

On Princess Mononoke

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Summary

Princess Mononoke (1997) is an animated film made by Miyazaki Hayao. While this film is a love story, it also has other themes.

One of the themes concerns the destruction of the environment. Miyazaki has revealed that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* gave him the idea for filming *Princess Mononoke*. He developed this idea, setting it in Muromachi Japan. He incorporated various historical materials and sources in his film. These materials, blended into Miyazaki's work, add charm to the film. In my opinion, one condition of a masterpiece in the field of film is to confront a contemporary problem, incorporating old cultural assets daringly.

After explaining and interpreting the materials and sources that Miyazaki uses, I classify the characters in this film into three basic types. They are classified according to their attitudes toward nature. I also analyze their relations with one another briefly.

Finally, I add that fury is the other theme of this film.

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This paper is based on a talk that I gave to international students at Obirin University on the film *Princess Mononoke* in the autumn of 2004. I used it as an introduction to Japanese culture.

Princess Mononoke (1997) is an animated film made by Miyazaki Hayao. He is a celebrated Japanese film director with many animated films to his credit. In 2002, he won the Golden Bear Prize in the Berlin International Film Festival for *Spirited Away*. This film was made just after *Princess Mononoke*.

Both *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* have diverse contents.

The story of *Spirited Away* concerns a young girl, Chihiro, who discovers who she is through amazing adventures in a fantastical wonderland. At the same time, this film implies criticism of modern Japan, especially of the excesses of the bubble economy around 1990.

Princess Mononoke, on the other hand, is a love story, although it has several other implications. We can see this feature in his film, *Castle in the Sky (Tenkū no Shiro Laputa)* (1986) as well. This film is also a love romance, in which Pazu and Sheeta nurture their love through their stormy adventures.

Another theme of *Princess Mononoke* is the relationship between nature and human civilization. We can find the same theme in Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* (1984) and *Modern-Day Raccoon War Ponpoko* (1992) as well.

Miyazaki has revealed that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* gave him the idea of filming *Princess Mononoke*. He developed this idea by setting it in Muromachi Japan. At the same time, he gathered and used various materials and historical sources for this film. In my opinion, these materials, blended into Miyazaki's work, add charm to the film.

This essay proceeds as follows.

First, I give *Gilgamesh* a glance. (1)

Second, I explain several materials or sources. (2~5)

Third, I classify the characters in this film into three types according to their attitudes toward nature and analyze their mutual

relations. (6)

Finally, I add that fury is the other important theme of this film. (7)

1. Gilgamesh

Andrew George writes in his introduction to an English-language edition of *Gilgamesh*: “The Gilgamesh epic is one of the very few works of Babylonian literature which can be read and enjoyed”. He went on to add that “some of the poet’s themes are so universal in human experience”.¹⁾

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, king Gilgamesh and Enkidu, his friend, kill the guardian of the cedar forest, Humbaba. “Humbaba curses the heroes, who promptly kill him and begin felling cedars in the sacred groves.”²⁾ Like *Gilgamesh*, *Princess Mononoke* highlights the struggle between the forest’s guardians and human beings.

The character of Eboshi Gozen in *Princess Mononoke*, as a female leader of a fortified ironworks, deforests much of the surrounding woodland in order to make iron. This deforestation causes the loss of habitat for much of the wildlife around the fortification. Angered by the wanton destruction, the gods of the forest fight back.

A huge wild boar, Nagonokami, which appears in the opening scene of this film, was wounded by Eboshi Gozen. He became *tatarigami*—*gami* or *kami* means god—, although it is translated as a demon in the version of the film dubbed into English.³⁾

Moro, a huge she-wolf, her offspring and a girl Mononoke-hime (San), who was brought up by Moro, hatefully attack Eboshi for what she has done to the forest.

Thus, in *Princess Mononoke* Miyazaki depicts the relationship between nature and human civilization.

2. Traditional names from Japanese myth or religion

The following is my interpretation of the names of four characters in *Princess Mononoke*.

