the price is right, new avatars for themselves, thus using the Center to obtain portions of its creative power. Shino helps Kirito navigate the labyrinth of alleys and shops to arrive at the Governor General's Office, which serves as the main point of contact between the players and the outer world. It is here that the gamers register for the Bullet of Bullets, the contest which determines the best player in GGO, and where they are transported to their separate arenas once the contest begins.

In the Alicization arc, by far the longest of the series, the elements of world-building are even more extravagant. Underworld is housed in a massive computer hidden in the Ocean Turtle, a nuclear-powered pyramid floating off the coast of Japan. Thus, both the architecture of the Celestial City and the journey to the Other World across dangerous waters are invoked. Underworld itself is split into two countries, the Human Empire, and the Dark Territory where dwell the ogres, orcs, wolves, witches, and other foes who wait for their chance to attack the humans. The fluctlights (energy pathways that contain the soul) of all inhabitants, human and foe, live in a gigantic cube, composed of smaller cubes, also housed in the Ocean Turtle. At the center of the empire stands the cathedral of the pontifex, Quinella. The cathedral, like the castle of Aincrad, stretches one hundred stories tall; contains a labyrinth of stairs, rooms, and corridors; presents floor bosses (in this case, the Integrity Knights) and traps that must be cleared; and at the top holds an access point to the outer world. This Center is balanced by one other, the World's End Altar in the Dark Territory, that Kirito and Asuna must use to transport themselves and Alice to the real world. Again, the image is of a floating city, decorated by a paradisiacal garden; the altar itself is a computer terminal which contacts the Ocean Turtle.

## THE SORCERERS OF SAO

The first sorcerer, Akihiko Kayaba, is stamped as a Scholar-Priest at his initial appearance in Aincrad: a godlike giant hovering over the avatars of the gamers, wearing the face-covering cowl of a cleric, telling his listeners how to reach the afterlife (i.e., the real world), and wielding pixels like magic spells. Like Virgil, he is a creator of magical artifacts, starting with the server that hosts the world of Aincrad, and the NerveGear helmet, though he is also the one who corrupts the first into a giant trap and the second into a killing device.<sup>10</sup> His most impressive artifact is the Seed, the world-building software that he bequeaths to Kirito, and that Kirito, for free, offers to programmers worldwide. Without the Seed, the worlds of GGO and Underworld do not exist. Kayaba does not live to see the Seed activated, for at the end of the Aincrad arc, after he vanishes from the presence of Kirito and Asuna, he uploads his own awareness into the virtual world, a process that destroys his physical body. It is in this ghostly state that he gives the Seed to Kirito at the end of the Fairy Dance arc.

The initial impression Kayaba-Heathcliff emanates is of a Clinschor-like sorcerer, controlling and powerful. As the cowed cleric, he stands aloof and apart from other people and from the world he has created. As Heathcliff, he is the leader of the forces attempting to break through to the top of the castle, but he is one of only two immortal objects in the game; thus, unlike the other players, he cannot be killed.<sup>11</sup> Kayaba-Heathcliff also seems motivated to repress any form of sexuality. When Kayaba warns the gamers about the nature of Aincrad, he also shuts down their ability to alter the appearance of their avatars. Men who had been posing as women, and women posing as men, receive a rude shock when their true identities are exposed. Heathcliff is nonsex-

ual, attracted to nobody, attracting nobody, expressing little emotion, visible only in his full plate armor. It turns out, however, that of all the sorcerers in *SAO*, Kayaba demonstrates what might be the most conventional sexuality. Later in the series, viewers learn that Kayaba and one of his colleagues, Rinko Koujiro, had become lovers, Koujiro not only helping him develop *SAO* but also maintaining his body during his dives into the game. Kayaba's resemblance to the sorcerer, then, is actually closest to the archetype: he recreates (and recreates in others) the shaman's ecstatic trance; he can contact a virtual world indistinguishable from the Other World; he demonstrates extraordinary talent for world-building; he, like Clinschor, has lured hundreds of victims to a magical castle in that world; and when he turns his mind to it, he can cause incredible harm.

