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Maxime DANESIN

François-Rabelais University, Tours (France)

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The European Middle Ages through the prism of Contemporary Japanese Literature: a study of *Vinland Saga*, *Spice & Wolf* and *l'Éclipse*

Maxime DANESIN

Abstract

Since the past few decades, the European Middle Ages have started to become a recurrent motif in Japan. Either depicted in historical works, appearing in a roundabout way, or even implied through archetypal backgrounds and characters in Medieval Fantasy, it has become a source of inspiration for Japanese authors and screenwriters, even taking a firm root in the video game industry—Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy series acting as relevant touchstones. Regarding the field of Literature at large, countless manga are based upon its settings (Berserk, Akagami no Shirayukihime), as well as several light novels (Slayers, The Record of Lodoss War) and “pure” literary works—among them, the Akutagawa Prize’s winner in 1998, L'Éclipse by Hirano Keiichirō. Besides offering the elation of exotic stories and re-enchanting our world, this foreign exploration of The Middle Ages creates a new approach of its realities and myths, sometimes reorganizing them to the point of syncretism with Japanese values. Thus, from folktales to civilizations features, those transcultural medieval elements affect the perception of Europe in contemporary Japan. In this article, in order to highlight the interaction between this part of the European culture and Japanese literature, I study three examples of literary works representing The European Middle Ages: the historical manga Vinland Saga (Yukimura Makoto), set during the Vikings Era and using the literary features of the Icelandic sagas; the light novel Spice & Wolf (Hasekura Isuna), a unique tale depicting the medieval merchant world; and the novel L'Éclipse (Hirano Keiichirō), portraying a young Dominican in the fifteenth century thrown into the world of alchemy and metaphysics. I argue that they are not only transcultural works, but that they also offer new perspectives on understanding how European realities and myths are being adapted in Japan.

The Middle Ages & Us

We constantly refer to the Middle Ages as it sheds light on what we are, claimed Paul Zumthor (Zumthor 1980, 17).¹ I would argue that the past few decades have proven him right with the massive increase in

¹ My translation. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the translations are my own.

cultural productions related to this era. Through new translated versions, medieval masterpieces have been rendered accessible to a larger audience (Amalvi 1996, 259–260), even to a young one, thus giving the opportunity to children’s literature authors to rewrite and revitalise those texts (Cazanave & Houssais 2011). Reaching beyond the representations born from Romanticism, Neo-Medievalism² has taken deep roots in contemporary literature ever since the success of Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose*, in 1982 (Amalvi 1996, 61–62 & 261). Not to mention that, following in J.R.R. Tolkien’s or C.S. Lewis’s footsteps, an enormous quantity of fantasy works has arisen, nursing the imagination of both teenagers and adults, and even crossing boundaries by entering the mass media entertainment industry. Becoming both a local and global phenomenon, it has attained worldwide success, from Peter Jackson’s screen adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* to the Massively Multiplayer Online Game *World of Warcraft*, which involves millions of people. Moreover, in the same way, the Nouvelle Histoire (‘New History’) movement initiated by Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora has changed the academic perception of Medieval Europe (Amalvi 1996, 242–255); the development of the field of Cultural Studies has allowed researchers and critics to take into consideration the impact of the images of the Middle Ages that new media and subcultures convey. Nowadays, this gives life to a rising enthusiasm and a well-deserved respect for these productions (Cazanave & Houssais 2011b, 8–9). Daily

² Based on Alice Chandler’s definition of “Medievalism” (1971, 7), I define it here as “a response to historic change and to the problems raised by the various revolutions and transformations of the [end of the 20th and start of the 21st centuries]”. This neologism was first coined by Umberto Eco (1986) in his essay “Dreaming the Middle Ages” (in *Travels in Hyperreality*, New York, Harcourt Brace).

life in the start of the 21st century bears the renewed signs of our attachment to this era and its imagination.

This intense presence of Medieval Europe can also be attested on the other side of Earth. Japanese scholar Iguchi Atsushi notes in a recent article that “any casual browser [of] Japan’s book shops will never fail to notice that they are full of images of the European Middle Ages” (Iguchi 2010, 65), and I, myself, have had the chance to witness this directly. I argue that this situation is related to the postmodern and *glocalization* movements analysed by sociologist Yui Kiyomitsu, from the fragmentation of time and space to the de-differentiation of borders between high-culture and low-culture (Yui 2010, 46). According to Talcott Parsons’s view of culture as a symbolic system, Yui concludes that “[its] most ‘globalisation-friendly’ aspects [...] would be, first, the affective-expressive one and second, the cognitive one”. He adds that “the evaluation aspect [which represents “religious, moral or ideological orientation”], comes last to be globalised” (Yui 2010, 44–45).

