

**Anime and Historical Inversion in  
Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke***

*John A. Tucker*  
*East Carolina University*

**Introduction**

If box office receipts are any indication of cultural significance, then Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke* (Mononokehime, 1997) surely stands as one of the most important works of late-twentieth-century Japanese popular culture: currently it remains the highest-grossing (¥16.65 billion, approximately \$150 million) domestic film in Japanese history. Prior to the release of *The Titanic*, *Princess Mononoke* eclipsed *E.T.* and reigned as the biggest box-office hit ever, domestic or foreign, in Japan. While *The Titanic* has since surpassed *Princess Mononoke* in overall ticket sales, over 13.53 million Japanese, or more than one-tenth of the population, have watched *Princess Mononoke* in theatres, and over five million copies of the video have been sold domestically (Yoneda, 204). *Princess Mononoke* also stands as the most expensive animated movie ever made in Japan, with a 3 billion yen (approximately \$30 million) production cost (Wakita et al., 168). Critics have lauded it in literally hundreds of media reviews, especially in Japanese film and popular culture publications such as *Kinema junpō*, *SAPIO*, *Nyūmedeia*, *AERA*, *uirumumeekaazu*, *Bessatsu Comicbox*, *Bessatsu Takarajima*, *Tech Win*, *Shunkan Kinyōbi*, *Video Doo!*, *Yurika*, *Cinema Talk*, and *SPA!*, as well as in the major newspapers, periodicals, and regional media. Additionally, *Princess Mononoke* has been awarded numerous prizes, most notably the 21st Japan Academy Award for Best Film (Kuji, 3-4; Schilling, 3). Not surprisingly the film has been released internationally, with an English language version, featuring numerous familiar American voices, including that of Gillian Anderson and Billy Bob Thornton, thus making it exceptionally accessible in the United States for anime fans, and those interested in Japanese history and culture. Internationally the film has been more widely covered than any Japanese movie ever, with reviews in virtually every major newspaper and journal in the U.S. and Europe. Not surprisingly, one Japanese commentator has declared that *Princess Mononoke* has become an "historic phenomenon" (Iwatani, 43).

While easily characterizable as an allegory

examining the ecological conflict between civilization and nature (Kanō, 38-39; Hamano, 35; Saeki 2000, 142), or as a religious epic depicting the tragic fate of animal deities inhabiting what had been luxuriant virgin forests (Yoneda, 204-05), *Princess Mononoke* is most obviously an anime of historical fiction, specifically an animated jidaigeki, or “premodern historical drama,” making many of its more poignant, often ecologically-oriented, ideological statements by couching them in rich allusions to history, myth, and legend (Schilling, 4). That Miyazaki decided to direct a film in the jidaigeki genre is somewhat unusual for his earlier anime have not typically appropriated that genre (McCarthy). Miyazaki is not alone in this regard: anime are not usually jidaigeki; instead they more characteristically utilize science-fiction or fantasy as genres (Napier 2001, 6), taking advantage of the animator’s full ability to create and metamorphose total environments to fashion imaginary, often futuristic scenarios. Kurosawa Akira (1910-98), generally recognized as the greatest of the jidaigeki directors, defined that genre as it is commonly understood with classic films such as *Rashomon* (1950), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Sanjurō* (1962), *Kagemusha* (1980), and *Ran* (1985), all featuring samurai heroics, swordplay, and an anonymous, often victimized peasantry (Prince; Godwin). With *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki has developed the jidaigeki genre in historically innovative ways, moving it away from the motifs Kurosawa deployed, and towards what has been considered the peripheries of Japanese history and culture.<sup>1</sup> In the process, Miyazaki catapulted women, young people, lepers, outcasts, “barbarian” groups, and other marginalized minorities of traditional narratives into prominent, often heroic roles, in some cases as defenders of the sacred natural environment against the onslaught of imperial Yamato civilization as led by ominously anonymous samurai. In turning the jidaigeki genre, as well as standard themes of long-established accounts of Japanese history,

---

<sup>1</sup> The juxtaposition of Miyazaki and Kurosawa is not gratuitous: Miyazaki was a great admirer of Kurosawa, especially his *Seven Samurai*. The two directors discussed postwar filmmaking in a special television broadcast, during which Kurosawa asked Miyazaki what he thought of using Shakespeare as a model for a jidaigeki film. In response, Miyazaki suggested the possibility of integrating that idea with the Muromachi period of Japanese history. According to Harada et al., the “idea” behind *Mononokehime* was born from that dialogue (171).

on their head, Miyazaki has drawn upon the pioneering work of the revisionist historian, Amino Yoshihiko (1928-). Amino's voluminous writings on medieval Japan similarly deemphasize samurai/peasant culture, feudal lords, the imperial line, and the centrality of the imperial capital, while highlighting the role of women, townspeople, artisans, outcastes, minority groups, and geopolitical spheres that have only infrequently figured in major ways in traditional histories (Amino, 1991; 1994; 1996).

Fredric Jameson suggests that science fiction has often been used to envision the "present as [past] history." On the other hand, "the classical nostalgia film, while evading its present altogether, registered its historicist deficiency by losing itself in mesmerized fascination in lavish images of specific generational pasts" (298). *Princess Mononoke*, as a jidaigeki anime, however, rejects "nostalgia" in favor of a perception of the present as a kind of "science fiction" in which some of the players, specifically those viewing the film, still have a chance to engage their present in light of a reenvisioned past. Though "lavish images of specific generational pasts" are indeed offered, *Princess Mononoke* does not encourage evasion of the present for the past so much as activism in the present for the future. Arthur Nolletti and David Desser have explained that "genre films" such as jidaigeki, "emerge as invaluable artifacts of their society, and even serve to redefine and mythologize the way that society sees itself" (xiii). Though they do not discuss anime, their observation is undoubtedly relevant to *Princess Mononoke* and its significance vis-à-vis Japanese history, legends, and ideology.

This essay examines salient historical allusions and fabrications made in *Princess Mononoke*, analyzing them intertextually in terms of various narratives of Japanese history—legendary, mythic, and modern—to assess Miyazaki's aggressive reinvention of history through anime. The essay argues that more than simple revisionism, *Princess Mononoke* transforms history by subverting received narratives, chronologies, and interpretive categories via extensive, salutary legendary fabrication regarding the nature of war and its heroes, gender roles, the "impact" of the west, religion, nature, and the spiritual environment. In *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki graphically reimagines transformative moments in Japan's past by inverting some long-manipulated legendary constructs of traditional historical literature, while highlighting other often marginal aspects, thereby fashioning a new ideological basis for a more ecologically balanced vision of the future. Simultaneously *Princess*

*Mononoke* subverts legends, which, though well ensconced in traditional accounts of the past, offer little positive inspiration for contemporary Japanese seeking to come to terms with themselves, their spirituality, and their environment. In engineering this innovative set of ecologically, socially, and religiously positive historical visions, the film supersedes legends, myths, and motifs which ideologists of the 1930s and early 1940s manipulated to advance their military and nationalistic ends via glorification of imperial heroes, especially those who fought to extend the territorial and cultural hegemony of the imperial state. In this regard Miyazaki's anime serves an ideologically positive role. Nevertheless, in its effort to provide a realistic vision of the future, one affirming the importance of nature and civilization, the film is reluctant to recognize the ultimate integrity of nature and the absoluteness of its claims, especially in relation to gratuitous human encroachments. While *Princess Mononoke* should be lauded, it leaves ample room for further reconceptualizations of the past, which might better serve Japan's future ecological needs.

Such an interpretation might seem exaggerated, even fanciful, given that anime is the medium. However, the noted scholar of Japanese culture John Whittier Treat has observed that "it is commonplace now ... to look upon popular culture as the site of struggle for hegemony, a 'contested terrain' between the admittedly dominant ideological intentions for how we are to live within culture and the emergent ideological ways in which we may succeed in re-articulating that culture in our own diverse interests" (353-87). Similarly, David Desser situates the works of New Wave directors such as Imamura Shohei and Teshigahara Hiroshi, "within the wider discourses of historical, political, social, and cultural studies." Desser claims that too many studies have sought to "dehistoricize" New Wave cinema by emphasizing its continuity with "traditional Japanese culture." He stresses the "political importance" and "cultural engagement with the historical moment" of New Wave, showing how it has "used cinema as a tool, a weapon in the cultural struggle" (2-3).

Along related lines, anime scholar Susan J. Napier suggests that the postmodern "absence of any sort of past" evident in the "creative destruction" of an earlier animated blockbuster, *Akira* (1988), implies an indifference to, if not a "thoroughgoing denial or even erasure" of traditional Japanese history and culture. Napier contrasts *Akira*'s celebration of "history's imminent demise" with *Godzilla* (Gojira, 1954), which allowed Japanese to "rewrite

or at least reimagine their tragic wartime experiences,” and Nippon chinbotsu (Japan Sinks, 1973), which sought to prompt a nostalgic, “melancholy pleasure of mourning for the passing of traditional Japanese society” (1993, 327-51). Viewed in this spectrum, *Princess Mononoke* returns to the didactic approach offered in *Godzilla*, providing Japanese a means of reimagining their past for the sake of redirecting their present and future worlds. Napier’s recent study, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, affirms this view, suggesting that *Princess Mononoke*, by reenvisioning “the conventions of Japanese history,” in effect assists Japanese in negotiating a major change in national identity (175-77).