1) *Mononoke*

When I heard the word '*mononoke*', I immediately remembered *mononoke* in *Genji Monogatari*. *Mononoke* are a kind of ghost or evil spirit in this tale. Of the several *mononoke* described, Lady Rokujō's *mononoke* is the most famous. Some women turn into *mononoke* if they feel an intense jealousy toward a certain person.

In case of Lady Rokujō, Genji neglects to visit her after a few rendezvous. However, she knows that Genji visits his lovers religiously. Because of deep hostility she had for Yūgao, Genji's lover, and Lady Aoi, Genji's wife, Rokujō turns into a *mononoke*. When Genji meets Yūgao in a vacant house one night, Yūgao dies suddenly. Lady Rokujō's *mononoke* probably murders Yūgao.

One becomes *mononoke* when one feels that their identity has been fundamentally invaded. *Mononoke-hime* (San), hating the people that cut down the trees of the forest, is a representative of *mononoke*.

2) *Okkotonushi*

In this film, *Okkotonushi* (乙事主), a huge wild boar, has lived for such a long time that some people think of him as legend. He turns into a god of anger and curse (*tatarigami*) at the end of his life.⁴⁾ His name reminds me of *Ōmononushi* (大物主) who appears in *Kojiki* (古事記). This classic was compiled in the eighth century and contains Japanese myths and history. *Ōmononushi* is one of the minor gods in *Kojiki*; there is no mention of *Ōkkotonushi*.

It is true that *nushi* means master, and both *mono* (物) and *koto* (事) mean thing. Yet *mono* can also mean a kind of spirit in ancient Japanese language. The *O* in both words are similar in sound. However, the Sino-Japanese character (*kanji*) of *Ō* (大) in *Ōmononushi* and that of *O* (乙) in *Okkotonushi* differ.

3) *Kodama*

Various gods and supernatural beings appear in this film. The primary examples are *Shishigami* (Deer God), *Nagonokami* and *Okkotonushi*, *shōjō*, *Moro* and *kodama*.

Kodama are supernatural beings from Japanese folklore and they are mentioned in *Genji Monogatari*. *Kodama*, in this film, appear as the thousands of fairy-like creatures. This form of *kodama* is probably the creation of Miyazaki. *Ko* means tree; *dama* means soul or spirit. In *The story of Aoyagi*, written by Lafcadio Hearn, alias Koizumi Yakumo (1850~1904), a lady Aoyagi is the spirit of a willow tree. The idea seems to have a relationship with animism. However, quantitatively *kodama* in this film are considerably different from Aoyagi's spirit. The number of *kodama* is too numerous to count.

On the contrary, Deer, Boars, and Wolf are considered to be embodiments of deities or the messengers of gods of the forest.

Shinto, the Japanese native religion, might have influenced Miyazaki's idea that various animals embody gods of the forests.

4) Shishigami

Shishigami changes its name to Deidarabocchi when it turns into a giant. This name probably comes from Daidarabōshi, a giant in Japanese folklore. *Bōshi* or *hōshi* means Buddhist monk. According to folklore, several lakes in Japan were made from his footprints.

Gami is the same as *kami*, or god, as I wrote. Shishigami looks like a deer, or *shika* in Japanese. And Shishigami is translated as a Deer God in the English-language edition. However, this god is not called Shikagami but Shishigami. Miyazaki's reason for not calling it the former was probably due to his understanding of old Japanese language. In ancient Japanese, both deer and boars are called *shishi*.⁵⁾ I think that Miyazaki purposefully used *shishi* to signify continuity in the forest.

One could also look at this naming in a different way. *Shishi* can mean lion. In Japan, there have never been lions, although wild boars, deer and wolves used to be widespread. For pre-modern Japanese, lions and apes (*shōjō*, 猩々) were only imaginary beasts.⁶⁾ Kanō Eitoku's *Karajishizu byōbu* (唐獅子図屏風), a slide-door painting (*shōheiga*), is one famous example of this imagery. *Kara* means Chinese; *jishi* or *shishi* means lion. While Eitoku could not have seen any lions, his creature was meant to represent the ruler of the animal kingdom.