Thus, we might ask ourselves: to what extent have medieval cultural elements penetrated in Japan? Therefore, I attempt to first answer this question by determining, through a broad panorama, how it affects contemporary Japanese literature.³ I then turn my attention to three works of different literary types that offer new perspectives on how the Middle Ages are being adapted in Japan: the historical manga *Vinland*

³ In this paper, I aim at a broader notion of Literature. My choice is motivated not only by the fact that, whether it is children’s or entertainment, they convey cultural images of Europe; but also because, as contemporary works, they meet the postmodern condition of de-differentiation of borders between high and low cultures. Thus, they need to be taken into consideration.

Saga by Yukimura Makoto,⁴ the medieval fantasy light novel *Spice & Wolf* by Hasekura Isuna,⁵ and Hirano Keiichirō's prized masterpiece *L'Éclipse*.⁶ I argue that this corpus, chosen for both the variety and the originality of its medieval elements, highlights the extent and the impact of the presence of the Middle Ages in Japan.

The presence of the European Middle Ages in Japan

I must first mention the existence of Japanese research on the European Middle Ages, despite the ongoing major problem of circulation of those works in western countries. Deploring this situation, the scholar Kido Takeshi urges his fellow researchers to try to take advantage of “the fact that [Japanese authors] may be able to view medieval history of Europe from a different angle from Europeans or Americans” (Kido 1995, 96). Some might even argue that the Japanese refer to Medieval Europe because of important historical similarities between both Middle Ages. This comparison was quite popular among legal historians from Japan and Europe, up until the mid-20th century, in order to differentiate the Land of the Rising Sun and the rest of Asia (Souyri 2013, 419–421). However, the research of Pierre-François Souyri on Medieval Japan shows that, ever since the 1970s and according to new historical approaches (Souyri 2013, 423–432), “the divergences [seem] now to widely prevail on the similarities” (Souyri 2013, 432). Nonetheless, despite no longer seeing the West as a united block but as a plurality of contexts with regional specificities, Japan is

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, I refer primarily to the French translation in this paper.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, I refer primarily to the English translation in this paper – since the French's one by Ofelbe Edition has only just started in March 2015.

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, I refer primarily to the French translation in this paper.

still using it as a reference system, mixing realities and myths together. Karoline Postel-Vinay reminds us that “Europe as an international reality coexists in the Japanese mind with its perception as an imaginary zone, a bucolic place where stone castles and unchanging landscapes can be found” (Postel-Vinay 1994, 21). Thus, Europeans and Japanese are still far apart and grow closer at the same time.

In the past few decades of this age of globalisation, the accelerating rate of intercultural exchanges has modified the content of Japan’s libraries, and the European Middle Ages has become a renewed area of exploration for writers, offering them unprecedented intertextual possibilities. Mainly coming from the gigantic manga industry, contemporary works in Japan that set their plots in a historical or fictional Medieval Europe might be seen as purely commercial and/or escapist, as they are often fantasy – a genre that still suffers from a marginalised status in academic institutions and countries such as France (Besson 2007, 9). Although it would be naïve to deny this aspect, the cultural phenomenon in Japan of the “ubiquity” of the European Middle Ages – this “intimately alien” – is far more complex (Iguchi 2010, 65). Iguchi claims that its reception can be explained by the nature of the Middle Ages itself. He reminds us that “[r]egardless of continuity [with the European past], [it] is employed everywhere in the world, in its myriad disguises and transformations brought about by cultural specificity and diversity” (Iguchi 2010, 65). And it has taken root in every level of Japanese cultural production, from animations to novels to manga.

According to the critic Enomoto Aki, the first step was the influence of the Japanese translations of C.S. Lewis (1966), J.R.R. Tolkien (1972) and Ursula K. Le Guin (1976) on local authors of Youth Literature (Enomoto 2008, 14). Then the medieval fantasy boom started in the 1980-90s. Triggered by the success of Japanese video games, such as *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, that use it as a background (Enomoto 2008, 18–20), it spread quickly to other cultural media, even playing an important role in the creation of a new literary genre, the *light novel* – a special entertainment novel in Japan that mainly targets junior and high school students (Enomoto 2008, 9).⁷ Enomoto remarks that one of the first most famous and influential light novels, *Slayers* by Kanzaka Hajime,⁸ depicts a heroic fantasy world inspired by Japanese role-playing games rather than the original Middle Ages, since it is easier for local young readers to understand and accept (Enomoto 2008, 84). For much of the 1990s this became a typical representation of medieval fantasy in Japan, with archetypal characters and places quite similar in a way to the ones described by Cécile Boulaire’s concept of “Middle Ages as a country” in French Children’s literature (Boulaire 2002). The difference is that the bones are western, but the flesh is Japanese, an expression first coined by the translator Niwa Gorō (Wakabayashi 2008, 242). These popular literary works are often mostly adding to Japanese values some stereotyped medieval elements, such as the social’s structure, knights, stone castles and its bestiary, regardless of their original complexity or even temporality.