In interpreting *Princess Mononoke*, this paper endorses the doctrine established by the ‘New Critics’ (including John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, W. M. Wimsatt) and furthered by recent theorists such as Umberto Eco, that “the author’s pre-textual intention—the purposes that may have led to the attempt to write [or in this case, direct] a particular work—cannot furnish the touchstone of interpretation” (Eco, 10). While this hermeneutic approach is most typically applied to literary works, it has been transferred to film by critic-theorists such as Noël Carroll. Carroll supports an “anti-intentionalist bias,” noting that “the value of a film resides in the individual film as it is seen” (Carroll, 174). Similarly, while this paper often speaks of Miyazaki as having reimagined history, inverted legends, recreated myths, etc, it does not mean to imply that this was Miyazaki’s primary purpose or, necessarily, his conscious intention. Rather it simply suggests that this reimagining, inversion, recreation, etc., can be read as salient byproducts of Miyazaki’s labors.

### Synopsis

Despite the title and promotional posters suggesting a female protagonist, the most obvious hero of *Princess Mononoke* is a teenage warrior Ashitaka (Mori, 193) the last prince of a hidden tribe of Emishi, supported faithfully by his youthful steed, Yakkuru, a robust red elk. It is noteworthy in this connection that the film’s original title was Ashitaka sekki, or *The Life of Ashitaka* (Kuji, 39-42). Shortly after the film opens a monstrous creature appears, a tatarigami, a vengeful raging deity depicted as a huge mass of bloody leech-like entities squirming forth from a largely unseen physical core. Briefly, the tatarigami throws off the oozing parasites to reveal his body as that of a giant wild boar. For reasons that are not clear, he attacks Ashitaka’s village. The only wrong of the villagers is that they

are humans, creatures the boar has come to hate unto death, without discrimination. With selfless bravery, Ashitaka defends his village, killing the tatarigami with an arrow piercing his right eye. In the fight a dark substance spewing from the tatarigami's form hits Ashitaka's right forearm infecting him, as he later learns, with a deadly disease.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than remain in his village and risk infecting others, Ashitaka accepts the divination of the local shamaness and embarks on a journey to the southwest in search of the source of the madness, which consumed the tatarigami. Along the way Ashitaka encounters a young female, San, riding bareback on a giant wolf deity, Moro. Though human, San has been raised by wolf deities and can communicate with the myriad spirits of nature; thus, she is the movie's eponym, *Princess Mononoke*, Princess of the Wrathful, Raging Spirits of Nature. Predictably, Ashitaka is

---

<sup>2</sup> Napier (343), notes that in the final apocalyptic portion of *Akira*, Tetsuo loses an arm, but then telekinetically replaces it. She compares this to Luke Skywalker's loss of an arm in fighting his father, Darth Vader, in the second film of the *Star Wars* trilogy. Napier proposes that the arm is "a displaced signifier for the phallus," and that the loss and telekinetic recovery can be viewed as part of Tetsuo's "struggle for maturity" and a sense of "his own identity *vis-à-vis* the world." Similarly, Ashitaka's diseased arm, which throbs with malignant hypertrophy whenever he feels hatred, symbolizes one aspect of the protagonist's critical, life-threatening passage from adolescence to existential authenticity. Insofar as Ashitaka can be viewed, as this paper suggests, as the antithesis of Yamato-takeru, and the latter a prewar exemplar of the nation and its virtues, Ashitaka's struggle for maturity acquires monumental significance. Similarities between Ashitaka's infection and contraction of "A-bomb" disease via black rain—in both cases, contact with a black substance transfers potentially mortal, but not immediately deadly, sickness—suggest that Ashitaka's struggle to overcome the disease of hate can be read as an allegory for Japan's coming to terms with the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by transcending the impulse to retribution in favor of a commitment to building a more ecologically respectful and spiritually harmonious world. Themes traditional to Shintô such as pollution and purification are also obvious here, and acquire more universality insofar as Ashitaka is an Emishi, not a Japanese.

attracted to her, and eventually persuades her to accept, in a limited way, her own humanity, along with his, in an effort to stem the greater violence that separated her realm, the forests defended by the wolf deities, from his, that of human society encroaching on the spiritual realm of nature in its relentless efforts to provide a better life for itself.

In the process, Ashitaka thwarts the efforts of an opportunistic Buddhist monk, Jikobō, and a cunning female, Lady Eboshi, to behead the Deer Spirit of the Mountain Forest, Shishigami, for the sake of personal gain: a mountain of gold offered by the Japanese emperor as reward for a means to immortality, in this case the head of Shishigami. By returning Shishigami's severed head to him and thus calming his apocalyptic rage, Ashitaka saves the day and the ecosystem, preserving the balance and harmony of nature and the spirits that Jikobō and Lady Eboshi were so hellbent on destroying. As an unexpected reward for returning Shishigami's head, Ashitaka achieves purification, being cured of his mortal disease, and presumably lives happily ever after with San. Most likely it is because of his love for San that Ashitaka, in the end, forgets his Emishi homeland, and the possibility of returning there. Curiously enough he decides instead to remain with Eboshi and the people of the iron factory village to help them reconstruct their lives in a more positive, harmonious manner. In many respects, *Princess Mononoke* is an old-fashioned epic love story which, no doubt, accounts for at least some of its popular appeal.<sup>3</sup>

Before turning to the main points of the paper, it must be noted that the English translation of the Japanese title Mononokehime is not very informative, despite its useful brevity and exotic aura. Hime means princess, and is not problematic. Mononoke, however, is not a name, as the translation suggests. Rather, it refers to wrathful, vengeful spirits, either of the living or the dead. While the Japanese promotional logo for Mononokehime presents mononoke in hiragana, the kanji for it are read wu

---

<sup>3</sup> Saeki discusses the innovative romantic qualities of Mononokehime (2000, 144). Izawa states that contrary to the typical Westerner's view of Japan as "a cold, calculating land of antlike workers, brutal efficiency, and overwhelming bureaucracy," anime offers "one of the best places to get a taste of Japanese roman ('romance')" (139). While not highly passionate and hardly sexually explicit, *Princess Mononoke*, true to Izawa's analysis of anime, is held together by the evident adolescent affection Ashitaka feels for San.

guai in Chinese, and can be traced in ancient Chinese literature to Sima Qian's (ca. 145-ca. 90 B.C.E.) *Shiji* (Historical Records), a classic of historical literature from the Han dynasty, and Han Yü's (768-824) essay, "On the Origins of Ghosts" (Yuan guai), written in the mid-Tang. Han Yu explained that "entities which can assume any shape or sound are wu guai, or 'supernatural things.'" In Japan the term assumed distinctive nuances with Murasaki Shikibu's (ca. 973-ca. 1016) *Tale of Genji* wherein, according to Doris Bergen's study, *A Woman's Weapon: Spirit Possession in the Tale of Genji*, mononoke refers to "spirit possession and possessing spirits ... a psychic phenomenon so integral to the text that it seems almost to structure the entire narrative." Bergen states that the *Genji* portrays Heian women, suppressed and subordinated within a male dominated aesthetic culture, asserting themselves through mononoke spirit possession, while alive or after death, as a means of taking revenge on those who have wronged them, and of rebelling against the biased socio-aesthetic system (Bergen, xv). Norma Field's *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji*, notes that "the record [for occurrences of mononoke] is reached in the *Genji*, which has no fewer than fifty-three examples, seconded by the *Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, an historical tale written some four decades later, with seventeen examples" (52). Classic instances in the *Genji* are in the ninth chapter, "Aoi," referring to Aoi's fatal gomononoke; and the fifty-first chapter, "Ukifune." Arthur Waley's translation of the *Genji* renders the "Aoi" usage as "possession," and the "Ukifune" as "illness" (189, 1215); Edward Seidensticker's more recent translation of the *Genji* glosses the first occurrence as "malign spirit", and the second as "evil spirit" (167, 1010). In Miyazaki's film, the word mononoke can be understood as a reference to the raging, vengeful spirits of the forest, which both possess the bearer and can pollute, mortally, those with whom the mononoke make physical contact. These vengeful spirits have been incited to rage, most generally, by the destructive incursions of humans, more specifically by the hypertrophic Yamato state, as it was recrystallizing in the late-Muromachi period, and most specifically, by the bullets that sear their bodies, break their bones, and burn their innards. The film's title could thus be translated, far less poetically, as "Princess of the Wrathful, Raging Spirits of Nature."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In ancient China, the *Analects* (7/21) made the word guai suspect, at least from a Confucian perspective, by noting that "the Master (Confucius) did not talk about supernatural phenomena (guai), feats of power, anarchy, or

### Analytic Themes

*Princess Mononoke* makes myriad historical allusions to geography, art, architecture, religion, philosophy, society, politics, and the martial arts, just to mention the more salient categories. Nevertheless Miyazaki does not offer these allusions in any chronologically unified way so as to suggest, e.g., a relatively accurate representation of the Kamakura period, the Muromachi, or the Tokugawa, though the film is most evidently set in the late Muromachi, an era during which Japan had descended into chronic civil war and ecological crisis. Yet rather than any attempt at consistent historical fidelity Miyazaki offers a mismatched, chronologically incongruous set of allusions, often merged with flights of complete historical fancy, thus suggesting a radically different historical past that might have been, not one which, even remotely, actually was. For example, the epic struggle with the raging deities, often manifest in their transformation bodies as monstrous animal demons,<sup>5</sup> recalls, more than Muromachi times, episodes from the age of the kami as described in the *Kojiki* (Records of Antiquity, 712) and *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720) (Matsumae, 340-41). Also Miyazaki modeled Ashitaka's name after the ancient chieftan, Nagasunehiko ("Prince Longshanks"), who opposed Emperor Jimmu's conquest of the Yamato plain. Ashitaka's name, in

---

spiritual phenomena." *Princess Mononoke*, in addressing all of these topics, is, when viewed in terms of East Asian intellectual traditions, an un-Confucian film. Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) Collected Commentaries on the *Analekts* explain Confucius' reticence by observing that supernatural phenomena, feats of bravery and power, and disorder and anarchy do not convey "the right aspects of ethical principles."

