

Miyazaki's Intellectual Landscape: Myth, Ecomedievalism, Coming of Age

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Hayao Miyazaki's films always present vibrant worlds full of lush liveliness, colorful landscapes and characters and fantastic, even mythic adventures. His stories, regardless of setting, suggest, as in Shinto, both strong ties to the ancient, medieval, and recent 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 and a fear of larger or external militaristic powers. They inculcate both respect for the power and holiness of nature and valorization of achievement and individuality. The presentation of humans blends East and West in their culture and physiognomy while maintaining essential ties to Japan's medieval heroic ethos; at the same time they consistently express gender equality while easing away from absolute moral judgment of any given character. Miyazaki's landscape comes to sentient life embodied in spirits, gods, and demons, and his human characters must and do deal with them. Myths, so often tied to tensions between childhood and adulthood, emerge in Miyazaki's films from the landscape to teach reverence for the earth—and the terrifying consequences of failing to protect it. Miyazaki echoes and adapts the patterns of medieval story and ancient myth and weaves them into stories modern or pre-modern. Regardless of time or place setting, he emphatically ties a courageous environmentalism and engagement with the “old world” with characters' movement toward maturity.

Miyazaki's films typically contrast the excitement and mortal danger of technologies while highlighting the living landscape through traditional coming-of-age stories. Several of the films, including *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Ponyo* (2008), *Arrietty* (2012 American release), and *The Wind Rises* (2013) deal explicitly with human/environmental tensions. As Dani Cavallero notes in *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, his films “hold cross-cultural and universal relevance” especially because of their concerns with “the fate of the ecosystem, the ever-present phantom of war, the evils of totalitarianism and the vicissitudes of self-development.”¹ While for this essay *Princess Mononoke* makes the best fit because of its explicit leap into medievalism, many of the films adopt similar concerns and even work them out in similar ways. Within its medieval setting, *Princess Mononoke* taps into modern use of mythic and traditional patterns and cultural history to tie the importance of characters' maturing with their awareness of their own growing courage and their environmental responsibilities. The blend of East and West creates a world safe for the “fantastic”

¹ See *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 7. Cavallero, the most significant Western scholar of Miyazaki's films, also mentions how the films “bring together diverse time scales” (9) and “quite distant epochs” (89), remain “eminently ethical” (12) including anachronistic application of *bushido* in *Porco Rosso* (98), address the “detrimental effects of human technology upon nature”—though, as in *Totoro* they may also show nature's benevolent attention to humans (70)—and, alongside a vision of Japan's “fascination with legend, mythology and folklore” (120), express metaphorically the “problem of environmental destruction we are facing on a global scale” (124). *Nausicaä*, for example, refers to the “pollution with mercury of Minamata Bay” (48) while giving its own nods to medieval notions of *bushido* and familial and community duty. Humans of any time and place have similar duties to the environment.

element of story and applicable to any culture. Moral growth and physical daring can arise in youthful characters without sentimentality, or exclusive nationalism. Because of the unique nature of Miyazaki's cinematic world, audiences may remain vague about how to apply the cultural "lessons" of the films, but he has left no doubt about the environmental lessons of the films: gods and demons can destroy those who without compassion or care exploit the environment and even those only tangentially connected to it. Even young persons, including the pre-pubescent, bear the burden of care, and they may have to suspend their ascent to adulthood to fulfill their responsibilities to the earth. *Princess Mononoke* stops what appears as an ideal romance because of the depth of the environmental tragedy that has occurred. Ecomedievalism comes to dominate the concerns of the heroic/mythic world: the characters must help restore the Forest Spirit before the world can become green again, and they must deal with the aftermath of the humans' abuse of living nature.

Some of the major gods of Japanese myth have a similar ambivalence: they may create or destroy, act well or poorly. The filmmaker resists simple endings or characterizations without muddying his themes, and he resists tropes of standard Western cinema while broadening his audience and providing his stories with emotional complexity. His stories carry over medieval notions of respect, loyalty, and responsibility into more modern contexts 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 gaining social status. It does depend on gaining and maintaining an awareness of one's effect on the environment.