⁷ The Japanese critic argues in his book that the definition of those novels is particularly difficult and takes notices of the growing interest by the older population of university students (Enomoto 2008, 50).

⁸ Kanzaka, H. (1990–2000) *Slayers*, Vols I–XV. Illustrations by Araizumi Rui. Tōkyō: Kadokawa, Fujimi Shobō.

A recent trend is to immerse these medieval fantasy stories directly in virtual realities, in contemporary Japan. A good example is the success of the recent acclaimed light novel *Sword Art Online* by Kawahara Reki,⁹ which narrates how players of an MMORPG get trapped in a virtual reality and have to beat the game to recover their freedom. I argue that the link created by these medieval fantasy works and Japanese video games may be following the same pattern, described by Karoline Postel-Vinay, of western elements in Japanese daily life. She states that what we perceive as a “manifestation of Japan’s westernisation [...] will be apprehended by [the Japanese] as an inherent element of their modern society’s reality” (Postel-Vinay 1994, 32). Thus, I would argue that European medieval fantasy elements may already be seen as a part of the reality and imagination of the contemporary Japanese.

The Vikings coming from the Land of the Rising Sun

The past decade has brought new forms of intertextual creations through transcultural elements and syncretism involving medieval imagination, such as a womanised King Arthur fighting for the Holy Grail in a fictional modern town of Kōbe.¹⁰ Not only are these works now countless, but they show a clear diversification in their use of Neo-Medievalism, in attaining various forms, genres and qualities. The

⁹ Kawahara, R. (2009-2014, Ongoing) *Sword Art Online*, Vols I-XIV. Tōkyō: ASCII Media Works, Dengeki Bunko.

¹⁰ Type-Moon (Dev.) (2004) *Fate/stay night* [Visual Novel Vers.]. Tōkyō: Type-Moon; Nishiwaki, D., Type-Moon (2006-2012) *Fate/stay night*, Vols I-XX [Manga Vers.]. Tōkyō: Kadokawa Shoten. It has been also adapted in anime (2011-2012). Some of the similarities between Kōbe and the fictional Fuyuki city where the action takes place can be seen photographed in this internet blog (Articles: 19 & 31/10/2009, accessed: 08/05/2014):
Punyari.wordpress.com/2009/10/31/real-life-fate-stay-night-locations-in-kobe
Punyari.wordpress.com/2010/10/19/unlimited-blade-works-anime-pilgrimage.

manga industry is still the main vessel for this literary movement, and one could easily find what one likes in it, from the romantic tale of *Akagami no Shirayukihime* to tragedies, whether it is the successful *Shingeki no Kyōjin* or the dark fantasy *Übel Blatt*.¹¹

Among them, we can also witness a growing interest in historical representations. Some of these portray free interpretations of various heroic figures – such as Joan of Arc. Others use detailed academic research, for instance Sōryō Fuyumi’s manga *Cesare*, dedicated to the rise of Pope Alexander VI’s elder son.¹² Here, I will turn my attention to an unusual work by Makoto Yukimura: *Vinland Saga*. Its serialisation starting in 2005 and still ongoing, this manga portrays the Danish conquest of England at the start of the 11th century and the life of the famous Icelander Thorfinn Karlsefni, who followed Leif Erikson’s route to explore of the mythical Vinland.¹³ In the early chapters, readers follow the main character’s life as a Viking, under the authority of Askeladd – who killed his father. A series of events lead him witnessing the rise of the Danish King Canute, losing his life’s purpose, and ending up as a slave. After entering a path of redemption and regaining his freedom, Thorfinn leaves behind his warrior past and confronts Canute, vouching to establish an ideal country for those who cannot live in this world engulfed in the flames of conquest. He then proceeds to prepare

¹¹ Akizuki, S. (2007–2014, Ongoing) *Akagami no Shirayukihime*, Vols I–XI. Tōkyō: Hakusensha; Isayama, H. (2010–2014, Ongoing) *Shingeki no Kyōjin*, Vols I–XIV. Tōkyō: Kōdansha; Shiono, E. (2005–2014, Ongoing) *Übel Blatt*, Vols I–XV. Tōkyō: Square Enix.

