

The Year's Work in Medievalism
Volume 28 (2013)
Special Issue: Medievalism Now

Miyazaki's Medieval World: Japanese Medievalism and the Rise of Anime

E. L. Ridsen, St. Norbert College

The author retains copyright and has agreed that this essay in *The Year's Work in Medievalism* will be made available under the following Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. This means that readers/users must: attribute the essay, may not use the essay for commercial purposes, and may not alter, transform, or build upon the essay.



Miyazaki's Medieval World: Japanese Medievalism and the Rise of Anime

E. L. Ridsen, St. Norbert College

Hayao Miyazaki's films always present vibrant worlds full of lush, colorful landscapes, characters, and fantastic, even mythic adventures. His stories suggest, as in Shinto, both strong ties to the past and the ever-present and powerful draw of nature alive with spirits of all sorts, yet they also show a belief in traditional local politics, a fear of larger or external militaristic powers, and an appreciation of Japan's medieval traditions. They inculcate respect for the power and holiness of nature, valorization of achievement and individuality within the service of one's people, and appreciation of the courage and sense of duty that contribute to samurai tradition. Miyazaki's films typically contrast the excitement and mortal danger of technologies with appreciation for physical and spiritual heroism; *Princess Mononoke* (1997, set in the Muromachi period, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries) stands out as a major achievement of Japanese medievalism that deserves additional scholarly treatment from non-Eastern sources, as the film and the aesthetics on which it draws have achieved enormous success worldwide. Miyazaki built a world as full of potential as anything in Western medievalism, and he did so amidst a burgeoning and influential tradition of medievalism that did and still does penetrate Japanese life and culture.¹ As Richard Utz notes in his essay in this volume, scholars have attended too little to religion in medievalism; similarly we have paid too little attention to the medievalism of Asia.

Because of the unique nature and power of Miyazaki's cinematic world, audiences may remain vague about how to apply the "lessons" of the films, however clear their themes. The filmmaker resists simple endings or characterizations without muddying his themes, and he resists tropes of standard Western cinema while employing those both of manga and traditional Japanese cinema, broadening his audience and providing his stories with emotional complexity. His stories often stress respect, loyalty, courage, and responsibility without promising any sort of fulfillment: growing up, and then later succeeding in the world, has more to do with calm self-control and respect than with achieving personally fulfilling relationships or achieving social status. *Princess Mononoke*² particularly focuses as well on the character—the courage, skill, and discipline—of mortal combat without foregrounding the combat as an end in itself. It highlights the virtues of bushido but in the midst of a lush and beautiful rather than stark and *noirish*—though no less dangerous—world.

To the medieval samurai world Miyazaki adds myth; he doesn't recapitulate it, but instead elicits contiguity with mythic *topoi* to ground his tales in matters more powerful and problematic than simple fantasy without historical paradigm. The stories thereby gain weight and applicability and extend his audience: he has the remarkable ability to make child-friendly stories that appeal just as

¹ The Japanese Middle Ages extend from the late twelfth century until about 1600; the following period, the Tokugawa or Edo period, kept many of the warrior/feudal traditions of the earlier age.

² The title refers to a term that Lady Eboshi uses for San: it means princess of spirits or monsters. For her it hasn't the positive connotation that it comes to have for the audience.

thoroughly to adults, partly, I think, because of the serious mythic layer that undergirds many of his plots. He anneals his themes with those of warrior culture and myth—ideas of responsibility to family, community, and a code of conduct—while allowing them to range into areas of contemporary international importance—anti-war, gender equity, racial equality—and of fidelity to human individuality and mutual human experience. He downplays the issue of self-fulfillment; he delays it, even perhaps denies its importance in the midst of the more pressing issues of loyalty, courage, peace, and work—we must suspend sexual fulfillment to its time and place, he suggests, an idea that Western film and myth tend to dismiss.

Princess Mononoke (1997), the most explicitly mythic of Miyazaki's films and the one he chose to set in medieval Japan, clarifies the love of the mutually heroic couple, but doesn't allow them either a sexual culmination or even a fully fulfilling relationship. Both Ashitaka and San, the main characters, have great skill in combat and unflagging personal courage, but they place kindness, appreciation, and sacrifice ahead of any personal interest. They help save their world, but they gain very little for themselves, and we don't know what joy the future holds for them. There Miyazaki particularly exploits the motif the Romans called *ubi sunt*, in Japanese *mono no aware*, "the sadness of things" or the sense of valuable, even beloved things passing or having passed from the world. Ashitaka's skills and motivations, especially, are those of bushido with perhaps an extra dose of love for the environment, though he is a prince rather than a samurai, making all the more important what he chooses to sacrifice to save his people and his world.

Princess Mononoke has of all Miyazaki's films perhaps the best-fitted romantic couple in Ashitaka and San, and yet it ends with the two parting. They will see each other in the future, but we don't know if they will ever marry or have a relationship greater than one of admiration and distant if appreciative friendship. Ashitaka has helped save San, the forest spirit, and the forest where she lives, but San bears too great a grudge against the other humans who have killed her adoptive mother and so many other local nature spirits that she can yet endure no regular interaction with humans. She may change in time. She tells the former prince that he "means so much" to her, but not enough to accept him as a husband. They are perhaps just of an age sufficient to marry—Miyazaki is seldom specific about that sort of detail. But he ends the film with his typical, realistic ambivalence: we don't know what will happen, only that the two have for each other a laudable love and admiration. The romance seems a particular part of the *mono no aware*, the sense of something beautiful lost, a small part of the film's comment on the essential but fragile relationship between humanity and nature that we have nearly lost and whose vestiges we continually foil. Ashitaka, having killed the boar god whose blood was polluted by an iron bullet, has cut his top-knot and ceremonially left his people rather than spread to them the suffering that comes with his own subsequent pollution. The curse of the poison has made him kill where he would only have defended himself and others, and he must live with the excessive results of violence that he never wanted in the first place. Having done nothing wrong willingly, and having been partly cleansed by the goodness of the great forest spirit, he must find a new place among the humans he barely knows

and who have done great harm to the forest and its creatures. San must grieve the loss of her foster-mother, the wolf goddess Moro, and try to help the many other forest spirits restore their domain. The film could hardly more powerfully defend the theme that responsibility and right action take precedence over any individual's or couple's fulfillment in sexual love—romance remains, but at a distance, even after the characters have through their actions fully come of age.