Western cinema, medievalism or otherwise, has always loved romance, even in children's movies: Lady and the Tramp kiss, if accidentally, through the intervention of a strand of spaghetti, and Beauty and the Beast reach adult, human love, and Melman can finally express his love to Gloria in *Madagascar II*, though that film focuses more at last on Alex and Marty's friendship and the value of friendship more generally—a theme that Miyazaki nearly always highlights. Yet nearly every one of Miyazaki's films sets up at least a kind of proto-romance, with the possible exceptions of *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Porco Rosso* and *The Wind Rises*, stopping it at the friendship stage. A concern for the environment in a sense replaces the romance as a necessary preliminary to it because of its essential importance: romance cannot take place in a dead or ruined world.²

Western myth and Romance, perhaps because of its traditional audience, throw a great deal of narrative weight on sexual adventures: a majority of the metamorphoses in Ovid's epic turn on sexual excesses, the *Odyssey* moves its hero, who by that time seeks only to return to his loyal wife, from one sexual interest to another, and Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* must resist sexual temptation. Nearly all substantial myths worldwide hinge on issues of generational succession, of which sexual coming-of-age comprises only a small part—yet that part has a great influence on the

² The reader may recall how in *Excalibur* the world re-acquires its green glow when Arthur rediscovers that the king and the land are one—i.e., that he must model stewardship for everyone.

progress of the stories. Taboos of various sorts and the transgression of social boundaries that aim at some sort of stability provide the narrative “nodes,” or points of concentration or confluence that create the stories’ tensions and point most directly to their concerns. Japanese myths, recorded versions coming largely from the early Middle Ages, include a preponderance of nature spirits, but also some traditional gods who often get themselves and their creatures into and out of trouble, though seldom trouble of a sexual nature.³ In a creation myth, Izanagi and Izanami, “Exalted Male” and “Exalted Female,” give birth to the islands of the Japan. When Izanami dies in childbirth, her husband pursues her into the dark underworld; he finds her, but when he also learns that she is decaying, he flees her and barely gets back to the upperworld alive. In the story of Amaterasu, the sun goddess (who is also the ultimate ancestor of Jimmu Tenno, the first emperor of Japan) retreats to a cave when the storm god, her brother Susanoo, behaves badly and insults her. Her absence denies the world her light. She is drawn forth by the singing and dancing of Ame-no-Uzume, a goddess of mirth, who shows Amaterasu her reflection in a mirror; the goddess, taken with her own beauty, rejoins the world to provide light again. Susanoo, though, is not entirely a bad god: he later saves people from the depredations of an eight-headed dragon by getting the beast drunk on sake and serially beheading it. Neither is Amaterasu entirely good, as she acts petulantly and ignores the responsibilities of her place and her power. Gods and spirits may, like humans, act well, poorly, or indifferently, as they also have places to fill in the natural world. The myths tend to stress such points of community and respect rather than adventure and self-actualization for their own sakes, as do Miyazaki’s films: the latter come from the former rather than replacing them as the motives of the stories. The gods embody the power of nature but also teach values directly applicable to human interaction.

Miyazaki doesn’t recapitulate myth, 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 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 Japanese myth—ideas of responsibility to family, community, and a code of conduct—while allowing them to range into areas of international importance—anti-war, gender equity, racial equality—and of correspondent fidelity to human individuality and mutual human experience. He downplays the issue of sexuality so common in myth and Romance without removing it; he delays its culmination as less important to his stories than 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.