¹² Sōryō, F. (2006–2013, Ongoing) *Cesare, Hakai no Sōsōsha*, Vols I–X. Tōkyō: Kōdansha.

¹³ Vinland would be somewhere between the current Canadian regions Newfoundland and Labrador (Boyer 1995, 224–227).

for his departure to Vinland, following his first dream as a child:
accompanying Leif Erikson.



III. 1 – Thorfinn Karlsefni (Vol. I, Cover).
Vinland Saga © Yukimura Makoto/Kōdansha.

This is, of course, just a brief summary, since up until now there has been more than one hundred chapters in this ongoing manga. The author uses three elements as a base for his story: Norse literature, mainly the *Saga of the Greenlanders* and the *Saga of Eric the Red* (Boyer 1987), the history of the Vikings, and the theme of Homecoming (Iguchi 2010, 66–67). The last one is well described in Iguchi Atsushi’s article, the only one that I know of dedicated to this manga, and is quite similar to my own approach to *Spice & Wolf* (Danesin 2010–2011, 61–63). I will only briefly refer to this theory before expanding my analysis. Iguchi points out that the characters in the manga, especially Thorfinn Karlsefni, Askeladd and Canute, are trying to achieve their homecoming in different ways, despite being “tossed around in their endless odysseys of ruthless violence, search for identity, the will to power and the questioning of faith” (Iguchi 2010, 67). They strive for a “utopia of which

they can never lay a hold” (Iguchi 2010, 68). Reminding us that our contemporary days can be seen as the “New Middle Ages” (Iguchi 2010, 67), Iguchi Atsushi concludes that the representation of this harsh medieval life “powerfully resonates with those who desperately struggle to find their homelands in the 21st century ‘medieval’ Japan” (Iguchi 2010, 68). Therefore, the European Middle Ages, which Jacques Le Goff considers as “the best suited to grasp ourselves in our roots and our breaks” (Le Goff 1977, 11), serves as a mirror for the deconstructed self of postmodern readers, even on the other side of the world.

The Vikings have been subjected to various interpretations throughout history, even becoming an archetype of Romanticism. As the historian Régis Boyer observes, despite better archaeological understanding their myths and realities have intertwined in our literature, deformed and spread in our imagination (Boyer 2008, 83–272). Thus, their reception in Japan is intriguing. It would be naïve to think that *Vinland Saga* strives to – or ought to – achieve perfect historical accuracy. That is neither its goal nor its ambition. There are plenty of scenes to satisfy readers’ thirst for mythical images, especially during fights.



III. 2 – Thorkell the Tall’s colossal strength (Vol. III, Ch. 19, 71).
Vinland Saga © Yukimura Makoto/Kōdansha/Kurokawa (French Ed.).

The author takes some liberties with historical events, such as the youth of King Canute, his relationship with Thorkell the Tall or even his rather feminine and frail figure – up until the sixth volume. One might also be surprised to see, among others, Askeladd beheading the Danish King Sweyn Forkbeard.¹⁴ Casting Askeladd as the character who commits regicide provides a fictional link between the Vikings’ history, the Icelandic sagas and the Arthurian legend. In addition to Yukimura Makoto portraying Wales as the last refuge of the Romano-British descendants,¹⁵ in the manga the real identity of the half-Welsh half-Dane Askeladd is Lucius Artorius Castus, King Arthur’s heir.¹⁶ His name is based on a Roman knight from the 2nd century who incorrectly became one of the potential historical origins for the Arthurian legend (Gautier 2013, 128-129)– while his nickname, signifying ‘The Ash Lad’, is taken

¹⁴ Yukimura, M., *Vinland Saga*, Vol. VIII, Chapter 52, pp. 76–77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, Chapters 23-26, pp. 39-150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, Chapter 52, p. 74.

from a famous Norwegian folktale protagonist. Lastly, I should mention the presence of Japanese elements, such as the fundamental and recurrent question, “What is a true warrior?”, which can be seen as clearly originating from the Samurai’s code *Bushidō*, even appearing at the core of the representation of Valhalla in Thorfinn’s nightmare.¹⁷