The second sorcerer, Nobuyuki Sugou, also seems to fit the mold of the Scholar-Priest. A protégé of Kayaba's, Sugou, despite being in his twenties, is the respectable lab manager of the electronics firm owned by Asuna's family. But then, in Alfheim, Sugou reveals to Asuna that by his experiments he seeks to gain the power of total mind control (Kawahara, *SAO* 3 108; "Captive" 19:27), even threatening to alter Asuna's brain so that she will fall in love with him. These scenes underscore how Sugou, like Clinschor, wields the sorcerer's power to "compel both women and men." Sugou is like Clinschor, and like Dōman, in other important ways. Dōman, as noted above, steals Seimei's magic book. Likewise, Clinschor steals his magic pillar from Queen Secundille of Tabronit (India) and by threat secures the foundation of his castle from King Irot of Rosche Sabins. In the same manner, Sugou builds Alfheim on the stolen shell of Kayaba's Aincrad. As Kirito accuses him during their showdown in Alfheim, "You stole it. You stole this entire world and the people left in it"

(Kawahara, *SAO 4* 150-151). An even stronger tie between Sugou, Dōman, and Clinschor is the nature of their sexuality. Dōman's transgression is limited to adultery; Clinschor's progression from adultery to castration to sexual repressor is more involved. Like Dōman and Clinschor, Sugou brings ruin upon himself by engaging not once, but twice, in a fierce rivalry over a woman. His initial rival is Kayaba, from whom he tries to steal the romantic attentions of Rinko Koujiro. He then enters into a similar rivalry with Kirito over Asuna. Unlike the other sorcerers, however, Sugou fails to win either woman he pursues.

How his rivalry with Kirito plays out emphasizes his character. As Sugou is aware, Kirito and Asuna have already married virtually (if not in fact) in the world of Aincrad. The partners even go so far as to buy a house on Aincrad's twenty-second floor, and in a frolic in the nearby forest, Kirito carries Asuna on his shoulders, his head between her bare thighs, an interaction immediately followed by the discovery of Yui, an AI nonplayer character who takes on the appearance of a young girl and who out of love for Kirito and Asuna gradually learns to call them Papa and Mama ("Girl"). As if to emphasize the contrast between Kirito's virility and his own impotence, when in their final confrontation Sugou begins to brutally molest Asuna, he throws a red ribbon from her bodice that lands before Kirito (Kawahara, *SAO 4* 147; "Gilded" 10:08), an implied reference to the red string of destiny that binds two lovers. Kirito defeats Sugou in Alfheim by cutting off his head and upper torso and stabbing him through the eye with his sword (Kawahara, *SAO 4* 154; "Gilded" 15:56-16:21). In the real world, after Sugou knifes Kirito's arm in the parking lot of Asuna's hospital, Kirito disarms Sugou and holds the blade at his throat, drawing blood with a small cut before dropping the weapon (Kawahara, *SAO 4* 161-65; "World"

0:50-3:58). In terms of its imagery, this climax has a double significance: not only do these literal and figurative beheadings come as close as one possibly can to the castration suffered by Clinschor without actually depicting it on-screen, but the knife at Sugou's throat also recalls Dōman's fate at the hands of his rival, Seimei.

The third sorcerer, Death Gun, offers Kirito and viewers alike a mystery: how is he killing gamers in the real world from the virtual world of GGO? The answer is that Death Gun is not one person but three, operating in both realms simultaneously. Two of the perpetrators, Shouichi Shinkawa and Atsushi Kanamoto, are villains from the Aincrad arc, members of the Laughing Coffin guild that killed other players in SAO. Shouichi has a younger brother, Kyouji, who helps concoct their scheme—while Shouichi fires a gun at the players in GGO, Kyouji and Atsushi, in the real world, break into the quarters of the helpless gamers and paralyze their hearts with a hypodermic of succinylcholine. Their strongest connection to the sorcerer is thus in their method of killing the gamers. As the sorcerer can destroy effigies of his victims to destroy the victims themselves and inflict death and sickness on his victims through the use of darts, so the three conspirators use bullets on avatars (in GGO) and syringes on bodies (in the real world) to achieve a similar effect. Their illusion of killing the gamers from inside GGO is so realistic that Kirito is hired to enter the game himself and investigate whether it is truly possible.

At the end of the Phantom Bullet arc, Kyouji reveals his own brand of sexual depravity. Throughout the arc, Kyouji tries to become Shino's protector in the real world, even saving her from three bullying girls on their way home from school, and attempts to express his romantic feelings for her until in the

climactic scene, when he visits her apartment after the Bullet of Bullets, he attacks her, threatening to inject her, too, with succinylcholine unless she gives in. Only Kirito's sudden appearance saves Shino. Kyouji's portrayal in the climax closely resembles Sugou's in his arc—the same slaver, frantic energy consumes them as they assault the women they supposedly love.