Nearly all of Miyazaki’s films have potentially romantic (though not always sexual) couples. The *Castle of Cagliostro* (1979) has the triangle of Lupin, Clarisse, and Fujiko, which bubbles with romantic

³ See for instance F. Hadland Davis, *Myths & Legends of Japan* (London: Harrap, 1913).

potential, but he turns from it to other concerns. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) introduces potential for its heroine and Asbel, a prince of a nearby nation, but has no narrative space to develop their perhaps nascent relationship. *Castle in the Sky* (1986) establishes a couple, Sheeta and Pazu, but marks them as unready yet to extend their friendship into sexuality. *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) introduces Kiki to Tombo, a boy her age, but, as in *Castle in the Sky*, they are yet too young for full romance. *Porco Rosso* (1992) provides two possible love interests for its porcine eponym, ending with a hint that he has chosen one of them, but without elaboration. *Princess Mononoke* (1997), the most explicitly mythic and the one explicit work of medievalism among Miyazaki's films, actually clarifies the love of the mutually heroic couple at the very end of the film, but doesn't allow them either a sexual culmination or even a fulfilling relationship. *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) closes with the suggestion that Sophie and Howl have indeed become a loving couple, but even they have difficulties ahead. Their country is just moving out of war, the wizard must still deal with issues of his magical powers, and Sophie is still recovering from her own curse, which had turned her from a healthy eighteen year old to an elderly woman—magic and the wounds of war remain in the way of their potential flourishing. *Spirited Away* (2001) has as its protagonist the ten-year-old Chihiro who develops a loving friendship with the enchanted river spirit Haku. But, despite his appearance, he is very old and she very young—how can such a relationship develop into romance? *Ponyo* (2008) matches the eponymous water-wizard's daughter with Sosuke, a small boy: they have something of a childhood romance, but obviously with sexuality suspended for quite some time, if it can or will come into play at all. *Arrietty* (2010) matches the eponymous heroine with Shawn, a human boy, while she comes from a tiny people who shun dangerous and blundering humans—the two have a beautiful friendship, even a love, but nothing permanent (not even a continuing friendship) can come of it. 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—a common idea in Classical and medieval stories. *The Wind Rises* includes an adult couple who seem well matched and who marry despite the woman's tuberculosis; she does not survive the narrative of the film, though she re-appears at the end of the film in a dream sequence as a kind of spirit of love and experience that will inform the remainder of the protagonist's life. Early in the movie Miyazaki uses the catastrophic earthquake of 1923 to produce a plot vector but also thematically in a way unusual for him: the earth isn't always benign. Even unprovoked by humans it can be a source of great danger and suffering—a point rather opposite to that in *Totoro* where Kasukabe recalls a “time when trees and humans were friends.”

Most of Miyazaki's work directly addresses an audience of children, though many of the films appeal to a wide range of viewers anyway, not only because of their visual charm but also because of their significant themes. Two aim more particularly at adult viewers, *Porco Rosso* and *The Wind Rises*. Films for younger audiences may reasonably steer away from sexual issues, but those for older audiences need not—unless of course the filmmaker wants them to, perhaps because he or she finds something else more important to communicate. Miyazaki would have no particular reason not to conclude *Porco Rosso* with Porco/Marco getting together with Gina, or even with Fio, if he had so

chosen. The fact that he leaves the romance ambiguous tells us something important about his aims for the film: like *The Wind Rises*, it deals more with issues of character and environment than with romance; romance serves more to fill out the world of the story than to direct its purpose. The Romance that ends because of the death of one of the lovers in *The Wind Rises* highlights the fragility of the individual human and thus of any relationship regardless of time or place.

Princess Mononoke, the film that has perhaps the best-fitted couple in Ashitaka and San, ends with the two parting, largely because of the damage the humans have done to the forest environment. 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 cannot yet endure regular interaction with them. She may change in time. She tells the former prince, who can't return to his own people, that he "means so much" to her, but not enough to accept him as a husband and herself as part of the human world. 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 more a 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 subsequently increasing pollution. 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. As Helen McCarthy has observed, Miyazaki, having begun with an idea based in Heian period, adjusted *Princess Mononoke* to blend Japan's pre-history with Muromachi culture and contemporary concerns about how humans can live productive, economically feasible lives while maintaining love and respect for our environment⁴—issues apt for Western as well as Eastern medievalism.