Miyazaki's Shishigami has the same status in the forest of *Princess Mononoke*. This is why wounded Okkotonushi, the leader of boars, desperately tries to appeal to Shishigami for help prior to dying.

3. Historical sources and historians

I would like to move onto the ways in which Miyazaki utilized historical sources in the making of *Princess Mononoke*.

1) *Ippen Shōnin Eden*

This film has historical depth as well.

In the market scene early in the film, Ashitaka pays for rice with gold dust. When I saw this for the first time, I was surprised. The houses of the scene looked just like those in one of the scenes in the picture scroll *Ippen Shōnin Eden* (一遍上人絵伝). This picture scroll was drawn in the Kamakura period and is now a National Treasure. Immediately I guessed that Miyazaki must have adopted a scene of *Ippen Eden* for his film. It is fantastic when a cultural asset can be used so daringly in a completely different art form.

Another scene which Miyazaki maybe uses the pictures from *Ippen Eden* is the one in which people, bandaged in white dressings, suffering from Hansen's disease appear. They are working or taking rest at the ironworks in the film.

By using traditional Japanese art, Miyazaki enriches his film.

Moreover, he based *Princess Mononoke* on various historical facts. As a result, the film becomes more realistic and persuasive, even though the story is a kind of fantasy.

2) Historians

Since 1970s, Japanese historians have been writing various interpretations of the past.

Several of them have written about socially oppressed people—victims of serious diseases and poor women.

Some historians drew their interpretation of Japanese medieval

mountaintop castles in illustrations. Surprisingly, the construction of Eboshi's fortified ironworks is very similar to these pictures.⁷⁾

Miyazaki may have studied their books. I would like to give an example of one of the historians.

Many people believed that the fundamental industry in pre-modern Japan was rice farming. The narrative that the majority of Japanese were farmers in pre-modern Japan has been dominant and common for a long time.

Amino Yoshihiko was one historian that challenged this thesis. He argued that non-farmers—for example, merchants, craftsmen, fishermen, and hunters—played important roles in pre-modern Japan.⁸⁾ Miyazaki agrees with Amino's point of view.

When Miyazaki talked with Amino, Miyazaki emphasized that: "Period films are almost stereotypes of *samurai*, farmers and townsfolk. Such history is boring... I have felt an interest in iron workers who wandered the mountains."⁹⁾

In order to consider Miyazaki's comment, let us compare *Princess Mononoke* with Kurosawa Akira's *Seven Samurai* (1951). In the last scene of *Seven Samurai*, Kanbei, who is the leader of the seven and acted by Shimura Takashi, reflects that: "It is not we but the farmers that beat the robbers." At the ending of the film, the farmers are seen planting rice in the field, accompanied by people playing drums and a flute.

Contrastingly, there are no scenes in *Princess Mononoke* of working in the fields. Many young women are manufacturing iron; most men in the film are workers and cowherds in Eboshi's fort, hunters, mountain priests (*karakasa-ren*) led by Jikobō and soldiers.¹⁰⁾ Maybe Miyazaki wanted to show that people's way of life in pre-modern Japan was totally different from that of *Seven Samurai*.

3) Three World Heritage sites

When Ashitaka carries two injured men into the forest, these three men see *kodama*. When they come across a huge tree, Ashitaka asked them if the tree is their mother. This tree is modeled on the Yakushima

cedars on Yakushima Island. This cedar forest is registered as a World Heritage site. Several members of Miyazaki's crew went to the island to get the images of the huge trees for the film.

Furthermore, the village where Ashitaka used to live is located in the mountains of the Tōhoku region. It also may have been modeled on the Shirakami Mountains, also registered as a World Heritage site.