The fourth sorcerer, Quinella, unlike the other sorcerers, does not live in the real world. She is an AI developed by the Ali-cization project and exists completely in Underworld. However, she has perhaps the most complex connections to the archetype of all the characters in the anime. First, though Quinella is female, she has elements of the Scholar-Priest in her makeup. As noted above, she has a religious title—pontifex—and her cathedral in the capital city of Centoria magically grows as her own power grows; but as a young girl she is assigned by her father, then lord of Centoria, the Sacred Task<sup>12</sup> of researching the Sacred Arts, the system commands that can be used like spells in Underworld. As her influence increases, she establishes herself as head of the Axiom Church, an organization she creates to regulate all other humans within Underworld. The Taboo Index, the gospel of the Axiom Church, is a codex of prohibitions that the humans must obey without question or face execution.<sup>13</sup> As she grows older, she attains administrator-level authority over Underworld, granting herself the power to generate magical artifacts such as the weapons with which she equips the Integrity Knights and builds her most fearsome creation, the sword golem. She even creates an alter ego—Cardinal—who wears the robes and hat of a scholar and who hides in the cathedral's library.

Second, because of her peculiar circumstances, Quinella also displays both the Siren and the Crone aspects of the Witch.

In her Siren aspect, to distract Kirito and his comrade Eugio (and probably several viewers as well) during their climactic battle, she appears before them naked. Ahead of this encounter, in a modulation of the fairy queen's story, she succeeds at seducing Eugio by welcoming him into her bed and, as Kalypso does with Odysseus, offering him a form of immortality in exchange for his becoming one of her Integrity Knights. How Quinella seduces Eugio is instructive. She weaves words by which she corrupts Eugio's love for his mother and for his closest friends—all natural and healthy feelings—into self-doubt and jealousy. She then tells him that if he will give her his love, she can offer him the “ultimate pleasure” (“Seal” 21:20). In truth, what she is doing is lowering his defenses so that he will grant her access to his memories and allow her to transform him into one of her Integrity Knights (“Seal” 22:51). Thus, like Clinschor, she violates the principles of love to make Eugio a permanent resident of the domain she has created for herself within Underworld and separate him from a real life—and real love.

In her Crone aspect, Quinella is even more dangerous. Like the elderly Himiko, she lives in self-isolation, though she does not surround herself exclusively with women. And like Tamamo no Mae, she uses her arts to appear youthful and to live well beyond her natural limit. As she nears the end of her life in Underworld, she finds a system command that will permanently restore her to her teen-aged body and appearance. By the time Kirito meets her, she has already lived over three hundred virtual years. Further, as the hag will create a dread spell by dismembering the living, so does Quinella by devising a ceremony, the Synthesis Ritual, by which she creates the Integrity Knights: she extracts the memories of her victims, leaving them with no recollection of their past, and inserts a false set of memories that make her new knights

blindly loyal to her. But even worse, she dismembers the living on a massive scale, and like a black shaman, reanimates the bones for a deadly mission, to transform three hundred Underworld humans into the sword golem, a towering skeletal killing machine. She tells the horrified Kirito, Eugio, and Alice that she has plans to create more. Thus, like Circe, like Sugou, she renders her victims into less than human forms.

The fifth sorcerer, Gabriel Miller, is an American mercenary hired to strike the Ocean Turtle, extract Alice's fluctlight cube, and seize the Soul Translator technology (STL) that creates and grants access to Underworld.<sup>14</sup> Also, as viewers learn during the Alicization arc, he is a two-time winner of the Bullet of Bullets contest in GGO. His tie to the sorcerer is seen in his lifelong fascination with the soul. The name of his GGO avatar, Subtilizer, is a translation of the Japanese 魂を盗む者, "soul stealer," a meaning he makes clear to Shino before attempting to steal hers during their battle in Underworld ("Gabriel"; "Code" 5:25). His backstory shows the progression of his fascination. When he is young, his father tells him that insects don't immediately die if they lose their heads. Miller then begins to wonder where humans keep their souls. When he concludes that his friend Alicia's soul must be housed in her brain, he jabs an awl into her ear. As she dies, he sees her soul rise out of her head ("Dark" 0:10-1:59; 12:28-13:10).