Howl and Sophie in *Howl's Moving Castle* have the greater likelihood of maintaining a relationship. They have certainly contributed to the improvement of their long troubled world, and they have shown their commitment to caring for each other. *Cagliostro* offers little hope of a sustained

⁴ Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation: Films, Themes, Artistry* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1999), 183, 185, 200.

relationship; Lupin and Clarisse come from different classes of society, Lupin and Fujiko have already had some kind of romance that did not succeed, and Lupin ends the film pursued by Inspector Zenigata, who after all that has happened still views Lupin as a criminal to catch. The romance in *Cagliostro* takes a distant back seat to the humor, the adventure, and the amazing conclusion in the unveiling of the mysterious “treasure” of the Castle—it turns out to be not monetary wealth, but the Roman ruin over which the current estate was built. That is the environmental message of the film and its focus: the greatest treasure we have is the cultural inheritance from our forebears and a world worth living in. As in medieval Samurai stories, romance gives way to one’s duty and one’s sense of social *place*, what Chaucer would call *degree*.

Similarly, the romance in *Howl* plays only a part of the more important complex of events at the end of the film: Sophie recovers her youth, Howl recovers a sense of self as Calcifer gains his freedom, the neighboring prince will be restored to his kingdom, and the war will end—the romance of two little people, as Rick from *Casablanca* might say, may not amount to a hill of beans in such a crazy world. We do end the film, though, with an infrequent event in Miyazaki’s films: a kiss. Howl and Sophie kiss as they sail off together in a new and better Castle, this one among the ubiquitous, quirky flying machines that distinguish Miyazaki’s *animé*. Dangers remain because of the unstable nature of sorcery in the world of the film: many characters wield it, few do so well, and its very nature is capricious. The young Howl fell under a spell by catching a falling star, saving it from crashing to its death on earth, and preserving it by placing it next to his heart. Problems come from good deeds as well as ill, an unpleasant truth that Miyazaki films can teach children and of which they repeatedly remind adults. Sophie’s ability to forgive, to persist despite terrible injustice, and to love with near self-abandonment dominates this emotionally complex and compelling blend of Eastern and Western fairytale and myth.⁵ We must guess whether her love will prove strong enough to keep Howl’s affection; has the wizard, having suffered spells that have delayed his own maturation, transformed enough to know what adult love means? The fact that they now live in a better, more peaceful world and a landscape not threatened by bombs and armies improves their chances considerably.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, like the later *Princess Mononoke*, deals mostly with the themes of courage and self-sacrifice in the face of impossible odds and problems caused by humans’ abuse of the environment in which they live. Despite its use of aircraft, it also uses medieval Samurai motifs, such as swordplay and the master swordsman, to add historical and cultural depth to the textual world. Its “near-feudal world” derives in part from a medieval folktale about a princess who loves insects.⁶ Perhaps even more so than San, Nausicaä has passed through the stage of nubility, of *shoujo*,

⁵ For more on this idea and for excellent interpretive and technical commentary on Miyazaki’s *oeuvre*, see Dani Cavallaro’s *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki* (page 169 and *passim*), as noted above. See also *The Fairy Tale and Animé*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2011; *Hayao Miyazaki’s World Picture*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2015; *The Late Works of Hayao Miyazaki*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. This essay has benefited considerably from her discussions.

⁶ McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation*, 72, 74.

into near if not quite full adulthood. Like Sophie she has great ability to forgive; like San she has great personal courage and athletic physicality; like Sheeta she has complete willingness to accept and respond to the responsibilities of her status while adapting to the demands of her changing situation. She meets a potential romantic partner, Asbel, when his plane attacks the one on which she is a passenger. Together they help to bring about a peace among the warring factions, largely because Nausicaä shows that the peoples must live in harmony with the forest which, rather than poisoning them, is actually removing human-made poisons from the environment to make it more livable for all. In the last scene of the film Asbel lifts Nausicaä by the waist and spins her around above him—the same thing that Pazu does with Sheeta in *Castle in the Sky* when the scene looks to be moving them toward a first kiss. In each case a potential romantic moment gives way to one of youthful exuberance and friendly love instead. As with Ashitaka and San, the plot suspends sexual culmination, suggesting it hasn't nearly the importance of other immediate and more pressing concerns. Let us grow up first and see who and what we are, the plots mutually imply. And Nausicaä has fully grown up: she has shown willingness to sacrifice her life not just for her people, but for the betterment of her world.

