



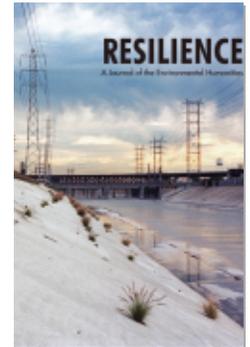
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The Tale of the Princess Kaguya

MIO BRYCE AND JASON DAVIS

Children walking through shaded woodlands joyfully singing of spinning waterwheels and of “birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers.” A hollow-nesting bird returns to a tree with food for its chicks. A snake swims across water. Boar piglets suckling at a sow. A squirrel watches the children walking and singing along a woodland path. They scramble over a stony brook. When the children arrive at a lookout onto a forested valley, their singing is stopped by the melodic, pitch-perfect singing voice of a small girl among them. Looking out onto the landscape, her lone rendition of the lyrics of returning to experience nature is much more palpable than what her friends have been repeating in unison. It resonates with a sense of longing she will crushingly succumb to in the future: “Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers / Teach me how to feel / If I hear that you pine for me / I will return to you.”

That biophilic infant, the yet-to-be-princess Kaguya, will rapidly grow like bamboo, into an adult within a few short months.¹ Her mythical transformation—from an innocent child, embodying simplicity and awed wonder at nature, to a young woman dragooned by filial obligation into an urban existence of material goods, insufferable courtships, and isolation from the rural life she experienced every day as a child—is freighted with cosmic irony, given her supernatural origins in a bamboo stalk and the wealth she brings to her foster parents. Moreover, the psychological collapse of Kaguya into resignation and depression from her conflicted sense of self caused by compounded doubt over her identity—fatherly pressure to pursue and attain a better life through prestige and a material lifestyle over the simpler, uncomplicat-

ed, but intimately more connected existence with the natural world—echoes contemporary Japanese intergenerational pressures and individual quests for social mobility in the face of the Lost Two Decades of the Japanese economy. Add to this a thematic reminder of the impermanence of life, and of death as driver of the cyclical nature of existence, and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is an arrestingly visual experience of interactions between humans and nonhuman nature as well as that of meditative and emotional ranges that capture the isolating psychic turmoil of a young woman's fated existence.

Isao Takahata's cinematic restaging of a Japanese fairy tale that can be traced back to the tenth century and even earlier, the oldest marker of Japan's cultural heritage that Studio Ghibli has adapted, continues Studio Ghibli's reputation for inflecting a storied past with environmental and social relevance for twenty-first-century audiences.² This is evident with the anime's portrayal of the fecundity and growth of bamboo and Kaguya's exuberant, emotional engagement with her experiences of the living world. But there are also aspects of Takahata's interpretation that depart from the traditional storyline of *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* that strikingly affect engagement and identification with Kaguya's existence, namely her eventual withdrawal from the world around her and her return to the moon with a celestial entourage gathered about an impassive Buddha. But before all of this, we should outline how this thousand-year-old tale has been traditionally narrated.³

An old and childless bamboo cutter is led to a glowing bamboo. In it he discovers a mysteriously tiny infant girl, whom he and his wife care for as foster parents. For their parental devotion, they are rewarded with gold in a bamboo, which the old man strongly believes to be symbolic of the infant girl's divinity. With such easily acquired wealth, the couple continue to raise her as their daughter in a mansion in the capital. The girl matures into a beautiful woman within three months and is named Kaguya-hime. Many nobles court her but without success. Urged by her foster father to select a husband, she requests five determined suitors to bring difficult to obtain treasures to her. All fail to deliver. The emperor, who learns of her reputation, desires her, but she declines his matrimonial offerings. When the emperor beseeches her in person, she disappears, convincing him to give up on possessing her. Kaguya becomes distressed and discloses to her foster parents that she is from the moon, which she must return to on the night of the

next full moon. Kaguya grieves over her impending departure from the earth. However, she loses her human memories as soon as she puts on her moon attire. The story ends with the distraught emperor sending a messenger to burn Kaguya's memento, the medicine for eternal life, on the top of Mount Fuji.