<sup>5</sup> Figal suggests that discourses related to monsters (*bakemono*), "the supernatural," "ghosts," and the "fantastic" generally can be viewed as "a mode of social and political critique," (156), one "affiliated with the instantiation of modernity in Japan." Applied to monstrous kami in *Princess Mononoke*, Figal's view implies that the raging boars, wolves, and apes affirm the revolt of nature and its powerful spirituality against the encroachment of the recrystallizing Yamato state. Furthermore, Figal's analysis implies that rather than atavism, the revolt of the monster deities provides a means of coming to terms with modernity.

translation, similarly produces “Prince Longlegs” (ashi=leg, taka=tall)<sup>6</sup>. Nagasunehiko’s armies were defeated, and he killed, after a golden kite appeared and led Jimmu’s troops to victory. Nagasunehiko’s encounter with Jimmu is described in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. While Nagasunehiko opposed the imperial ambitions of the then crystallizing Yamato line, much as Ashitaka did, unlike the latter, he was not an Emishi. If the connection with Prince Longshanks is pressed, Ashitaka can even be viewed as an avatar, in anime, of the “anti-Emperor Jimmu” archetype.

This recombination of the traditional narrative, merging motifs associated with the mythic age of the gods and those of the late-medieval Muromachi period, exemplifies the manner in which Miyazaki radically reimagines the Japanese past, not merely changing a few details, but instead fusing opposite ends of the historical continuum so as to create a sufficiently open-ended, even unfamiliar, historical space for articulating a novel, ideologically satisfying narrative. In the following sections several of Miyazaki’s other remakings of the past are explored intertextually as both inversions and subversions of traditional historical accounts. In particular, four central themes and the protagonists epitomizing them are examined: (1) Ashitaka, warfare and the problem of the Emishi; (2) *Princess Mononoke* and gender stereotypes in Japanese history; (3) Lady Eboshi, arquebuses, and the problem of the West; and (4) Shishigami, quasi-Shintō pantheism, and problems related to religion in history and the environment.

#### **Ashitaka, Warfare, and the Problem of the Emishi**

Key to understanding Ashitaka’s significance as protagonist of *Princess Mononoke* and the film’s fabrication of ideologically innovative historical legends is his identity as an Emishi, one of the so-called barbarian tribes supposedly “subdued” (i.e., marginalized if not eliminated) early on, during the age of the gods, by the emerging Yamato state. Though little is known about them, later they, or others like them, were generally referred to as the Ezo, and then after the Meiji Restoration, commonly called Ainu.<sup>7</sup> What is

---

<sup>6</sup> Visit [www.mv.com/users/ctwilkes/MH-text-j/MH-names.txt](http://www.mv.com/users/ctwilkes/MH-text-j/MH-names.txt).

<sup>7</sup> Hudson suggests that “Emishi” was “primarily a political category whose meaning changed over time.” He explains that “biologically and probably linguistically” the Emishi were related to proto-Ainu groups derived from Jōmon peoples. Still, Hudson observes that “the presence of any ethnic

clear, however, is that in traditional historical narratives, the Emishi were rarely assigned laudatory roles. Rather they were cast as “eastern savages” who “dwell together in promiscuity ... dress in furs and drink blood” (Aston, 203; *Nihon shoki*, 174-84)<sup>8</sup> i.e., as a despicable people who ought to be ostracized, enslaved, or eliminated. One locus classicus is the *Nihon shoki* where an advisor to the emperor Keikō relates that the Emishi are of “fierce temper.” He suggests that the Emperor “attack them and take” their land which is “wide and fertile” (Aston, 200).<sup>9</sup> Miyazaki’s lionization of Ashitaka as a heroic Emishi prince thus inverts traditional narratives of the Japanese past which idolized those associated with the imperial throne and loyalists serving it.

The most significant intersection of the dominant, emperor-centered Yamato narrative and those systematically denigrating the Emishi occurs in the (legendary) accounts of Yamato-takeru no mikoto (supposedly 83-113), in many respects the archetypal divine warrior of imperial Japan. Arguably it is the tale of this well-known figure, first set forth in the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*, that *Princess Mononoke* turns on its head, casting Ashitaka, the Emishi prince, as the Anti-Yamato-takeru, having him reverse the heroics (pseudoheroics) Yamato-takeru is credited with so that instead of slaying villified barbarians and building an imperial state, he defends the

---

‘reality’ behind the Emishi is in a sense irrelevant, since the concept of Emishi was itself an artificial construct, imposed from outside.” Hudson adds that once Emishi were incorporated into the Ritsuryō system, they were referred to simply as prisoners, implying that “differences between the Emishi and Japanese were not very great or else that such differences were not considered important in this context.” (198-200).

<sup>8</sup> The *Nihon shoki* villifies the Emishi far more than does the *Kojiki*, describing them as rebels and kidnappers who have not been “steeped in the kingly civilizing influences.” Furthermore, they are said to live amongst “malignant deities” who “beset the highways and bar the roads, causing men much annoyance.” See Wakabayashi (89-91), for analysis of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* treatment of Yamato-takeru in relation to Yamagata Daini’s (1725-67) promotion of him in eighteenth-century Tokugawa Japan.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the military strength of the Emishi, Hudson (199) explains that they were “more than a match for the Yamato armies,” citing studies by Farris (82-119); Friday (17-22); and Lewin (304-26).

natural, spiritual, and social orders necessary for the preservation of a balanced ecosystem.<sup>10</sup>

A rehearsal of six major aspects of the Yamato-takeru legend,<sup>11</sup> along with a commentary on how *Princess Mononoke* inverts and subverts

---

<sup>10</sup> Barrett (141-45) cites Yamato-takeru as a “Prodigal Son” archetype, second to Susanoo, in his account of Mizoguchi Kenji’s “internationally famous” *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sansho dayu*, 1954). Relatively little has been done to relate, intertextually, anime characters to historical, mythic, or religio-cultural archetypes. Noteworthy exceptions are Komata’s (54-67) comparison of the character Akira, in Otomo Katsuhiro’s manga and anime (1989) by the same name, and Wakanomiya, the kami of Kyoto’s Kasuga Shrine. Napier (102) likens Miyazaki’s Nausicaa, heroine and eponym of the anime film, to “a godlike figure from ages past who will come to save the world.” In an endnote, Napier suggests similarities between Nausicaa and the princess of “one of Japan’s first fairy tales” *Taketori monogatari* (*The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*), and notes that Miyazaki himself has “mentioned his indebtedness to another Japanese folktale, *The Lady Who Loves Insects*. It might be added that Ashitaka’s inversions of Yamato-takeru are less explicit when considered in relation to Yamato-takeru prior to his expeditions against the Emishi. For example, there is no parallel, inverted or otherwise, linking Ashitaka to Yamato-takeru’s decision to disguise himself as a female consort in order to gain proximity to, then assassinate, a Kumaso chieftan.

<sup>11</sup> An introductory account is in Morris (1-13). The *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* accounts differ significantly in details, though both describe Yamato-takeru at length. Wakabayashi (89-91), points out that in the *Kojiki*, Emperor Keikō dispatches Yamato-takeru due to fear of his murderous nature, hoping that he will be killed fighting barbarians. In the *Nihon shoki*, Yamato-takeru volunteers for the mission. Also, the *Nihon shoki* villifies the Emishi more than the *Kojiki* does, and casts their conquest in a logic echoing that of ancient Chinese texts justifying military expeditions against so-called barbarians. Also, Cranston (469) notes that the *Kojiki* “concentrates on the guile, violence, loyalty, and hubris of the hero [Yamato-takeru]—he emerges strongly as a simple and tragic figure, ... in the *Nihon shoki*, however, the same character spouts reams of high Confucian sentiment... The effect is noble but remote from the unpretentious lyricism of the Japanese.”

them, should make Miyazaki's reconstruction of historical legend through anime more clear. First, Yamato-takeru was a prince of the supposedly sacred Yamato line, which claimed imperial power over central portions of the Japanese archipelago but was, during the period corresponding to the legend, more engaged in aggressive acquisition of power via conquest of independent groups such as the Emishi. On the other hand, Ashitaka is a young Emishi prince (though there is no historical evidence the Emishi ever had an imperial line), dwelling in an apparently peaceful, marginalized community (five centuries after they were supposedly assimilated or wiped out), led by a shamaness "Wise Woman," Hii-sama.<sup>12</sup> Although Ashitaka possesses a nobility that sets him apart, he is on very human terms with young and old throughout his village. While similar to Yamato-takeru in his status as a prince, Ashitaka is otherwise his antithesis: rather than a divine warrior serving an ambitious, domineering imperial state, he is a culturally content human being, hardly seeking to subjugate other peoples or dominate their ways of life.