Kiki, rather younger than these other heroines, still has, in a quieter way, a strong sense of responsibility: as a fledgling witch, she can hardly wait to get out on her own to discover and employ her skills for the advantage of others. A boy in her new city takes a romantic interest in her; making a delivery in a terrible storm, she returns home late for their date, but later they have a wonderful if hair-raising adventure on his propeller-assisted bicycle, and then she saves his life as he hangs precariously from a rope attached to an out-of-control dirigible. The romance, youthful, invigorating, and completely pre-sexual, contributes only a small part to Kiki's gaining her confidence and growing into her abilities: she has no lack of responsibility, kindness, or desire to work to help others, and she blends into the natural world rather than fighting with it. Chihiro of *Spirited Away* is younger yet. She comes to love Haku, whom she helps to recover his identity, but the love appears more like that of dear childhood friends or even siblings, as it is clearly pre-sexual. The motif of coming of age dominates here more than in any of the other films with the possible exception of *Kiki's Delivery Service*; Chihiro, a scared and perhaps slightly spoiled child at the beginning of the film, comes away from her adventure ready to face life in her new town and school. She has got a job and done well with it, made friends, saved a dear friend, and by her sense of fair play and a clear-headed decision saved her parents from getting eaten! Miyazaki minimized even hints of the erotic as he moved his stories more toward younger audiences, especially since Chihiro's love interest is a river spirit rather than a boy: she helps him recover his identity and allows him once again to serve his environmental purpose. While it has few elements of medievalism, *Spirited Away* maintains the same respect for nature and nature spirits as do the other films.

The erotic, when it does appear in these films, shows up in forms more typical of Japanese than Western art. In a scene in *Spirited Away* Chihiro sits with her adult friend Lin on a balcony munching a late-night snack as they look out at the stars; the erotic element is muted, appearing only in the

backless pajamas in which they lounge as they prepare for bed. In *Kiki* it appears only with the swing of the young witch's underdress as her father picks her up and twirls her around—the same move we see associated with potential love interests in *Nausicaä* and *Castle in the Sky*. One scene briefly shows Nausicaä's bum: her outfit typically includes a very short skirt, and the scene in question is drawn from behind and below.⁷ Sheeta, obviously too young for marriage, becomes the romantic interest of all of Dola's much-older sons. To save the badly injured Ashitaka, San in *Mononoke* 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 gently exploits the sexual elements of Animé/manga and related arts, while backgrounding them to the greater significance of recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of the environment and saving it—the task of any caring, aware person regardless of his or her personal powers. The potentially erotic gives way to the explicitly environmental, and there Miyazaki's medieval world connects aesthetically and thematically with his modern.

We might reasonably call Miyazaki a Japanese Tolkien, his work partly but not fully medievalism. Miyazaki's work, like Tolkien's, blends the medieval with the ancient and the modern (the hobbits may even be more early Victorian). Tolkien also played down romantic stories and played up our need to love and protect our natural world. The erotic may make an interesting and essential part of our lives as well as our myths, 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 (as do, for instance, Sam and Rosie in *The Lord of the Rings*). The culture of the world of Miyazaki's 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, pollution, and exploitation. Love we must: it makes us who we are. Romance can wait; environmentalism, though, cannot. What we may put aside for ourselves, Miyazaki suggests, we may not neglect for our world. We must come of age in our awareness of the living environment and our relationship to it. If we ignore it, it may bite, it may sicken us with our own poisons, or it may simply shake us off entirely.⁸

⁷ The hint of children's undergarments is mostly but not exclusively female. In *Totoro* Kanta runs to hide from Satsuki, who has come to his home to return the umbrella he lent her, because he is dressed only in a T-shirt and undershorts.

⁸ Interested readers may also want to see Miyazaki's own writing on his films: Hayao Miyazaki, *Starting Point, 1979-1996*, trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2014); *Turning Point, 1997-2008*, trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2014).