With Ashitaka and San, the plot suspends sexual culmination, suggesting it hasn't nearly the importance of other immediate and more pressing concerns. Let's grow up first and see who and what we are, the plot implies. It fits well amidst a tradition of stories that deal with the difficulty of love in a society torn by violence and both natural and social strife.

Miyazaki has tended to minimize the presence of the erotic in all his films, probably due to the youth of a good part (but by no means all) of his audience—he focuses more on what the characters need to find and what virtues they must exhibit to find it. The forge workers in Lady Eboshi's Irontown know the sorry world of sexuality: the lady has rescued them from brothels, and their labor now seems by comparison lighthearted and more than tolerable. To save the badly injured Ashitaka, San must chew a medicinal root and place it in his mouth with hers, an act both innocently loving and hinting at both motherly love and sexual love. Miyazaki only gently exploits the sexual elements of Animé/manga and related arts, while backgrounding them to what he finds more important and compelling ideas. The erotic may be an interesting and essential part of our lives, but for young persons with responsibilities to accomplish and adventures to experience, we must set it aside for a later time in favor of more pressing concerns. It falls under the greater need for other feelings and a set of virtues that must put off if not fully ignore romantic fulfillment. The culture of the world of his texts urges that we must first come of age mentally and emotionally. The sexual world has no fewer dangers than the general world at large, full of magic, violence, cruelty, danger, and exploitation. Love we must, and sometimes fight we must, but romance can wait. Loss we must face, and perhaps even horrors beyond anything of our own making, but the force of good character can occasionally win out in a medieval world beautified nearly beyond our dreams: colorful, alive, active, full of opportunities for goodness, kindness, and respect. The main narrative vectors lie in the characters trying to do what they believe to be *right*, rather than seeking romance—Western films have tended to the opposite, as characters *may* learn something of value as they first and foremost seek romance.

In many ways a “samurai film,” *Princess Mononoke* joins a notable and respected body of filmmaking, usually but not always *jidaigeki*, period stories. Akira Kurasawa, perhaps Japan's most famous filmmaker, produced a litany of great samurai films, including *The Seven Samurai* (1954),³ *Yojimbo* (1957), *Sanjuro* (1962), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Ran* (1985), and *Throne of Blood* (1989). Three films directed

³ This film is the source of *The Magnificent Seven* (1960, dir. John Sturges); it both felt the effects of and in its turn affected American Westerns.

by Hiroshi Inagaki appeared between 1954 and 1956 exploring the life of the great swordsman and author of *The Book of Five Rings*, Miyamoto Musashi. A number of films followed the troubles and adventures of Zatoichi, the blind swordsman. “Chushingura,” the legendary tale of the forty-seven Ronin from the eighteenth century, appeared as a Japanese film in 1941 and 1962 versions (and in an American version in 2013). Among many other notable samurai films one may name *The Hidden Blade* (2004, dir. Hideo Yamada, a non-Westernized version of *The Last Samurai*, 2003, so popular in the West) and *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (1937, and thus pre-war, dir. Sadao Yamanaka, who died in World War II). *Lone Wolf and Cub: The Sword of Vengeance* (1972, dir. Kenji Misumi) influenced the American-made *The Road to Perdition* (2004, dir. Sam Mendes). *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999, dir. Jim Jarmush) is among the most interesting and innovative of American “samurai” films, where the samurai character works as a Mafia hitman.

Medievalism in the form of samurai influence has also pervaded anime, though more often in television shows than in feature films: *Samurai Champloo* (2004, dir. Shinichiro Watanabe), *Basilisk* (2005, dir. Fumitomo Kizaki), *Blade of the Immortal* (2008, dir. Koichi Mashimo), *Otogi-Zoshi* (2004-2005), *Samurai 7* (2004, based on Kurasawa’s work, dir. Toshifumi Takizawa), among others. Feature films include *Sword of the Stranger* (2007, dir. Masahiro Ando) and *Ninja Scroll* (1993, dir. Yoshiaki Kawajiri). Series and films have gained a great deal of international success, and anime medievalism deserves and I suspect will soon get increasing critical attention in the West and around the world.⁴ Miyazaki’s work, both beautiful and suitable for a wide variety of viewers, sets an extremely difficult standard to match while pointing a direction at which future filmmakers can aim. His medievalism, like that in samurai films more generally, has quite a lot to teach us about a more diverse view of artistic responses to the medieval world, and it can lead us to a more inclusive and expansive view of what medievalism as a field of study can accomplish.

⁴ For scholarly work currently in print in English see, for starters: Dani Cavallaro’s excellent books (e.g., *The Animé art of Hayao Miyazaki* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006]); Ian Condry’s *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan’s Media Success Story* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2013); Jonathan Clements and Helen McCarthy’s *The Anime Encyclopedia: A Guide to Japanese Animation Since 1917* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2001); Susan J. Napier’s *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (Updated Edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). For reading that contextualizes samurai films among the larger body of cinematic medievalism, see Nickolas Haydock’s *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008). For this brief essay I have done only the merest literature review.