Second, Yamato-takeru achieved fame (notoriety) due to his "rough, fearless nature," early on manifested when he murdered his elder twin brother in the privy. Fearing his son's ruthlessness, perhaps even patricide, Emperor Keikō (71-130) sent Yamato-takeru to Kyushu to subdue Kumaso tribes (97) and thus expand Yamato power. Later he was

---

<sup>12</sup> Miyazaki's depiction of the Emishi community, with its shamaness leader, Hii-sama, recalls the most ancient extant accounts of Japanese communities recorded in the Chinese work, the *Weizhi* (History of the Kingdom of Wei, 220-65). There the Japanese are denigrated as a "dwarf-people" (Wa) given to divination, and ruled by Queen Pimiko, a shamaness who "occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people." For a translation, see de Bary et al. (4-7). Since nothing is known about Emishi political organization, it is difficult to claim that Miyazaki inverts Emishi realities by relating them in terms of categories used by Chinese historians to describe ancient Japan. Nevertheless it seems clear that instead of the vacuum of ignorance regarding Emishi, Miyazaki offers an idyllic depiction of female rule in the Emishi community one, which casts the latter as akin to the ancient Japanese, prior to their turn away from female rule. It is noteworthy that there are shamans, both male and female, in Ainu cultures who have often been socio-political leaders as well. See Ohnuki-Tierney (162-75).

deployed to the northeast to subdue the Emishi (110).<sup>13</sup> Along the way Yamato-takeru hunted and killed various and sundry deities of nature as if it were sport. Ashitaka, however, is presented as an ethically responsible, spiritually and ecologically sensitive youth, given to gentle pursuits, though trained with a strength enabling him to overcome samurai en masse. Miyazaki allows Ashitaka to slay a deity (the tatarigami), and to maim and kill samurai with demonic horseback arrowshots that either dismember or decapitate them. But such displays of superhuman martial skill are few, and only permitted as last resorts for the sake of defending innocents. Even so, because he killed the tatarigami, Ashitaka contracts a mortal illness. Still, more than an aggressive warrior he is portrayed as a righteous defender of his village and a ready savior of those in distress. In this respect he more epitomizes, ideologically, postwar Japan's military commitment to self-defense, than the prewar willingness to engage in aggressive warfare for the expansion and glorification of imperial rule.

Thirdly, Yamato-takeru was sent on distant journeys to fight for the cause of Yamato glory in part because of his violent nature (*Kojiki*, 177). Before allowing Yamato-takeru to depart for the east, Emperor Keikō focused his son's wrath by villifying the Emishi as a people living among "evil spirits in the mountains and boisterous demons in the plains who bar the highways and obstruct the roads, causing much suffering to our people" (*Nihon shoki*, 177). Ashitaka, however, was sent on his pilgrimage to the southwest, towards the Yamato geopolitical heartland, in order to discover the root of hatred and evil in the world. Hii-sama, the Emishi shamaness, informs Ashitaka that if he can find the source of hate which consumed the tatarigami, then his mortal wound might be healed. Ashitaka learns that the rage of the deity resulted from human aggression into its forests, made possible by the deadly arquebus. Thus whereas Yamato-takeru was dispatched by Emperor Keikō to facilitate the spread of imperial civilization into the Emishi homelands, Ashitaka, seeking to end the crisis of hatred and rage, found its cause in the intrusion of civilization into the previously harmonious realms of spirit and nature. Ashitaka thus serves as an ideological critique of both the Japanese past, and the aggression of

---

<sup>13</sup> This follows the *Kojiki* account more than the *Nihon shoki*. In the latter, Yamato-takeru volunteers for duty, while in the *Kojiki* he suspects that his father, Emperor Keikō, in dispatching him to fight distant battles, intends to do him in.

humanity vis-à-vis nature in the contemporary world.

Fourthly, before his journey to subjugate the Emishi, Yamato-takeru visited his aunt, the High Priestess of the Great Shrine of Ise, who provided him with a sword, the *kusanagi no tsurugi*, or “grass-slaying sword,” supposedly passed down from Susanoo no mikoto, brother of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. It was this sword, which Yamato-takeru used to escape a fiery trap laid for him by a Sagami chieftan. In contrast, Ashitaka, before going into exile, is met by Kaya, a simple village girl who secretly violates an Emishi taboo forbidding encounter with a person en route to exile. Kaya violates the taboo in order to give Ashitaka a small crystal knife as a good luck charm. Again, Miyazaki depicts Ashitaka as the antithesis of Yamato-takeru, subverting a legend glorifying imperial expansion by means of a sacred sword, by remaking it into one which highlights the relatively peaceful pilgrimage of Ashitaka via the non-threatening, largely symbolic good luck charm he carries with him. This pilgrimage is supposedly forced on Ashitaka, not by the imperial ambitions of Emishi to lord it over all as divine sovereigns, but by the acute rise of hatred and rage, evil forces emanating from the southwest, as a result of the belligerent expansion of humans into the spiritual realm of nature, something Ashitaka must halt in order to survive. Though hardly Gandhian in his non-violence, Ashitaka is, compared to Yamato-takeru, a less heavily armed, relatively pacifistic hero, relying not on sacred weapons but instead his commitment to peace and spiritual harmony.

Fifth, after slaying the Suruga chieftan<sup>14</sup> who tried to incinerate him on a moor where he had been sent to hunt deer, Yamato-takeru’s party sailed across the bay between Sagami and Kazusa. En route, they encountered a violent storm sent by a deity whom Yamato-takeru had offended. To appease the kami and save her husband’s life, Yamato-takeru’s wife, Princess Ototachibana, threw herself into the ocean. Shortly after, the storm subsided. Princess Ototachibana’s self-sacrifice, while arguably an act of courage and assertion of strength, also helped establish one of the most egregious patterns of behaviour enjoined for women: readiness to martyrdom for the sake of their husbands. Yamato-takeru mourned his wife’s demise, exclaiming *Azuma wa yo!*” (Oh! My Wife), but within days had subdued another deity in Shinano, and then conjugally

---

<sup>14</sup> The *Nihon shoki* identified the area of Suruga, while the *Kojiki* states Sagami.

united with a new consort, Princess Miyazu, despite her menstrual period (Kojiki, 242-44; Nihongi, 205-08). *Princess Mononoke* offers an inverted analogue: after Ashitaka sustains a mortal gunshot wound while trying to thwart San's attempt to assassinate Lady Eboshi, San, already filled with hatred toward all humans and livid that Ashitaka had foiled her attack, drew her dagger back to plunge it into his neck. Stunned when he responded, "Live! You are beautiful," San suddenly felt pity for Ashitaka and carried him to Shishigami's pond, leaving his lifeless body partially immersed in the water. Later Shishigami arrived and kissed Ashitaka's bleeding wound, healing it completely, but not the deadly disease infecting his arm. When San saw Ashitaka restored to life, she offered him dried meat for sustenance. While saving Ashitaka's life, San resorted to none of Ototachibana's suicidal heroics. Indeed, her first impulse was brutal: to cut Ashitaka's throat. Rather than a distinctly subordinate species, women in *Princess Mononoke* are frighteningly powerful, at points potentially deadly creatures.

Finally, Yamato-takeru died at the age of thirty after threatening to slay the kami of Mount Ibuki, which had, unknown to him, transformed into a huge boar. Due to this arrogant irreverence, the boar sent a mysterious hail storm down, causing Yamato-takeru to contract a deranging, mortal illness which soon killed him.<sup>15</sup> In *Princess Mononoke*,

---

<sup>15</sup> Aston, trans., *Nihongi* (208) identifies the kami of Mount Ibuki as "a great serpent;" Philippi, trans., *Kojiki* (246) states it was "a wild boar." Doak (11, 21) relates that Yasuda Yojūrō (1910-81), the leader of the Romantic School, identified Yamato-takeru's offensive words to the Mount Ibuki kami, and the retributive hailstorm that followed, as "the transformative moment" marking "the beginning of the decline of the ancient logic of sequence," and the end of "a time when the Japanese people and their gods 'lived in the same palaces and slept in the same beds' (dōden kyōshō)." The opening of *Princess Mononoke* suggests that a similar "transformative moment" occurs in the film: the narrator relates, "In ancient times, a land lay covered in forests, where for ages long past dwelt the spirits of the gods. Back then, man and beast lived in harmony. But as time went by, most of the great forests were destroyed. Those that remained were guarded by gigantic beasts who owed their allegiance to the great forest spirit, for those were the days of gods and of demons." To apply Yasuda's analysis to *Princess Mononoke*, the twilight of the age of