As far as World Heritage sites are concerned, several roofs of houses in Eboshi's fort remind me of the steep thatched roofed houses (合掌造り) in the Historic Village of Shirakawa-gō, Gifu. This village is also a World Heritage site. It is surprising that the huge roofs of the village in *Seven Samurai* are just the same as the historic ones at Shirakawa-gō.¹¹⁾

Since *Princess Mononoke* makes me think of *Seven Samurai* on at least two points, I can assume that Miyazaki must have been very conscious of Kurosawa's film when he directed this film.¹²⁾

4. Traditional plays

After Shishigami loses its head, the body continues to move energetically. The head of Moro, being severed from her body, suddenly moves and bites Eboshi's arm off. These amazing scenes remind me of a line in a *kabuki* play: "Even if my head were cut off and thrown away, I would show you I could move." (*Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kwaidan*, 東海道四谷怪談)

In *Princess Mononoke*, heads or hands of soldiers are often cut off and flung away from their bodies. These scenes, which may look a little bit comical, are possible because *Princess Mononoke* is an animated film. Miyazaki is making here the best possible use of the characteristics of animation. However, these scenes are not very unusual, because we can sometimes see such scenes in the Japanese puppet theater *bunraku*.

While I cannot be certain if Miyazaki was aware that he was borrowing this imagery from *kabuki* and *bunraku*,¹³⁾ the similarities are striking.

By the way, many women are working in Eboshi's ironworks. They

had been prostitutes. Eboshi Gozen, as the red-lipped Madam of the fortress, saved them from a life of prostitution and brought them to her ironworks. I purposefully used “Madam” to highlight that one of the meanings of *gozen* is courtesan. Shizuka Gozen, who was Minamoto no Yoshitsune’s lover and is a popular character both in *nō* and in *kabuki*, and Hotoke Gozen, Taira no Kiyomori’s lover in *Heike Monogatari*, are two other examples. I am judging from Eboshi’s name and her blood red lips.

5. Foreign literature and films

As stated above, Miyazaki based much of *Princess Mononoke* on Japanese folklore and history. At the same time, he borrowed various elements in his films from foreign literature and films.

1) Literature

I have already made mention of *Gilgamesh*; but Miyazaki’s references to literature are extensive. For example, *Laputa*, as a character Mushka mentions in the film, comes from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.¹⁴⁾ In *Nausicaä in the Valley of Wind*, which also deals with environmental destruction, the name of Nausicaä comes from Princess Nausicaä in Homer’s *Odyssey*.¹⁵⁾ In the opening scene of *Princess Mononoke*, a *tatarigami* appears, as I have already mentioned. Also the name of *tatarigami*, the god of fury and curse, is similar to the Furies in one of Aeschylus’ tragedies.

2) Two films

I’d like to give just two examples of citing other films.

The first one concerns Eboshi’s entrance. Here people and cows are climbing a steep, narrow mountain road, carrying a lot of packs. It is a scene reminiscent of Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972).

The other scene comes near the end of the film. When Ashitaka goes to look for San on the back of Yakul, he approaches a huge rock. This rock looks strikingly similar to the one in Monument Valley shot in

John Ford's *Stage Coach* (1939). Miyazaki might be paying homage to *Aguirre* and *Stage Coach* here.

I have stated various aspects concerning the sources that are visually present in *Princess Mononoke*. Of course, you can enjoy this film, even if you don't notice these sources at all. However, you can enjoy it a lot more, if you know something about the sources or backgrounds of this film.

6. Attitudes toward nature

As stated in the introduction of this essay, one of the main themes of this film is the relationship between nature and human civilization. Three types of attitudes toward nature seem to be shown in this film.

- 1) The attitude of Jikobō and Eboshi
- 2) The attitude of wild boars, wolves and San, apes, and Shishigami after being shot
- 3) The attitude of Ashitaka and Shishigami before being shot

1) The first type

Both Jikobō and Eboshi try to kill Shishigami, because they regard this god as the supreme god of the forest. Their aim is human conquest of nature. In addition to this, Jikobō suggests the Emperor desires Shishigami's blood because it will give him immortality. The idea of immortality might come from Taoism (道教).