His obsession worsens when he reaches adulthood. Competing against Shino in a new Bullet of Bullets, he throttles her from behind, and with the breathy whisper of a lover muses that her soul must taste sweet ("Final" 18:00; "Code" 4:41). When he first enters Underworld (as Dark Lord Vecta), he kills a Dark Knight, Lipia Zancane, who tries to assassinate him, and when he inhales her departing soul, he grows so ad-

dicted to the sensation that he transfers the focus of his mission from simply obtaining Alice's fluctlight to destroying it so he can experience her soul as well ("Dark" 13:55-14:53). He makes his boldest announcement during his final battle with Shino in Underworld: he wants to know "whether or not one can also suck in the soul of a living human through an STL" ("Code" 4:24)—in other words, whether he can use the new VR technologies to ingest the souls of people in the real world and not just those of the AIs in Underworld. This is more than the declaration of a sorcerer, whose stock in trade is harming the souls who wander into the Other World; it is a chilling warning to the viewers of the potential power of VR to consume not only their time and energy but their very souls as well.

In these scenes, it is clear that Miller has displaced his sexual impulses into his obsession. When the audience first sees Miller with Alicia in the forest where the murder takes place, his hands appear to be on her head in a gesture of tenderness. It's only after the camera changes position that viewers realize that she is bleeding from her ear. After he extracts the weapon, she falls into his arms as if into an embrace. Zancle initially approaches him as if she is offering herself to him. Their struggle takes place on his bed with him astride her, pinning down her hips, restraining her hand, and strangling her. In his duel with Shino in Underworld, he immobilizes her with a spell and pulls her in for a soul-sucking kiss; they are broken apart only when Kirito's memento on Shino's necklace sparks to life. At no time does Miller show interest in the women themselves; to him, they are containers that he would strip away to get to the prize within. It is only fitting that at his death in Underworld—a death, ironically, that also kills and disfigures his body in the real world—Alicia's soul is the one who drags him down to his fate.

## CONCLUSIONS

The influence of the sorcerers on the story arcs of *SAO* is too broad to be adequately summarized, but the discussion can profitably be pared down to two major effects. The first is that in a setting of computers and virtual reality, the sorcerers help to create an atmosphere of magic and mysteriousness. The worlds they build and inhabit recall the medieval castles, the otherworldly fairy realms, and the extraordinary powers of the shaman and of the magicians of the Middle Ages. Those worlds, too, recall the romances that served for their audiences as an escape from the dreariness of real life and a chance to indulge in private wishes for characteristics or outcomes that could not be attained by acceptable means in the real world.

The second effect is that they are the primary sources of conflict. On one level, they present dangers to the wellbeing of the heroes. They threaten death, rape, disfigurement, mind control, and other tortures whose forms and methods would be almost unimaginable in real life. On another level, their contests with the heroes represent the struggle between acceptable norms of behavior and deviance from those norms. Taking scientific or technological discoveries too far, exerting authoritarian control over a world, and abusing victims to further one's own questionable goals or act out one's abnormal sexual desires enumerate some of the overarching concerns that the heroes must face along with the immediate obstacles to their own survival. That the adversaries are sorcerers, and that the contests take place within the Other World, lifts these concerns out of the mundane and tinges them with supernatural urgency. But like Clinschor, these sorcerers fall into the same error: their world-building has convinced them that they are free to operate in those realms without limits or consideration. Yet like all wish-fulfilling fantasies, those con-

victions cannot stand when an agent of the real world comes into contact with them. In other words, the sorcerers initially appear to be bigger than the worlds they have constructed, but they have tied themselves so deeply to their creations that the heroes, by entering those worlds and exposing their flaws, can defeat their makers.

Still, the urgency stirred up by these sorcerers charges *SAO* with an energy that is not easy to reproduce even in works of the same genre unless they employ a similar character. The difference is evident in two minor story arcs, *Calibur* and *Mother's Rosario*, that appear in season 2 of the anime, and in the special edition episode that aired after the first season. In these arcs, Kirito and his friends do not face Kayaba, Sugou, or a sorcerer of comparable stature, and their adventures—save for the relationship Asuna builds with the terminally ill Yuuki Konno—simply mimic those that participants might experience in a typical role-playing video game. The same problem appears in another popular anime, *Log Horizon*, which began airing a year after season 1 of *SAO*. The series has a similar premise: thousands of gamers trapped in a simulated world with no apparent means of returning to reality. But because no story arc in the anime's three seasons features a sorcerer with the same powers or the same nefarious ends as those in *SAO*, the gamers do not face the same dangers—they don't die if their avatars are terminated—and do not gather the same motivation to start a quest for home. Instead of directing their focus against a world-controlling sorcerer from whom they can force their escape, the gamers either fight among themselves or battle the virtual realm's NPCs and monsters, again replicating the experience of role-playing itself but not seeking a return to normality or confronting any larger questions of ethics or morality as do the characters in the four main story arcs of *SAO*.