Given Takahata's own thematic restaging of the routines of everyday life in relation to nonhuman life, especially nonhuman life's rhythms and rates of development alongside human activity, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* amply emphasizes the lived relations of human-and-nature interactions through manual labor with wood, especially bamboo.⁴ The anime's depictions of the vigorousness of bamboo literally and metaphorically represent the dynamism of life on earth in contrast to the lifelessness of the moon, wherein beautiful immortals happily reside free of emotions. Bamboo is energetic, straight, yet flexible and evergreen. With its extraordinarily rapid growth, tenaciously vigorous roots, usefulness as food and a livelihood, and serenity-offering experiences as a grove, bamboo represents aspects of the visible, invisible, and thriving activity of the plant world, while embodying spiritual power and a pathway to the mythic world.⁵ Through this pathway, the moon sends Kaguya—as well as gold and beautiful attire—to Sanuki no Miyatsuko, the bamboo cutter and caretaker of the forest. The bamboo forest and the surrounding mountains depict an ecosystem in which the rural life of humans interact daily with nonhuman life, a living relationship contributing to Kaguya's enjoyment of her happy childhood. Moreover, young bamboo is a metonym for Kaguya herself. Her growth is extremely quick, dynamic, almost violent, and somewhat comical; and her nickname, Takenoko (literally, “bamboo child” or “bamboo shoot”), aligns her with nature, while her more formal, mythical appellation as Nayotake no Kaguya-hime (Princess Shining Night of Willow or Soft or Elegant Bamboo) represents culture.

Takenoko is very much in the mold of a female Ghibli protagonist. She is energetic, curious, and affectionate, exemplifying the essence of life. Her curiosity about a pair of little frogs spurs her to crawl and then soon after to toddle, indicating her strong identification with nature. As Takenoko, she fully enjoys life with her intimate friends, especially Sutemaru (the oldest brother of the neighbor's children), and learns about life in the mountains. Unlike the original Kaguya, Takenoko is a wild child, as indicated by her naked bottom in her infancy. She is sex-

less, genderless, and full of life and happiness. As is evident in her fascination with amphibians, she loves living things and relishes the intimacy of her encounter with them, much in the manner of Nausicaä, the character from Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. She has no desire for a material-based or commodity-focused lifestyle, and so she also somewhat resembles Heidi, the character from Johanna Spyri's original book *Heidi*, the 1974 anime version of which Takahata directed for Japanese television, with Miyazaki providing designs, layouts, and screenplay, as *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*.

Even without any knowledge of the ancient narrative that *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is adapted from to help guide appreciation of Takahata's modern treatment of it, the purposeful accentuation of Kaguya's experiences of the living world is key to evaluating the anime's connections between human and nonhuman nature. For one thing, the scenes of daily human life and its interrelationships to the cyclical phenomena of the natural world are so integral to how this lived relation to nature is intersubjectively shaped as experiences shared between generationally different characters. But it is also through Kaguya that the anime explores the subjective depth or inner, psychological world of life-affirming, individual encounters with the natural world. How the visual creation of this involvement of characters with the nonhuman world, and its impact on the viewer, can be brought out more fully is to think about *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* using Adrian J. Ivakhiv's notion of "ecologies of the moving image," especially in the way the anime can be understood as articulating a world for its characters *within* the film—a film world—that has been constructed to affect the viewer's connection to the images through a "process-relational perspective."⁶ To put it more clearly, the activities of humans and nonhuman life, such as bamboo, and their interactions that make up and define the rural life of bamboo farming, as it is depicted in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, gesture at, and even reflect on, relational processes—"those activities by which things emerge, grow, interact and affect the world around them"—producing the object world of bamboo, landscapes and the events of human experiences of them, both collective and individual.⁷ In a key sequence, Kaguya's volatile, emotional collapse is depicted through the rushing of her devastated soul into the mountains of her home, only to find the ruins of Sotemaru's house in a desolate, wintered landscape. Here Kaguya, having not experienced all seasons, learns of the com-

ing spring. Takahata's visual style abundantly communicates both the traditions of Japanese visual culture and the plasticity of contemporary animation, through the reproduction of handcrafted line work of visual designs as well as the materiality of watercolor and charcoal. Moreover, there are also the ways in which the anime contributes to a perceptual ecology of film-world experiences—the way cinema reflects the world as “a realm in which images and sounds, *looks* and *listens*, are exchanged and transmitted among the elements of a world that is communicative by its very nature.”⁸