However, it would be wrong to portray *Vinland Saga* as a popular work that only tries to expose the Japanese to the exotic figures of the Vikings. Far from presenting the story of muscle-head barbarians only interested in dying in battle to reach Valhalla, Yukimura Makoto indulges in refined drawings and detailed research in order to represent the Norsemen’s social system and his characters’ depth and appearance. The author depicts without embellishment the life of the medieval farmer, the harsh reality of slavery and the terror inflicted by the Vikings’ assaults in England. Gradually, the veil is lifted from his main character’s backgrounds and reveals that Yukimura Makoto has paid particular attention to their psychology. A good example would be his Shakespearian kind of touch shown in his depiction of the madness borne from wearing the Danish Crown.¹⁸ As the title of his manga suggests, the Japanese artist relies on the Sagas and their way of taking historical liberties (Boyer 2008, 763–771). Realistic elements are combined with mythical ones, whether it is the colossal strength of Thorkell the Tall at the Battle of London in 1013¹⁹ or the legendary and disciplined Jomsvikings mercenaries – to which the main character’s

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. x, Chapter 71, pp. 183–222.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. xi, Chapter 72, pp. 5–34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. iii, Chapters 18–19, pp. 49–129.

father belonged.²⁰ Along with the rise of Canute and the intrigue behind Askeladd's kinship with King Arthur, Yukimura uses the absence of details of Thorfinn Karlsefni's youth in both *The Greenlanders* and *Eric the Red* sagas to embellish upon his past and motivation for his expedition to Vinland. Lastly, describing the Viking as "a man, like us, with circumstances that pushed him towards adventures, [...] a man who loved life, as we do", Régis Boyer reminds us that Sagas, "keeps focusing on the individual with his pains and joys, his weakness and greatness, his dreams and tenacious efforts to master his destiny which always end up triumphing, of him and us" (Boyer 2008, 262). The struggle of the characters as shown by the Homecoming theme, their time as slaves or even the fateful fall of the North Sea Empire, are clearly in accordance with this approach. Therefore, in addition to the elation of adventure, through its transcultural and postmodern nature *Vinland Saga* not only appears as both a historical and fictional rewriting of the original Norse story, but it also revitalises the Vikings' reality and myths as a prism through which contemporary Japanese readers can ponder on their own situation.

Spice & Wolf, an encounter between Europe and Japan

Among the category of light novels, the seventeen-volume series *Spice & Wolf*, written by Isuna Hasekura and published from 2006 to 2011, has caught audience and critics' attention for its unique tale and atmosphere. Set in a medieval fantasy background, this story relates the encounter of Kraft Lawrence, a travelling merchant, and Holo the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. vi, Chapters 39–40, pp. 107–114.

goddess of harvests, a wolf in human form. As the goddess wishes to return to her northern homeland, they make an agreement to journey together until they reach her destination. The readers follow this strange pair on their voyage and romance, as they go through mercantile cases, cross lands and slowly break the barriers between race and age, fairies and humans, legends and society's realities.



III. 3 – Holo the Wise Wolf (Vol. I, Cover).

Spice & Wolf © Isuna Hasekura/Illustration: Ayakura Jū/Kadokawa Corporation/ASCII Media Works.

Enomoto Aki highlights clearly that the main originality of this work is its way of depicting an economical theme in a realistic analogy of European Middle Ages, rather than the usual swords and magic (Enomoto 2008, 168). Hasekura used, along with other historical sources, the French historian Jean Favier's work, *Gold & Spices: The Rise of Commerce in the Middle Ages* (1998),²¹ to provide a detailed merchant's universe as the core of his novels and, coincidentally maybe,

²¹ Hasekura mentions some of his sources on his internet blog (article: 17/08/2006, Accessed: 08/05/2016): <http://ameblo.jp/hasekura2/archive-200608.html>

even its title. Through financial crises that serve as the main events, readers are introduced to the complex matters of mercantilism and trade tricks. The intrigue of the very first volume portrays a case of massive-scale short-term speculation on the purity of silver currency – similar to a smaller-scale one described by Jean Favier, which happened in Florence during the 14th century (Favier 1998, 135). This allowed the Japanese author to explain the medieval currency system, from the trust's value in the coins to its geopolitical power,²² even including the important role of money changers, which is also described in Favier's work (1998, 134), through the character of Lawrence's friend, the cambist Weiz²³. Introducing this socio-economical evaluative aspect of the Middle Ages to Japanese readers, Hasekura uses the intrigues, as well as Holo and Lawrence's discussions, to create the chance to teach basic macro- and microeconomics in the same way detective fictions would present criminology's theoretical explanations. In addition, by introducing a new character,²⁴ the young and intelligent Col, who becomes the protagonist's student, the master/apprentice relationship enhances readers' learning experience and discovery of the Middle Ages' commerce.

²² Hasekura, I., *Spice & Wolf*, Vol. I, pp. 100-101.

²³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 104.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 49.