Ashitaka cleanses himself of the rage disease by returning to Shishigami his severed head, which had been shot off by Lady Eboshi and Jikobō in their effort to gain a mountain of gold as a reward from the Japanese emperor for the potion of immortality. Rather than dying tragically as a fallen youth, Ashitaka lives, facilitating the realization of spiritual harmony among all he encounters. Whereas Yamato-takeru's final, regretful thoughts are directed toward his emperor, Ashitaka's last remarks reveal his dedication to the project of building a better society, one in equilibrium with the natural and spiritual realms. In this respect Ashitaka's mission is consonant with the virtue supposedly extolled by Prince Shōtoku (572-621) in his "Seventeen Point Constitution," harmony (wa) (De Bary, 48; Nakamura, 409-16). Thus Miyazaki attributes one of the more positive ideals of Japanese political thought not to yet another ancient Yamato prince, Shōtoku, but to an Emishi prince, Ashitaka.<sup>16</sup>

With Ashitaka, Miyazaki subverts the Yamato-takeru legend by inverting most of the major twists in it so as to glorify the model of selfless service to one's community, humanity, the spirits, and the environment via harmonious life with all. Rather than attempting to dominate or subjugate the Yamato forces or the deities of nature, Ashitaka, an Emishi, works with them assisting in the transformation needed for the eventual reconstruction of human society, including both Yamato and non-Yamato. When Ashitaka engages in warfare, it is always defensive, and most frequently for the sake of preserving the spiritual and natural realms. Never is there a hint of war for the sake of imperial glory. Thus if *Princess Mononoke* endorses any warfare as just, it does so only for the sake of preserving the spiritual and ecological order of the environment against those forces that might destroy it. On the other hand, the Yamato-takeru legend assumes, without explicit question or critique, that war is just provided it serves the expansionist ends of the Yamato state and its "kingly civilization." Ashitaka's legend, then, as created by Miyazaki, both inverts and subverts that of Yamato-takeru at almost every turn.

Critics of literature and film refer to the "intentionalist fallacy" as the mistaken belief that "evidence about the author's pretextual intentions"

---

coexistence of humans and kami began with the use of firearms, and ended with the decapitation of Shishigami.

<sup>16</sup> Somewhat similarly, Kuji (51-55) describes Ashitaka as a "conciliator" (chōteisha), but does not mention Prince Shōtoku or wa in this context.

are most crucial to establishing “the ‘meaning’ of the aesthetic object” (Collini, 6). This paper assumes that it not necessarily crucial that Miyazaki meant, intentionally, to fashion Ashitaka as an inversion of the Yamato-takeru legend. More significant than Miyazaki’s “intent” is that such a reading of the film is coherent and credible. At the same time, the tale of Yamato-takeru has long been one of the most widely known in Japan, and even today is one most children know, at least vaguely.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, Miyazaki knew the legend, and at the very least worked away from it, perhaps unconsciously if not in purposeful subversion of it. And there were good ideological reasons for doing so. After all, Yamato-takeru is not just a character from ancient histories: early-twentieth century ideologists repeatedly appropriated his legend, readily finding in it traditional inspiration for the militaristic and ultranationalistic ambitions of imperial Japan.<sup>18</sup> For them, he embodied an exemplary willingness to do battle for

---

<sup>17</sup> Children’s literature on Yamato-takeru includes the picture book by Tabata (1968); Hamada (1968); and Akune (1969). Though postwar juvenile literature on Yamato-takeru emphasizes his mythic, tragic nature, prewar children’s books were more oriented toward militaristic nationalism. For example, the postscript to Yamagishi (1943), explains that it was published to promote in “the nation’s children” (shōkokumin) the excellent qualities of the “leading race” (shido minzoku) for the sake of the future establishment of Greater East Asia.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in a popular illustrated work which went through 110 printings in its first year, *Yamato sakura* (1935), featuring the likes of Susanoo, Emperor Jinmu, Empress Jingu, Minamoto Yoritomo, the Soga brothers, Benkei, Yoshitsune, the Akō samurai, etc., Yamato-takeru is depicted twice (3-4), first disguised as a young woman about to stab the Kumaso chieftan, thus spreading the “majesty” of the imperial throne to barbarian peoples, and second, standing with his “grass slaying sword” in hand, observing his fiery victory over the Sagami chieftan who had tried to burn him to death. Both portray Yamato-takeru as an ever-victorious agent of the emperor, extending imperial military prowess east and west. Another example of the appropriation of Yamato-takeru for militaristic ends is in Saeki (1939, 17-19). Also, Tōma (8-9), notes how late-Meiji Monbusho sanctioned history textbooks for elementary schools provided glowing accounts of Yamato-takeru, and that the content and spirit of these early lessons was consistent through August 15, 1945. Toma adds that scholars

the imperial cause, especially in its conflicts with non-Japanese. Though Yamato-takeru did not die in battle, moments before his death he did regret that he would never again see his emperor, thus exhibiting utter loyalty to the throne and the success of its military ventures against non-Japanese. In the 1930s and 1940s, as Japan extended its hegemony into northeast Asia (rather than northeastern Honshū), and into southern Pacific territories (rather than Kyūshū), the legend was repeatedly invoked as one of the earliest and most sacred expressions of bushidō, or the so-called “way of the warrior.” *Princess Mononoke* supplants the militaristic nuances still associated with the legend via the creation, through inversion, of Ashitaka, a good, gentle, and righteous warrior fighting for the causes of non-Japanese, the environment, and the integrity of the spiritual world. Perhaps recognizing the ideologically tainted nature of much of Japan’s legendary past, and the Yamato-takeru legend in particular, and realizing the potency of anime for creating new cultural icons, especially among the young, Miyazaki turned to historical fiction in an effort to pioneer, via anime, a new, more positive set of legends capable of facilitating Japan’s peaceful, ecologically balanced advance into the new millenium.

#### ***Princess Mononoke* and the Presentation of Women**

Miyazaki presents women as being as strong, if not stronger than men.<sup>19</sup> Most noteworthy is *Princess Mononoke*, or San as she is called in the movie

---

such as Tsuda Sōkichi criticized the veracity of accounts of Yamato-takeru by noting significant differences between the Kojiki and Nihongi versions, but admits that such scholarship was subjected to bitter critique by defenders of Yamato-takeru. (11-12) Postwar studies of Yamato-takeru treat his story as “myth” (shinwa) or “legend” (densetsu), rather than history, and emphasize the tragic and poetic elements in it, often comparing Yamato-takeru to other tragic figures in ancient mythologies, such as Hercules. For example, see (Tsuneo 1983; Yoshida 1979). There are still nearly two thousand shrines in contemporary Japan where Yamato-takeru is fêted with annual matsuri. For a listing of them, see Sakurai (583-627).

<sup>19</sup> *Princess Mononoke*’s positive presentation of women contrasts with that found in much of postwar cinema. For a recent study, see Wawrytko (121-68). Wawrytko examines the presentation of women in four films, Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), Kinugasa Teinosuke’s *The Gate of Hell* (*Jigoku kumon*, 1953), Mizoguchi’s *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku ichidai*

itself. San first appears with blood smeared all over her mouth from where she has sucked the poison from a rifle wound in the shoulder of her mother, Moro the wolf demon.<sup>20</sup> Spitting out the tainted blood, San glares at Ashitaka, telling him with her eyes that she is far more fierce than he could ever imagine. Though Ashitaka clearly has feelings for her, the reverse is never as evident. In the end, the Princess vows that she must return to live with the wolves, a course more admirable and perhaps heroic than that chosen by Ashitaka, working with those at the rifle factory to build a better society rather than returning to his Emishi village. Most likely it was because of his affection for San that Ashitaka forgot his former community and found a new mission in one closer to her, even as she remained committed to the wolves. San is not alone in her superior strength of character: Lady Eboshi and the brazen women of the factory village are presented as being equally strong, independent, and outspoken, if not entirely admirable. They readily upbraid their men, aggressively approach

---

onna, 1952), and Shinoda Masahiro's *Double Suicide* (Shinjū ten no Amijima, 1969), and finds "each of the central women characters in the films examined here is in some way victimized by ... cultural assumptions and accommodations." (125) Wawrytko does not examine the presentation of women in anime. She does, however, conclude that Japanese women looking for role models other than those of "the lady or whore" should chose "an older mirror in which to peer, such as that provided by the primal Shintō role models of women and sexuality that preceded Confucian and Buddhist trepidations," especially those of Amaterasu and Ame no Uzume. (161-62) *Princess Mononoke's* portrayal of San suggests the creation of a new, Shintō-like role model for women, one grown out of traditions revering nature, but not simply reiterating or paraphrasing them. Kuji (60-62) suggests that San is cast as a "Jōmon-style woman," i.e., one harking back to the Japanese prehistory, circa 10,000-250 B.C.E.

<sup>20</sup> Schilling (4), suggests that San "has her antecedents in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and François Truffaut's *The Wild Child*. Schilling also notes that Miyazaki's 1984 hit, *Kaze no tani no Nausicaa* (*Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind*) features a "young heroine," Nausicaa, who "battles to survive in a poisoned future world." Napier (1998, 100-03), analyzes Nausicaa as "a far more positive role model," if not, by western standards, "a totally liberated heroine." Other recent studies of female roles in manga and anime include Tsurumi (171-85) and Allison (259-78), and Napier (2001, 182-84).

them, at least verbally, engage in physically demanding work with seemingly boundless energy, and even form a militia unit devoted to the defense of their village.

