

Isekai, or, Other Worlds: The Gendered Divide in Japanese Portal Fantasies

When it comes to Japanese media for young people, it is almost always classified along lines of both age and gender. For instance, shoujo manga usually features romantic storylines and handsome male characters who fall in love with the female lead. The word shoujo in Japanese literally means “girl,” earmarking these texts for that demographic. The same can be said for shounen (boy), seinen (young adult man), and josei (young adult woman) manga genres.

A subgenre that all of these gendered categories share is isekai, or stories about other worlds. In isekai, the main character is often transported to a fantasy, parallel, or simulated world through some plot device, similar to what we call portal fantasy in the west. The difference is that unlike most portal fantasies such as the Narnia books, Peter Pan, or Alice in Wonderland, which are intended for younger readers, the isekai of shoujo and shounen stories deal heavily with romance, but in startlingly different ways. Shounen isekai heroes often gain RPG-like powers when they enter the new world, and almost inevitably they gather a harem of sexy female counterparts who all claim to be in love with them. In contrast, shoujo isekai heroines are terrified and alarmed at finding themselves in a new world. They remain weak, seldom having much control over the events that occur except to encourage their male counterpart, usually the first man they met in the new world and the object of their love.

In this paper, I will explore this gendered divide in Japanese isekai stories to determine how and why tropes such as these continue to be popular and relevant in Japanese culture.