III. 4 – [Manga Vers.] On the left, a lesson on the medieval currency system. On the right, one of the many detailed medieval settings (Vol. I, Ch. 5, 132; Ch.6, 155). *Spice & Wolf* © Isuna Hasekura/Koume Keito/Originally published in Japan in 2008 by Media Works Inc., Tōkyō.

Focusing on economy, European medieval elements are in every corner of this light novel. Lawrence being the main character, *Spice & Wolf* portrays the harsh life of a travelling merchant.²⁵ Besides the trade system, readers learn of the dangers and taxes waiting for on the roads²⁶, which are well-known to historians (Le Goff 2006, 11–12). Additionally, the light novel depicts the relationship between foreigners and locals, and the difficulties of settling down²⁷ – both historical elements are also detailed by Jean Favier (Favier 1998, 109–124). Another example among essential European factors in Hasekura’s series is the presence and influence of merchant guilds, starting with the central role of the Milone and the Medio companies in the first volume. They remind us of famous historical ones, from the House of Medici to

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 19, 67–68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 15 & 137.

the Florentine corporations *Arte della Lana* and *Arte di Calimala* (Favier 1998, 95). Moreover, the tenth volume portrays an evident analogy to the Hanseatic League, the Ruvik Alliance, described as the “single most powerful economic alliance in the world” and a “nation-sized opponent” whose “home territory is the whole of the Northlands”.²⁸ Lawrence – a travelling merchant through and through who was given the role of protagonist – and the European medieval economy – used as the main framework and not as an ephemeral background element – are definitely uncommon literary elements and original ones in Japanese literature. Furthermore, Hasekura did not disregard medieval social life, devoting an interested attention to the successive inns, alimentation and its medicinal use, the impact of monasticism, even the confrontation between pagans and an analogue of Christians.²⁹ Lastly, by making his main character an anti-hero, a common human far from the idealised knight, a stubborn yet skilled merchant, Hasekura put his final touch to what seems to be a realistic story, if it were not for the centuries-old Holo. Although the complexity of the medieval economy might appear unappealing to some readers, the light novel characteristics – easy reading pace, focus on dialogues, catchy characters, junior and high school students being targeted (Enomoto 2008, 86) – makes up for it. Combined with the main themes being universal – trade, romance, travelling –, this allows *Spice & Wolf* to be understood and enjoyed whether it be by Japanese or Europeans.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. x, pp. 26 & 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. vii, pp. 179–182; Ludo J.R. Milis’ work (1992) is mentioned, among others, as a source on this matter by Hasekura on his blog article (see link above),

One might easily simplify the parallels with the real world by saying that the merchant plays the European part and Holo the Japanese one. Indeed, Holo conveys local feminine elements and characteristics, whether it is her cunningness typical of the Shintō fox spirit – *kitsune* – or her way of speaking which is based on the *kuruwa kotoba* language, used by high-class prostitutes from the Edo period, the *Oiran* (Danesin 2010-2011, 28–29; Maynard Senko K. 2012, 32 & 83). Even her personality is linked to the concept of *Wabi-Sabi*, the Japanese ideal of beauty (Davies & Osamu 2002, 223–232). Nonetheless, in a medieval background, the wolf literary motif resonates whether you are Japanese or European. As Brett L. Walker’s research on wolves in Japan shows, her character’s depth and taboo romance with Kraft Lawrence is no stranger to the Japanese and Ainu folklore, nor is her protection over the harvest (Walker 2005, 85 & 9). On the other hand, she possesses European elements, such as her gigantic true form,³⁰ reminding us of Fenrir’s myth, and the way she appears as a dangerous and fascinating pagan fairy, despised and chased by the Church. Likewise, Holo’s pronounced passion for apples and her way of tempting and playing with Lawrence can appear both as an obvious reference to the biblical episode of Adam and Eve,³¹ or as a part of the playful side of the Japanese *kitsune* literary figure. I should also mention that, by sharing similarities with the *Iru-kon* Japanese folktales (Davies & Osamu 2002, 173–174),³² *Spice & Wolf* also resonates with the Melusinian tales known by European readers.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 209–215.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 75–78.

³² *Iru-kon* is a type of folktales where “a person marries an animal that has transformed itself in a human being” (Davies & Osamu 2002, 262).