Historical reality for the late-Muromachi period, or for most any epoch in medieval Japan, was hardly similar (Napier 2001, 182). After all, there is no suggestion in *Princess Mononoke* that any of the major women, San, Lady Eboshi, or the women of Tataraba, are beholden to men for their stake in society, despite the fact that political and military developments tended to encourage concentration of a family's fortunes in the hands of one son, typically the eldest, which in turn accelerated the process by which women, losing virtually all claims to significant property rights, came to be dependent on their male relations, either their fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons (Pharr, 258). If anything, *Princess Mononoke* suggests that there were alternatives for medieval Japanese women, albeit not very appealing ones. San, though heroically brave, lives amongst the wolf demons of the forest, hardly an appealing role. Lady Eboshi manages a factory town producing firearms, mostly relying upon the labor of strong-willed women, once sold to brothels but bought out of that humiliation by Eboshi. Though Eboshi is shrewd, sharp and courageous, her angle on success suggests the extent to which women were marginalized in medieval times. In addition to her ex-prostitute work force, Eboshi also employed lepers in her rifle factory, giving them a productive and meaningful, though not desirable task. The collection of outcastes that Eboshi assembled around herself has prompted Kuji Tsutomu to suggest that Eboshi might have been a burakumin, or a part of the pariah group ostracized throughout medieval and early-modern Japanese history (65-76).

But it can also be argued that Miyazaki's presentation of women in *Princess Mononoke* accentuates somewhat exceptional if not marginal trends of medieval history in which women stood out, despite the forbidding threat of samurai violence. None of the major female roles in Miyazaki's film depict women as being in any way weak, defenseless, shy, or relatively inarticulate creatures, in desperate need of male defense or assistance for their survival. If anything Miyazaki's presentation of women acknowledges their unfortunate circumstances, i.e., their marginalization within a sociopolitical system of military rule, but also casts them with a defiant strength meant to make the best of what could easily be construed as an insufferable, virtually optionless set of circumstances. In this respect, *Princess Mononoke* as a character might be

typed in the same category as the “strong and even domineering women” portrayed in story collections (*setsuwa*), comic plays (*bungaku* and *kyōgen*), and more serious *Nō* drama. Given the spiritual potency assigned to her and the wolf demons who are her family, she resembles the kind of popular legendary, quasi-spiritual persona sometimes described as “the powerful and mysterious ‘snow woman’ (*yuki onna*) and/or ‘mountain woman’ (*yamamba*),” (Pharr, 259; Inokuchi, 357),<sup>21</sup> i.e., as a mysterious, eccentric, spiritually potent female capable of superhuman feats and/or appearances, and most typically appearing in a manner that frightens if not terrifies those more ordinary sorts who encounter her.

It should be mentioned that one of the traditional categories of *Nō* plays, specifically the third “developmental level,” was that of “Wig Plays” (*katsura mono*), or “Female Plays.” Another category, that of the “Madness Plays” (*monogurui*), often features deranged women (*kyōjo*). Kunio Komparu has suggested that the “derangement” evident in these plays represents a “release of the self from all normal bounds precipitated when an already abnormal state of mind, created by extreme human suffering or sadness, is suddenly ignited, either by some event or by an explosion of violent emotions like love, yearning, or jealousy.” Komparu suggests that

---

<sup>21</sup> Inokuchi Shōji describes the *yuki onna* as “an apparition of a woman dressed in white, believed to appear on snowy nights. Pale and cold like the snow, she is often blamed for mysterious happenings. She is associated with children and is sometimes thought to be a woman who died in childbirth, frequently appearing with a baby in her arms” (Inokuchi, 357). Regarding *yamamba*, sometimes called *yamauba*, Inokuchi explains that while “commonly described as a female demon who devours humans the *yamamba* sometimes appears in legends and folklore as a humorous, stupid old hag” (Inokuchi, 297). A *Nō* play entitled *Yamauba*, originally written by Zeami (1363-1443) but revised by Komparu Zenchiku, portrays the “old woman of the mountains” as “the fairy of the mountains” who has managed their seasonal vitality for infinite ages past. According to Arthur Waley’s description of her, the *yamauba* “decks them with snow in the winter, with blossoms in spring; her task carrying her eternally from hill to valley and valley to hill.” Though her “real” form is that of an old, thin-faced woman with wild white hair hanging down over her shoulders,” she can appear to stranded travellers as a “mountain girl” (Waley, 247). *Princess Mononoke* seems closer to the *yamamba* than the *yuki onna*.

this derangement is “a highly spiritual state accompanied by separation from the self,” one which may take the “form of having another spirit existing within oneself in order to be able to receive signs from the outside or of intentionally replacing one’s own spirit with another” (34-41, 37). Relating this theme to the Tale of Genji and the notion of mononoke, Doris Bergen suggests that Murasaki Shikibu utilized mononoke, or spirit possession, as a means of empowering women to challenge the oppressiveness of a male dominated, aristocratic society wherein polygyny allowed men a number of wives and mistresses, resulting in emotional distress for those rejected (245-50). The case of the Rokujō Lady, so enraged by Genji’s rejection of her that her spirit possessed unto death Genji’s new love, Aoi, is the most famous, and surely one relevant to understanding *Princess Mononoke*. Again, however, Miyazaki inverts traditional accounts, here literary rather than historical, suggesting that mononoke, rather than a “woman’s weapon,” is one deployed by kami, the deities and demons of nature, directed at humanity, both male and female, in the wake of humanity’s rape of the environment and its inherent spiritual order. There is no hint that the spiritual rage and wrath issuing from either the tatarigami or Shishigami, for example, actually derived from that of San. Rather than its source, she is the sympathetic midwife of the rage, allying herself with the offended creatures, but fighting physically, selflessly, and heroically, mostly as a human being rather than through circuitous spiritual means. If ancient and medieval drama depicted mononoke as a means of empowering women in rebellion against a stifling, humiliating social order, Miyazaki inverts that depiction through *Princess Mononoke* by making it a weapon primarily of the deities and demons, with women such as the Princess activist human allies rather than the actual agents or recipients of spirit possession.

Lady Eboshi represents another archetype: the medieval samurai woman who gains political power, or an opportunity to display exceptional bravery in desperate circumstances. Most notably, Eboshi is somewhat reminiscent of Hōjō Masako (1157-1225), wife of Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-99), and one of the key players in the founding of the Hōjō regency, which governed the Kamakura (1185-1223) bakufu in the wake of Yoritomo’s demise, and that of his sons. Eboshi’s cool courage, even in battle, is reminiscent of women such as Shizuka Gozen, Yoshitsune’s (1159-1189) mistress who defiantly danced before her captors. While these medieval women do offer more than significant historical justification for the creation of a strong-

willed female leader such as Eboshi, they differ from Eboshi insofar as each rose to power via their associations with their husband's campaigns or military projects. Without Yoritomo's rise to shogun it is difficult to imagine Masako's assumption of power as shogunal regent. Similarly, without the military campaigns of Minamoto Yoshinaka (1154-84), it seems farfetched to imagine Tomoe Gozen riding into battle and beheading men. Eboshi, on the other hand, is presented as a woman who has risen by her own strength, making her rather unique as a female of medieval Japan.

The women, ex-prostitutes, working for Eboshi, are arguably the most historically credible group in *Princess Mononoke*. In her history of Japanese women, Susan Pharr relates that "altered family patterns, war, and other social changes such as the development of cities led to a growth of prostitution, and brothels were established at major transportation centers." Regarding samurai women, Pharr adds that they were "expected to strive, and even die, for family honor if necessary; to help defend their homes, they were trained in certain martial arts, especially the use of a blade-headed staff (naganata)" (258). *Princess Mononoke* merges these strands, liberating women from the brothel, not by a man but instead through the work of Eboshi, and then presenting the ex-prostitutes as ready to fight with muskets rather than naganata in defending their factory village. Pharr's study does not suggest that martial skills were cultivated among medieval women at large, but it does not seem beyond credibility that even the lower orders would have expected women to take part in self-defense if necessary. While female warriors were surely not the norm, in highlighting this aspect of the medieval past Miyazaki was arguably accentuating a positive periphery of Japanese history vis-à-vis women. Given that the 1980s and 90s have frequently been called the *onna no jidai*, or "the age of women" (Fujimura-Fanselow, xvii), there can be little question that Miyazaki's presentation of a host of strong, valiant, spiritually potent women played well with those intent upon establishing a heightened consciousness of what has been, until recently, a muted historical theme, the diversity and continuity of significant female roles in Japan's past.

#### **Lady Eboshi, Firearms and Consciousness of the West**

For Western viewers familiar with Japanese history, one disturbing aspect of *Princess Mononoke* is that Miyazaki chose to situate the Manichean struggle between the forces of humanity and divinity in what would seem to

be the age of Japan's first major encounter with the West, the mid-16th century, when Portuguese introduced firearms, in the form of the arquebus, and Christianity, as taught by Jesuits, Franciscans, and Dominicans. Miyazaki's narrative does not explicitly acknowledge this as such, suggesting instead that the period in which the film was set was perhaps more than a century before the coming of the Portuguese. However the presence of firearms (*ishibiya*)<sup>22</sup> and their prominence throughout the film, leaves little room for questioning whether the crisis of hatred, rage and imbalance, spiritually and ecologically, which plagued Japan generally and Ashitaka's village in particular, resulted, even if only indirectly, from the impact of the West, and most conspicuously the introduction of firearms. After all, as the *tatarigami* lay dying, an iron clump erupted from his oozing, disintegrating viscera. Although at that point, the identity of the bullet was not clear, Ashitaka's journey ultimately introduced him to a village of iron workers led by Lady Eboshi. Under Eboshi's direction, the village had thrived as a manufacturing town producing rifles and intent on aggressively mining the great forest where San and her wolf-mother, Moro, lived. Arguably, much of the madness that infected the land could be traced to the poison that entered the body politic, the spiritual cosmos, and the realm of nature, with the introduction of western things, symbolically demonized by the arquebus bullet.<sup>23</sup> After all, Eboshi and her cadres

---

<sup>22</sup> Takayanagi and Takeuchi (57) refer to this as another name for the firearms introduced to Japan by "the ships of Southern barbarians." Some sources, however, identify the *ishibiya* as a "hand cannon of Chinese origin." Since Miyazaki does not address the origins of the *ishibiya* specifically, the matter is of course open to question.