Kaguya's inner struggle with the suffocating, commodity-driven, urban life world of social betterment and intergenerational determination is one aspect of Takahata's allegorical accentuation of the legend. Takenoko/Kaguya embodies the transformation of nature into culture. From the humorous episode of responding to being called Hime (Princess) by Miyatsuko over Takenoko by the village children to her forced relocation with her foster parents to the capital, she is introduced to the world of commodities, property, social class, material lifestyles, and consumerism, all premised on urban separation and distancing from the world of nature. The transformation of Takenoko to Kaguya through the cosmetic alteration of shaving off of her eye brows and blackening her teeth—following normal practice for noble women of the period, designed to increase Kaguya's marriage prospects as the best opportunity for the happiest life possible—reflects the film's accentuation of the intergenerational shaping of expectation. Moreover, with life in the capital, opportunities for Kaguya reconnecting with nature are delimited by an urban setting and domestic pastimes. They are reduced to attenuated experiences of nature—a crude kitchen and tending to vegetables in a small backyard as well as reproducing past experiences of the natural world through artefacts such as the re-creation of mountain life in miniature form, all of which are totally incongruent with the palatial, meticulously kept mansion and its furnishings. And floral patterns worn by Kaguya and her foster mother, symbolizing the beauty and ephemeralness of nature, are static reminders of their separation from their previous existence. Kaguya, the young bamboo, is now cut from the root and crafted by Miyatsuko, the bamboo cutter, as symbolized by a bamboo birdcage given to her. She is more like a lifeless cage than like the bird that she releases, representing her own submission and resignation from life.

Moreover, Takahata's departures from the narrative of the fairy tale, especially through Kaguya's efforts at returning to her birthplace, serve to accentuate the cyclical aspects of growth and death. Kaguya's returns to where she grew up—once after she is overcome with dread at the realization of her fake existence as a princess and again when she attempts to reunite with Sutemaru after learning of her impending, fated return to the moon—lead to her discovery that irrevocable loss is followed by renewal. The dead and abandoned hillside she finds earlier has not perished but is in the throes of winter, while the hillside undergoes regenerative growth from over forestation. And her reunion with Sutemaru, experienced as if in a daydream, only reaffirms her loss as a reminder of the life she never had, especially given Sutemaru's own family life as a new father. Finally, Kaguya's departure for the moon is unsettling particularly due to the visitation of the Buddha-like leader of the moon. Takahata's placement of Buddha in the moon entourage descending to the earth on clouds resembles a *Raigōzu*, a picture of Buddha's welcoming to the pure land, shown to people on their deathbed.⁹ This processional harbinger signals Kaguya's withdrawal from the world of the living. However, the final image of the film, an infant within the face of the moon, symbolizes rebirth and the coming tale of another Kaguya, the new spring.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mio Bryce is head of Japanese studies in the Department of International Studies: Languages and Cultures at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. She is the author of more than thirty articles and book chapters on topics that range from teaching and learning Japanese as a second language to children's literature to anime and manga as integral to youth identity and youth cultures. Her teaching of Japanese language, literature, and manga and anime—including the courses *Manga and Japanese Contemporary Culture* and *Manga and Anime as Global Imagery*—aim at capturing and magnifying undergraduate students' passion for Japanese culture and language. Mio's research interests are wide ranging yet always centered on human relationships with self, others, and their surroundings. She perceives particular significance for fiction in Japan as an effective medium for individuals to express their views and concerns, such as ecological issues, which otherwise are easily suppressed in a society where conformity and contextual appropriation prevail. Mio was recently the recipient of a research grant to support exploring the potential for establishing a volunteer program to assist with supporting Japan after the Great East Earthquake.

Jason Davis has been involved since 2004 with teaching anime and manga to undergraduate students as part of Japanese studies in the Department of International Studies: Languages and Cultures at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. These courses have been a popular attraction for nontraditional humanities students—such as international, science, and business students—and especially for undergraduates with English as a second language. The exploration of ecological themes and issues in anime has been a component of a course taught every year aimed at introducing undergraduate students to contemporary Japanese society through popular culture. Among Jason's publications are contributions to *Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy* series of books—including coauthoring chapters in *Anime and Philosophy: Wide Eyed Wonder*, edited by Josef Steiff and Tristan D. Tamplin (2010), and *Manga and Philosophy: Full Metal Metaphysician*, edited by Josef Steiff and Adam Barkman (2010)—as well as an overview of manga genres in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Continuum, 2010).

NOTES

1. See Kellert, *Kinship to Mastery*.
2. Kristeva, "Pattern of Signification in the *Taketori Monogatari*," 245. See also McHugh, "Animal Gods in Extinction Stories"; Napier, "Confronting Master Narratives"; Pike, *Enviro-Toons*; Wright, "Forest Spirits, Giant Insects and World Trees."
3. Keene, "Tale of the Bamboo Cutter."
4. See Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli*.
5. Okazaki, "Taketori monogatari kenkyū," 14.
6. Ivakhiv, "Teaching Ecocriticism and Cinema," 147. See also Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*.
7. Ivakhiv, "Teaching Ecocriticism and Cinema," 147.
8. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, xi, author's italics.
9. Stone, "By the Power of One's Last Nenbutsu," 77–78.

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