If Jikobō and Eboshi succeed in killing Shishigami, they could fell trees in the forests with impunity. This is what they intend.

By the way, Jikobō is a suggestive name. *Bō* refers to a monk. Since *jiko* is represented in *katakana*, the meaning is not obvious. However, *jiko* in Japanese probably refers to self(自己). If I am correct, this name refers to selfishness. Thus his character is representative of the selfish nature of those like Eboshi and himself.¹⁶⁾

2) The second type

San, wolves, boars and *shōjō* look at humans as enemies. The boars, led by Okkotonushi, try to attack and kill the men of Eboshi and Jikobō; two wolves and San also participate in the war. In the end, Eboshi, Jikobō and his men massacre all the boars, using various firearms.

When Okkotonushi tries to attack Jikobō's men, Shishigami does not participate. One of the boars asks why Shishigami saved Ashitaka's life while not saving or helping Nagonokami.

Shishigami eventually becomes furious with rage after being shot by Eboshi.

Shōjō are hostile toward humans, like boars and wolves. Yet, *shōjō* do not attack men; they only plant trees on the deforested mountain slope at night.

3) The third type

Ashitaka tries to search for an alternative way in which humans and nature can coexist. This way differs from the idea that humans can rule all forests; it also differs from the idea that humans should not rule any forest. Ashitaka attempts to find the third way, despite the disapproving and sneering tone of Moro.

One night, San attacks Eboshi's fort and fights with Eboshi. After Ashitaka stops their fight and saves San, Ashitaka is shot with a firearm. When Ashitaka, San, Yakul and the two wolves arrive at a lake in the forest, and Ashitaka is left alone, Shishigami appears to heal Ashitaka's wound. Ashitaka recovers miraculously. However, the god leaves the wound inflicted by Nagonokami as it is. It is likely that Shishigami did not want to deny the boar's rage. Even if Shishigami does not fight with the boars against Jikobō's men, Shishigami seems give the boars moral support. Shishigami seems to be sympathetic toward Ashitaka's alternative way before this god is shot by Eboshi.

Ashitaka, at the end of this film, decides to live with Eboshi's people and asks San to join him. However, San refuses because she thinks that it is impossible to live with humans, especially those that

make iron. Her future is not bright because the gods of the forest have already been killed.

How can human beings coexist with nature?—This is one of the themes of *Princess Mononoke*.

7. Fury

Shishigami eventually becomes furious with rage after being shot by Eboshi, as I have already stated. Shishigami turns into *tatarigami*.

Miyazaki said, “The contemporary world is filled with numerous number of *tatarigami*. For example, Palestine and Africa are full of *tatarigami*.”¹⁷⁾ Judging from this statement of his, a lot of *tatarigami* are still alive and would appear not only in medieval Japan but also in various areas where people’s fury flood today. In Miyazaki’s thought, *tatarigami*’s fury is not limited within the issue of environmental destruction.

I have made mention of an Aeschylus’ tragedy. Speaking of which, fury is often an important sentiment of the characters in Miyazaki’s films. Another example of this is: when the sixteen-eyed Ohmu in *Nausicaä* unleashes its fury, the color of its eyes turns from blue to red. Fury changes the insects from passive giants to unstoppable juggernauts.¹⁸⁾

Just before his death, Nagonokami¹⁹⁾ murmured, “You shall know my hatred and grief”. This murmur clarifies fury, one of the important themes of this film.

Shishigami also turns into *tatarigami* or a kind of Juggernaut. The destructive power of this god of the forest is awful.

After watching this film, we realize that serious difficulties confront us.

Notes

- 1) Andrew George, Introduction, p. xxxii, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by Andrew George, Penguin Classics, 2000.