<sup>23</sup> Totman (226), relates that the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were times of massive deforestation, resulting from the "feverish building and burning" that accompanied war and peace. Mining for precious metals such as gold and silver added to the depletion of natural resources. In this respect, Miyazaki's identification of the Muromachi period as one of ecological crisis is accurate. Along other lines, Brown (120), states that "the heroic military exploits of Yamato-takeru" reflected the aggressive Yamato expansion into the west and northeast made possible "by a far more extensive use of iron weapons." The age in which Yamato-takeru supposedly lived, then, was similarly one of ecological crisis, in part resulting from new developments in military technology.

regularly attacked Moro and the wolf gods, and other kami intent on preserving the spiritual balance of the forest, with their rifles, blasting away at them until finally the iron bullets broke the bones of their transformation bodies and crippled their spirits with a hatred that typically led to self-destruction. For the sake of progress, it seems, Eboshi and her settlement engaged in systematic decicide, or a slaughter of kami, a horrific crime made possible, the film implies, by the introduction of the arquebus.

Admittedly this is an overly simplistic reading of Miyazaki's film, for it does not specifically present Westerners at all: rather it portrays Japanese, in this case the villagers led by Eboshi, as conspicuous culprits. Also, Miyazaki makes no allusion, implicit or explicit, to Christianity, the religious force associated with the spread of firearms in Japan throughout the second half of the sixteenth-century. Instead, Eboshi is said to have obtained the rifles from Jikobō, the crafty, double-dealing Buddhist monk. Nevertheless the film does suggest through the historical symbolism of firearms, that an indirect legacy of Japan's first encounter with the West was an infectious hatred, capable of killing even the gods and demons of nature, transmitted by gunshot and aggressive abuse of the ecosystem, and made possible by weapons sold by Europeans. While Miyazaki reportedly does not see *Princess Mononoke* as a sweeping condemnation of the West, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that "things Western" are at the heart of the problem, and, furthermore, that had the West not intruded, somehow the human-divine harmony which Ashitaka sought to recover, and which Miyazaki suggests existed, might somehow still have prevailed.

While this anti-Western nuance appears difficult to avoid, there is one possible explanation for the presence of the firearms, which does not involve the West. Soranaka Isao relates that "there is scattered evidence that the Japanese already had some basic knowledge of explosive weapons before the Portuguese arrived." Soranaka explains,

Mongol invaders in the late 13th century had surprised the samurai defenders by using weapons that are now believed to have been a type of explosive cannonball, known among contemporary Japanese as tetsuhō or teppō. Historical documents, including the Hōjō godai ki, also suggest that copper-barreled handguns, developed by the Chinese in the 13th century, were introduced at the port of Sakai in 1510 and actually used in combat by some warriors in the eastern provinces as early as 1548.0.

Soranaka acknowledges, however, that “it was the introduction of European firearms that marked the beginning of the widespread use of such weapons” (Soranaka, 279).

Conceivably, Miyazaki might have had this relatively little known footnote to the history of firearms in mind when he cast them as crucial players in *Princess Mononoke*. If so, then he again would be reverting to a form of historical inversion, denying that firearms and the evil that flowed from them was something that could be blamed on the West. Rather his suggestion would be, on the one hand, that Japanese were intelligent and technologically sophisticated enough either to develop firearms themselves, without gaining them from the West, or to master the technology they had previously been exposed to in combat with Mongol invaders. While these are real possibilities, it remains difficult to avoid the conclusion that for most viewers, the medieval presence of firearms, especially ones resembling arquebuses as those in *Princess Mononoke* do, will be associated with the West, and given the nuances developed in the film, the associations will be decidedly negative. While this paper does not intend to offer even a passing defense of firearms, it must be noted that assigning the crisis of hate and religio-ecological disorder to firearms encourages a kind of *higaisha ishiki*, or “victim consciousness,” which leaves the Japanese seemingly blameless victims of abuse or inhumanity at the hands of evil foreigners who sowed the seeds of destruction within them. While there is undoubtedly some truth in this view, even Miyazaki’s claims that he has depicted Japanese as, in part, the evil-doers seems to be less memorable than the arquebus and the more or less automatic historical associations that it conjures.

#### **Shishigami and Quasi-Shintō Pantheism:**

*Princess Mononoke* opens with a beautiful, bird’s eye vista of mist covered mountains. The narrator solemnly relates,

In ancient times a land lay covered in forests where for ages long past dwelt the spirits of the gods. Back then, man and beast lived in harmony. But as time went by, most of the great forests were destroyed. Those that remained were guarded by gigantic beasts who owed their allegiance to the great forest spirit, for those were the days of gods and of demons.

Shortly after the tatarigami was mortally wounded, the shamaness Hii-sama respectfully bowed before the boar, identified him as a “nameless god of rage and hate,” and pledged that a mound would be erected to honor him in the hopes that he would “pass on in peace and bear us [the villagers] no hatred.” The boar then cursed the humans, and promised that they would feel his hate and suffer as he had suffered. The shamaness later explained that Ashitaka had been infected by the rage that poisoned the boar after a metal shot shattered his bones and burned his flesh, turning him into a tatarigami, a demon of hate and rage.

Identification of Ashitaka as an Emishi prince suggests that Miyazaki has no intention of reviving Shintō for the sake of imperial glorification. At the same time, *Princess Mononoke* does endorse the conception of Japan as a shinkoku, or divine land, one of the notions most emphasized by State Shintō, as well as historically in texts such as the Jinnō shōtōki by Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293-1354) (Varley). Still, insofar as the shinkoku perspective is broached by a narrator who laments its degeneration, presumably due to the Yamato conquests, and insofar as the shinkoku ethic is championed by a character explicitly identified as an Emishi prince, it can hardly be identified simplistically with Shintō religiosity. After all, the shinkoku way of thinking, identifying nature with the spiritual world, is equally characteristic of many ethnic groups, as well as religiously inclined ecologists and environmentalists who view nature as the very body of the divine.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Honda (11) relates that the notion of kamui in Ainu religiosity, e.g., “is broad, including the spirits of the dead as well as good and evil deities and demons.” Honda characterizes Ainu life as “One with all the other lives of great nature, Ainu people lived with kamui (pantheistic spirits), leading a life of ‘ethnic self-determination’... Contrary to the perspective of modern Western science, which came to approach even living phenomena as ‘things,’ the knowledge and skills of the Ainu were based on viewing even ‘things’ considered inanimate as having life” (55). Watanabe adds, “Every topographical feature such as hill, river, and sea, was seen as the field of activity of these kamui groups” (69). If Emishi can be identified with Ainu, then the pantheism (and respect for the environment which might issue from it) that *Princess Mononoke* promotes could be as easily equated with Emishi-Ainu beliefs as Shintō.

Arguably, Miyazaki's emphasis of the religious as well as natural struggle with humanity was meant to provide a spiritual worldview, more or less consonant with that of Shintō, though with a decidedly more universal, multiethnic grounding, and at the same time to link that universalism with a new realm of religious activism, the environment. More traditional accounts of the Japanese past, legendary or historical, would have featured persons identifiable as Shintō clergy, but in *Princess Mononoke* they are not to be found. One noteworthy allusion to Shintō is Miyazaki's endearing depictions of kodama, or tree spirits, as little white creatures living in the forest and serving as guides for those who peacefully pass through it. The Team Ghiblink website, however, notes that since the name is written in katakana, not kanji, "it could also mean 'small ball' or 'small spirit.'" It adds that "although kodama (a tree spirit) appears in many Japanese folktales, kodama as a little white creature is Miyazaki's creation".<sup>25</sup> Another possibility is that Miyazaki is highlighting an aspect of Shintō, the kodama, to accentuate one of the most positive aspects of that form of religiosity, its sanctification of nature. Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) referred to kodama in his *Kojiki den*, observing that, "the term kami is applied in the first place to the various deities of heaven and earth who are mentioned in the ancient records ... Amongst kami who are not human beings I need hardly mention Thunder ... There are also the Dragon, the Echo [called in Japanese kodama or the Tree Spirit], and the Fox" (Aston, 8-9). Thus it seems that a religious worldview similar to that of Shintō is expressed at every turn, though its sanctity is most recognized not by the Yamato but by Emishi. Miyazaki's association of Shintō with the Emishi rather than the Yamato groups inverts traditional historical assumptions casting Shintō as the form of religiosity associated with the Yamato imperial line and the Japanese people themselves.