Examining the sorcerers of *SAO* in this manner reveals interesting similarities in how the archetype has been treated in Western and Japanese cultures. The exercise also reveals that the sorcerer continues to be a viable character type in modern media. Through interactive games, visually appealing anime, and other avenues, people of all ages, like the gamers of *SAO*, willingly enter the supernatural realms these sorcerers inhabit. Of interest, too, is how *SAO*—if A-1 Pictures continues to produce the anime—will bring to life the mysterious figures who plunge the heroes into the next story arc—Unital Ring. All signs point to the appearance of two more sorcerers—the voice of the girl who announces the newest survival game, and the latest intruder into Underworld. The treacherous, otherworldly landscapes in which the sorcerer operates—no doubt anchored by another Cosmic Center—surely will also figure prominently. However they manifest, Kirito and company will have to navigate the dreadful dangers, defeat the villains, and save the virtual worlds once again.

## NOTES

- 1 Throughout this paper, *SAO* in italics will refer to the name of the series depicted in the anime and in the light novels. *SAO* (non-italicized) will refer to the game of the same name played within the series.
- 2 In a press conference at Sakura-Con 2013, Kawahara stated that he was “able to make the virtual world of *Sword Art Online* studying various American sci-fi novelists, movies in the United States that featured virtual reality” (lugiamania).
- 3 The Center is also represented by symbols such as the Pillar (Eliade 261) and the Celestial City (Eliade 267-9). In Buddha’s Temptation under the Bodhi Tree, the Cosmic Center is a still point around which the rest of the universe spins or rotates (Campbell 83).

- 4 A similar restriction on female initiative is seen in the ceremony Izanagi and Izanami perform before their first sexual union. They circle a heavenly pillar—a Cosmic Center—but because Izanami, the wife, greets Izanagi, the husband, first, their union fails (*Nihongi* 12-17).
- 5 Modern portrayals of Himiko paint her as everything from a “sober” and “commanding” ruler, to a sexual adventurer, to a “dangerous witch,” to the High Priestess in specialized tarot cards (Miller, “Rebranding” 185, 190, 180, 194).
- 6 The story gets bawdier from this point. Virgil’s suspension may be read as impotence—a characteristic carried forward, as seen below, in Clinschor and Sugou. After his humiliation, Virgil extinguishes all the fires in Rome (Tuchel 256). On the assumption that these fires represent hearths, and therefore the creative energy of the womb (Yassif 250), then he has rendered the women of Rome infertile as well. In different continuations of this tale, these fires can be relit only by the genitalia of the woman who spurned him (Yassif 247, 252).
- 7 This liberation resembles Son of Light’s rescue of his wife from Man-Eagle, complete with a journey to a floating house, helpful spirit maidens, and a final duel between the hero and the sorcerer.
- 8 Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld appear in Jotunheim, from a lake at the base of the tree, in the Calibur story arc.
- 9 The goal of each fairy nation is to defeat the guardian knights and reach Oberon’s palace to be transformed into Alfs. The nonplayer character knights recreate nearly perfectly the onslaught faced by Gawain in the Castle of Wonders, their attacks on Kirito resembling those of the automated five hundred slings and five hundred crossbows that fire upon Gawain.
- 10 After clearing the game, Kirito and Asuna, while the three float among the clouds, confront Kayaba about the deadly nature of Aincrad. He expresses no remorse. Instead, he evades, saying that “[he] forgot a long time ago” his reasons for designing

it as he did (“End” 17:36). More important to him was the dream of “creating that castle, a world that surpassed all our laws . . .” (17:49).

- 11 In his last duel with Kirito, he turns off this feature.
- 12 Sacred Tasks are vocations assigned to all in Underworld by their town elders.
- 13 In reality, as seen in the case of Alice, Quinella transforms those who break the Taboo Index into Integrity Knights.
- 14 There is another sorcerer in Underworld, Dee Eye Ell, one of Dark Lord Vecta’s minions. Space does not allow a full treatment of her, but it should be mentioned that her “tentacle rape” of Leafa, the avatar of Kirito’s cousin Suguha, in season 4, episode 13, raised a firestorm of criticism on the internet, and is only one aspect of her deviant sexuality.

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