Finally, as I pointed out earlier, in my first essay on *Spice & Wolf* I argued the importance of the homecoming theme, and my opinion has been reinforced by Iguchi Atsushi's research. In this light novel, based on the *topos* of the journey, the already 25-year-old Lawrence struggles to find his place and settle down, as he is trying to achieve his dreams of owning a shop.³³ Holo, a member of an endangered species in this monotheist age, tired and saddened by the villagers' behaviour, wishes to return to her homeland, which seems to have been destroyed. Both of them suffer from loneliness and travel for the sake of homecoming, in order to find a place to belong. The very start of the series portrays this situation, as it is said that Holo "no longer had a place here"³⁴ and that Lawrence "longed for company more and more frequently".³⁵ The first sentence of *Spice & Wolf*, "So that's the last, then?",³⁶ appears as the trigger, and the last sentence of the first volume definitely puts the journey's literary *topos* at the core of the novel.³⁷ As Lawrence helps Holo, even researching old tales for her, he revitalises her legend, becomes a part of it and re-enchants his merchant life and the readers' world. The story applies well to contemporary Japan, since the syncretism between the encounter of Otherness, the trader's profession and ancient folktales can resonate with both Japanese society's realities and traditional Shintō beliefs. This way, *Spice & Wolf* adheres completely to the Neo-Medievalism movement.

³³ Hasekura, I., *Spice & Wolf*, Vol. 1, p. 140.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 230.

Thus, the combination of transcultural elements in this paragon of syncretism allows readers to enjoy a unique fantasy, to experience the encounter between European Middle Ages and Japan, while receiving a real lesson on the merchants' universe, ancient folklore, and medieval economy. This way, characterised as a light novel *d'auteur*³⁸, *Spice & Wolf*'s characteristics can appeal to the older population of university students, rather than just young readers, making it even more singular in Japanese literature.

The literary and cultural Alchemy of *L'Éclipse*

Among Japanese authors who have been inspired by Europe, rare are the ones who portray our Middle Ages in the “pure literature” field defined by literary critics (Ozaki 2012). Following the huge success of his novella *L'Éclipse*, the talented Hirano Keiichirō, self-proclaimed disciple of both Mishima Yukio and Mircea Eliade, has ranked top of this list. In 1998, he won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, equivalent to the Goncourt in France, with his fake medieval memoirs portraying Nicolas, a young Dominican in a French village of the ending 15th century, immersed in the mysteries of alchemy and metaphysics. This work deserves and requires a thorough study, which has yet to be done,³⁹ covering its every aspect, such as his exceptional use of Japanese language – a sensitive topic that Hirano himself chose to explain in his collection of essays *Monologues* (Hirano 2007, 304–308). However, in

³⁸ Enomoto Aki (2008), pp. 166–168. Enomoto mentioned *Spice & Wolf* as a light novel among the category of original authors, of whom it can be said that they have a personal style. I strongly agree with this vision and I argue that this particularity enhanced the literary value of this work. However, this is not the place to discuss this point.

³⁹ A thorough study of his work and its European influences is in process and will be developed in my thesis.

order not to stray from the path of this article, I will only mention and concentrate on the European medieval atmosphere and motifs depicted in this novella.

One of his most original features is its very beginning, which can be framed as an autobiographical pact. Bringing in the readers from the first step, it stimulates and immerses them throughout the whole text:

“J’ai voulu consigner dans les pages qui suivent certains souvenirs personnels. [...] je dirai la nue vérité sans jamais falsifier rien.”⁴⁰

At the same time the narrator swears his oath, he recognises that his testimony is not one to have faith in, leaving the role of judge solely to God.⁴¹ This odd pledge is immediately followed by Nicolas’s description of his initial circumstances as a university scholar in 1482, along with several references to alchemy and theological elements.⁴² Setting the story’s medieval and estoteric tone, the protagonist’s pledge and background immediately create the spark that breaches the walls between reality and metaphysics, leaving the readers to their doubts, as they wonder what can possibly justify such a mysterious introduction.

Hirano Keiichirō enhances the Neo-Medievalism of his novella by putting into motion a realistic and metaphysical atmosphere. On the one hand, as an important part of the story’s core, he depicts Christian elements, portraying various clergy’s members, from the University of

⁴⁰ Hirano, K., *L’Éclipse*, p. 7. (‘I have wished to record in the following pages some personal memories. [...] I will speak the naked truth without ever falsify anything’).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 9–13.