- 2) *Gilgamesh*, p.39
- 3) Helen McCarthy called this boar “a boar god”. Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki Master of Japanese Animation*, Stone Bridge Press, reprinted, 2002, p.182.
- 4) When Okkoto turns into *tatarigami*, a character calls him “a monster” in the version of the film dubbed into English.
- 5) Beast, deer and boars are *shishi* in ancient Japanese. Cf. ‘*shishi*’, *Jidaibetsu Kokugo Daijiten, Jōdai-hen* (時代別国語大辞典・上代編). Sanseidō, 1967.
- 6) The word *shōjō* is reminiscent of a *nō* play, *Shōjō*. However, *Shōjō* as the *nō* play character is a drinking, debonair existence.
- 7) *Shukan Asahi Hyakka, Nihon no Rekishi* (週刊朝日百科・日本の歴史) 20, 2002, pp. 5-304.
- 8) Amino Yoshihiko (網野善彦) wrote a number of books, one of which is: Amino, *Nihon Chūsei no Hi-Nōgyōmin to Ten-nō* (日本中世の非農業民と天皇). Iwanami Shoten, 1984.
- 9) *Ushio* (潮), September, 1997. See also Miyazaki Hayao (宮崎駿), *Kaze no Kaeru Basho* (風の帰る場所), Rokin'on, 2002.
- 10) Some historians criticize that *Princess Mononoke* is not always based on historical facts in the Muromachi period. In my opinion, such criticism is not justified. What kinds of historical facts are *kodama*, *Shishigami* and a girl living with wolves based on? This is idle talk.
- 11) Kurosawa’s crew visited Shirakawa-gō in order to find and study “an origin of farmer’s life in Japan”, when Kurosawa was directing *Seven Samurai*. Hirosawa Ei (廣澤榮), *Nihon Eiga no Jidai* (日本映画の時代), Iwanami Gendai Bunko, Iwanami Shoten, 2002, p.141.
- 12) See Kurosawa Akira, Miyazaki Hayao (黒澤明・宮崎駿), *Nani ga Eiga ka* (何が映画か), 1993, Tokuma Shoten.
- 13) After making *Nausicaä*, Miyazaki said that he wanted to depict Japan which differed from the beautiful Japan depicted in *kabuki* and *nō*. (Miyazaki Hayao (宮崎駿), *Shuppatsuten 1979~1996* (出発点 1979~1996). Tokuma-Shoten, 1996, p.262)
- 14) Many main characters in Miyazaki’s works are children. Concerning this point, Miyazaki said that East Asian people liked stories whose main characters were children, but European people did not think of such stories. Miyazaki took *Journey to the West; Monkey* (西遊記) as an example. In this Chinese story, a child god appears and the power is as strong as adult gods. Both *Tarzan* and *Princess Mononoke* are stories in which main characters play important roles in each forest. But *Tarzan* is not a child, of course. (Hotta Yoshie, Shiba Ryōtarō and Miyazaki Hayao (堀田善衛・司馬遼太郎・宮崎駿), *Jidai no Kazaoto* (時代の風音). Asahi Bunko, Asahi Shinbunsha, 1997, p.132) By the way, the characteristics of heroines in *Tarzan* films and those in *Princess Mononoke* are completely different.
- 15) Miyazaki said that the image of *Nausicaä* came both from *Odyssey* and from ‘Young lady who loved insects’ in *Tsutsumi Chūnagon Monogatari* (堤中納言物語), which was written in the Heian period. (Ibid.)
- 16) The name of this monk is Jikobō, according to the theater program published by Studio Jhibli. A critic wrote this monk’s name not as *jiko* but as *jigo*. If his name were Jigobō, I’d like to interpret it as *jigō* (自業), which refers to ‘own foolish behavior or action’. The name *Jigo* is also symbolic. However, I have to follow the theater program.

- 17) Miyazaki Hayao, 'Interview, Now and Then', in *Eurika* (ユリイカ), August, an extra edition, 1997, p.44
- 18) In his blueprint for *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki said, "There is no happy ending concerning the battle between savage gods (荒ぶる神々) and human beings." (Miyazaki, *Shuppatsuten*, p.421)
- 19) *Kami* in Nagonokami (ナゴの守) does not mean god (*kami* 神). It refers to a rank of feudal lords.