If Miyazaki's goal was to substitute for Shintō a form of religiosity akin to it, but ultimately attributable to the Emishi, then his focus on Shishigami, or the Deer Spirit of the Mountain Forest, might be viewed as a reworking of Amaterasu the Sun Goddess in favor of a supreme nature deity, described by Ashitaka as "life itself," less removed from humanity and more mystically approachable than the Sun Goddess. Another possible line of interpretation views Miyazaki's development of the Deer Spirit of

---

<sup>25</sup> Visit [www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/mh/faq.html#nascot](http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/mh/faq.html#nascot).

the Mountain Forest as another inversion of the Yamato-takeru legend. The *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* relate that after Yamato-takeru “subdued all of the unruly Emishi and pacified the unruly deities of the mountains and rivers,” he travelled into the province of Shinano where he killed the deity of a verdant mountain, which had taken the form of a white deer, striking it in the eye with a piece of garlic (Philippi, 242; Aston, 207-08). Soon after Yamato-takeru proceeded to Mount Ibuki intending to slay the deity there. That deity then sent down a violent storm of hail and sleet, one which reduced Yamato-takeru to a mortally diseased, deranged stupor. Though Yamato-takeru, according to the *Nihon shoki*, “made an offering of the Emishi,” whom he had earlier captured, to yet another deity, his disease soon killed him, at which point he transformed into a large white bird and flew away into the heavens (Aston, 209-10). While Yamato-takeru became diseased unto death for killing one mountain deity, transformed into a white deer, and for having threatened to kill another, Ashitaka was healed because he returned to the Deer God of the Mountain Forest his decapitated head. By ultimately respecting the deities of nature, Ashitaka achieved purification and physical redemption, while Yamato-takeru, due to his gratuitous attacks, met tragic death. Arguably the lesson taught by Ashitaka is simply a more positive version of that learned, the hardest way possible, by Yamato-takeru, that engaging the deities of nature in frivolous battle is senselessly suicidal. Though it might be argued, then, that the message Miyazaki advances is essentially Shintō in nature, by linking it to Ashitaka, it acquires an Emishi identity, one which privileges those marginalized, ultimately lost peoples, with a kind of familiar, but ethnically reformulated, religious integrity that was surely meant to be viewed by the audience as worthy of emulation.

Nevertheless, the subplot in *Princess Mononoke* relating the attempt by Jikobō, the rogue Buddhist, and Eboshi to decapitate Shishigami in order to win a reward offered by the Japanese emperor, casts the Yamato imperial line in the worst possible light (Iwatani, 43), at the center of deicide and ecological degradation, even while arguably alluding to a famous episode in Shintō mythology in which Amaterasu, having been harrassed by Susanoo, retreated into a cave and left the world in utter darkness, threatening its warmth and ultimate vitality. Somewhat analogously, the decapitation of Shishigami leads to hypertrophy of the deity’s terrifying night body, and the threat that its divine yet deadly cytoplasm might envelop and suffocate the earth as it searches for its severed head in a state of apocalyptic anger. Only after Ashitaka returns the

head to Shishigami does the divine beast assume its beautiful form, and the balance of nature is again restored. Thus, rather than rehearse the old Shintô legends Miyazaki offers an ideologically clean mythology, one close to Shintô in important themes but decidedly different in detail and alleged origin. Miyazaki's historical fiction thus articulates a new history and a new religiosity facilitating greater respect for, even veneration of, the ecological order. In traditional legends Miyazaki found too little that could be unambiguously used, or too little that was not already tainted by earlier ideological manipulation.

Buddhism, as represented by Jikobō, offers little that is inspiring or positive. Rather, Jikobō is a duplicitous, self-serving cynic, always ready to justify via twisted logic whatever he wants. Along decidedly pessimistic lines Jikobō, in one of his first conversations with Ashitaka, relates that "War, poverty, sickness, starvation. The human world is crowded with the dead who died swallowing their resentment. If you are talking about a curse, then this whole world is a curse." While Jikobō does help Ashitaka buy a bag of rice, thus doing one good deed, he does so by conning the rice seller into thinking that the piece of gold given him by Ashitaka is worth far more than it actually was. Although Jikobō directs Ashitaka towards Shishigami, he does so for his own purposes, apparently thinking that Ashitaka, a demonic archer, might help him in securing Shishigami's head. It was also Jikobō who first supplied Eboshi with firearms, and then later persuaded her to help him in attempting to decapitate Shishigami. When Ashitaka foiled that effort, returned the severed head to the Shishigami, and restored balance to the forest, Jikobō's only conclusion was, "I give up! You can't win against fools." While a source of comic relief, Jikobō can hardly be construed as representing any serious religious alternative offered by the film. If anything, the monk represents a religion too worldly and too cynical for its own good, one incapable of grasping the gravity of the crucial balance between humanity, nature and the divine necessary for satisfactory life in this world. Though Miyazaki's presentation of Buddhism through Jikobō might only be construed as a critique of Buddhism, and not of Japanese religiosity generally, nor Shintô in specific, one could easily argue that just as Buddhism constituted the dominant form of spiritual engagement in the Muromachi, Miyazaki's humorous yet unappealing casting of it was meant as an overall questioning of the value of tradition in the face of a crisis for existence, ecologically and spiritually, in the contemporary world. As a result, Miyazaki inverted the religious order, privileging the supposed

spiritual worldview of the long-hidden Emishi, while lampooning that of the dominant tradition. In the process, as with the inversions of Yamato-takeru, the role of women, and the legacy of the West, Miyazaki created a new historical perspective meant to inspire, more than received tradition might have, renewed awareness of the spiritual importance of harmony with the ecosystem and the realm of spirits.

### **Epilogue:**

#### **The Problem with Miyazaki's Legend**

While *Princess Mononoke* is, as historical legend, superior to most found in traditional literature as it relates to the struggle between Japan and the Emishi, and more generally Japanese civilization and the realms of nature and the numinous, insofar as the film concludes with an optimistic ambiguity, it can hardly be considered problem-free. Viewers might find solace in the victory of Ashitaka over Eboshi and Jikobō, not to mention the defeat of the shadowy samurai forces presumably representing the expansionistic imperial regime of the Yamato state. Nonetheless, committed environmentalists will find the conclusion anticlimatic due to its endorsement of some kind of compromise between the forces of aggressive growth, the environment, and the spiritual realm. Such compromise might usher in a mere truce that barely undermines the human putsch, even as it sounds the death knell of the ecosystem and the spiritual universe as they had existed. After all, the film concludes with Shishigami, the supreme deity of the innermost natural sanctuary as yet unconquered by human advances, being decapitated by gunfire, an explosive dismemberment warning of its ultimate demise. San realistically declares that “even if it comes back, this is no longer Shishigami's forest. Shishigami is dead.” In a way reminiscent of Krishna's advice to Arjuna, delivered in the *Bhagavad-gita*, denying that death can ever really occur, Ashitaka consoles San by saying, “Shishigami cannot die. It is life itself. It has both life and death. It told me to live ....” Ashitaka's words are comforting, upon first hearing, but they ring less true every subsequent time, especially given that for a deity such as Shishigami the disgrace and humiliation of decapitation would be tantamount to death itself. Shishigami might live, but with the threat of firearms (and, as we all know, much worse) challenging the integrity of its existence, the latter becomes a relatively mute and substantially meaningless point. One can only wonder whether Shishigami might, for example, end up exemplifying “life itself” encaged in a zoo. While the

return of its head affords it a degree of final dignity, Shishigami is equally disgraced by Miyazaki insofar as the director has Ashitaka deliver Shishigami his head. In his rage, Shishigami might have destroyed the entire universe clumsily searching for unity with himself, and finding it only in apocalypse. That such a deity would be so inept in recovering his head makes him appear bumbling and surely lacking in anything near omniscience. While it might be unfair to fault it for the latter, undoubtedly Shishigami's defeat at the hands of the humans signals if not an outright destruction of the gods, then their decided subordination to the realm of human power.

Equally ominous for any real affirmation of environmentalism is Ashitaka's decision to remain within the Yamato body politic rather than return to his Emishi village. One might object that Ashitaka had earlier declared himself "dead" to his village, a death encoded ritually via his cutting off his hair. Mutually, the village had deemed him dead, recognizing his self-imposed exile. That notwithstanding Ashitaka's return to Emishi life, and the close communion with nature it embodied, would have sent a more powerful message to viewers than does his decision to become a part of Lady Eboshi's village and make it a better one. The very ambiguity of what Ashitaka and Eboshi envision as a "better village" will leave only naive viewers with a sense of reassurance that things are going to improve. One does not need to be thoroughly cynical to recall that Eboshi's village, despite the harbor it offered to lepers and prostitutes, was engaged in the aggressive manufacture of firearms, producing new and more refined lines even within the course of the movie. A "better village," then, for Eboshi, might mean little more than one fully capable of decapitating and destroying Shishigami. And, given the cool-headed cynicism that regularly issues from Jikobô, as well as the smooth double-talk that make him so appealing, one can only wonder whether his final line, "I give up! You can't win against fools," refers to the supposed idealism of Ashitaka, and the new-found faith of Eboshi and the others, or serves as a disarming tactic, making viewers chuckle even as they, in swallowing such facile lines, cast themselves equally as fools.