Paris scholars to the Dominican preacher Jacques Michaëlis. Along with the Inquisition and Heresies, neither theological arguments⁴³ nor illustrious literary references⁴⁴ are forgotten; even the very end mentions the growing Lutheran movement.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Hirano describes the sordid and harsh life conditions of villagers who face the aftermath of the Black Death⁴⁶ and a poor harvest.⁴⁷ However, what has to be highlighted is how well the Japanese author brings and confines his readers to a sordid ambiance. The remote village which serves as the story's stage appears as a place inclined to deleterious behaviours⁴⁸ and rumours, such as Guillaume's wife's infidelity,⁴⁹ or the local Priest Justus's unorthodox behaviour⁵⁰ and the hidden food in his office.⁵¹ On top of this background, Hirano creates a mystical and dark atmosphere with local superstitions, strengthened by both the madness born from a mysterious disease and Jacques Michaëlis's sermons⁵² – leading to the condemnation of the alchemist Pierre Dufay by the Inquisition. Combined with the strangeness of the young Jean, the isolation of the village and the autobiographical pact, it instils in the readers a mystical feeling of suffocation and anxiety that reaches its paroxysm during the scene of the Androgynous being's execution. In this fashion, Hirano achieves in *L'Éclipse* a dark and theological European medieval

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 107–108.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 109–111.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 143–147.

atmosphere that enhances the core of his work: the alchemy myth of the *Magnus Opus*.

Constructed almost like a detective fiction story, nothing is left to chance in this novella. Every element's description serves its purpose, whether it is the alchemist Pierre Dufay's house⁵³ or Nicolas discovering the geometrical disposition of the village and the meaning behind it.⁵⁴ Through the prism of the main character's mind, the readers experience theological and metaphysical reflexions, and share his growing fascination with the alchemy myth. Hirano has put this art at the core of his novel: every part of the narration is dedicated to an extended metaphor that meticulously leads to the *Magnus Opus*, the philosopher's stone – of which the principles are exposed by Umberto Eco (2010, 85–107). The opening step of this process, *negredo*, was already done when Nicolas met the alchemist. It was the first image of the village, and it can be seen in the recent graves of the cemetery due to the Black Death and the rotten corpse story.⁵⁵ The second step, *albedo*, is witnessed by the main character as he follows Pierre Dufay into a deep cavern, where lies the *Rebis*, the androgynous being born from the fusion of the sulphur and mercury, trapped in the rocks.⁵⁶ *Citrinas*, the third stage, is disregarded by the old alchemist⁵⁷ but can still be seen in lunar presence of the solar eclipse.⁵⁸ Finally, this phenomenon and the death of this creature, burned at the stake, serves as the final act of the process, the *Rubedo*, and from its cadaver, the golden stone is created, despite

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 71–81.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–60.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 131–41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

turning soon into dust.⁵⁹ Through Nicolas's spiritual enlightenment, the readers experience the alchemy quest and the incarnation of the Christ, commonly associated with the *Magnus Opus* (Eco 2010, 94).

Using the European Middle Ages as the story's backbone, the Japanese novella *L'Éclipse* appears to be quite a unique prism for a Japanese author to use, as Hirano exposes in an impressive way the alchemic and theologic's parts of the evaluative aspect of our medieval civilisation. In order to do it, he conscientiously based his work on Mircea Eliade's theories of the secret art, despite this scholar being quite controversial (Dubuisson 2008). His influence can be seen throughout the novella, such as in the blacksmith's crucial role or in the cavern figure, two elements that can be tracked down in Eliade's essay *Forgerons et Alchimistes* (Eliade 1956). Finally, I would like to briefly mention the presence of several elements of intertextuality with Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Marguerite Yourcenar's *L'Œuvre au Noir*. Among others, I can name the introduction of the novel as a testimony, the narration in the first person, and the theological discourse appearing quite close to the Italian author's work, and the extended metaphor of the *Magnus Opus* in the French author's masterpiece.

Conclusion

It can be inferred from this depiction of the European Middle Ages in Japan that contemporary Japanese authors and readers look at it through three prisms: their own historical knowledge, cultural

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–196.

perception and personal imagination. This renders the study of these materials even more complex and interesting, as it raises a lot of multidisciplinary questions. As seen throughout this article, we might say that for the Japanese, Neo-Medievalist literary works do not come down to only escapism, but also act as a way to understand themselves. They might feel attracted to it not only because of a controversial presumption of proximity between each other's Middle Ages, but also through their postmodern condition, starting from the fragmentation of time and space. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves how these reorganised medieval elements on the other side of the world can affect our own perception of our identity, now that they entered daily Europeans readers' lives. Including the manga boom (Bouissou 2012, 12), the acceleration of Japanese literary translations in France (Sakai 2012, 233–243) requires that we renew our insight, especially with works that send back to us modified cultural images of our own civilisation.

To conclude this article, which will be further developed in my thesis, I would like to borrow Marco Pellitteri's words as I believe that these transcultural works that convey Japanese and Medieval European elements can "mould the *sense of wonder* and the emotional and cultural sensibility" (Pellitteri 2004, 19) of the new generations in Europe and Japan, drawing closer their imagination, thus creating a strong *glocal* common ground in the future.

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