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Mononoke-hime as the Tragedy of Modernity

KRISTEN L. ABBEY

It was not Zeus that made the proclamation;
nor did Justice, which lives with those below, enact
such laws as that, for mankind. I did not believe
your proclamation had such power to enable
one who will someday die to override
God's ordinances, unwritten and secure.

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

Princess Mononoke (*Mononoke-hime*) premiered in the year 1997, the same year Studio Ghibli finalized its distribution contract with Disney. Miyazaki has confirmed the infamous rumor that Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki sent a *katana*, a samurai sword, to Harvey Weinstein, then CEO of Disney-Miramax, with the note “no cuts.” Disney wanted to edit the blood from the film. Ghibli stood its ground, negotiating the legendary contract that allowed not a single cell of Ghibli animation to be edited by Disney distributors (Brooks). Disney hoped to trim *Princess Mononoke* into the shape of its own princess movies, but *Mononoke-hime* at no level is a children's movie. *Mononoke-hime* grossed top box office internationally and won Japan's 1998 Academy Awards, a first for an animated film. *Mononoke* is not the name of a princess but a term for monsters, often from stories of the Muromachi era (1392–1573), which is the setting of the film. A *mononoke* is a spirit, like the spirit of a storm or an animal, which, like a European fairy, is not necessarily well disposed to human people. The title is an insult hurled at the female pro-

tagonist, San. The label demotes the *kami*, the gods who claim her as family, to mononoke, ghosts and monsters of nature. The film's title, translated literally as "Princess of the Monsters," suggests horror and tragedy as genres, not children's romance. *Mononoke-hime*, like Sophocles's *Antigone*, is the tragedy of the unresolvable conflict between human civilization and the natural law of the gods. Tragedy cannot be staged without violence.

Mononoke-hime is Hayao Miyazaki's most mature work, displaying his powers as writer and animator at their height and representing his most aggressive stance on the environmental problem of modernity. Capitalism, industrialism, and democracy all conflict inexorably with the sacred world of the primordial forest. As in Aristotle's definition, this tragedy does not come about because of evil people, although greed and exploitation play their part. In *Princess Mononoke*, Muromachi-era samurai are at war with an industrial town that represents Western capitalist influence. The samurai and ironworkers are in a war for economic survival. Irontown is in turn at war with the local sacred forest, which is protected by wolf gods. People die in armed conflict in *Mononoke-hime*. Gods die, killed not by Enlightenment secularism but by deforestation and by iron bullets.

In the opening scene, the hero, Ashitaka, kills a boar god to protect his village. The god was polluted by an iron slug; and driven mad by the poison, the boar curses Ashitaka. The curse compels the village to exile Ashitaka, like Thebes expelling Oedipus, to keep Ashitaka's pollution from spreading. The village sees the loss of Ashitaka as the loss of their future. Ashitaka was the leader for their next generation; and when Ashitaka says goodbye to his potential bride, the prospects for further progeny are brought into question. The leaders' heavy beards and the description of the village as an ethnic group exiled to the north by the shogunate indicate that the villagers represent the Ainu. The Ainu are an indigenous people with a separate language from the Japanese, displaced in a series of battles in the early Muromachi. As recently as the first part of the twentieth century, the Ainu were still being displaced from the lands left to them in Hokkaido (Ito 2008). The Ainu went without legal recognition as an ethnic minority until 2008 (Umeda 2008). While *Mononoke-hime* is obviously creating an indigenous origin story for Ashitaka that separates him from mainstream Japan, his relationship is not simply aligned with the gods of nature. The village

may have lived quietly with the forest as a neighbor; there is no compromise possible. Ashitaka had to kill the boar for the village to survive, but the village can't survive if it kills the gods of the forest. A nostalgia for a righteous indigenous life vanishes with the village in the first few minutes of the movie.

The Ainu village's elderly female shaman sends Ashitaka to "see with eyes unclouded," which seems in these opening minutes to mean that he's to look for justice for the boar and a cure for his curse. This would be the typical heroic quest narrative. What happens, instead, is that Ashitaka bears witness to the early shots that end feudal Japan. As an Ainu, he is an outsider to mainstream Japanese history, a participant observer. Ashitaka looks for the most moral choice among an array of socially destructive and environmentally catastrophic possibilities.

Ashitaka finds a farming village under attack by samurai. The feudal system, while bucolic, lives in conflict with itself and at odds with Ashitaka's world and the world of the sacred forest. Ashitaka's arm, scarred by the boar's curse, sends his arrow with unintentional and inhuman violence, taking both of one man's arms off with a single shot and decapitating another samurai with a second. The pollution from the iron slug continues to darken the world, and poison Ashitaka. The film conflates industrial and spiritual pollution, with the effect that destroying the environment is the same as destroying the self.

Ashitaka leaves this agricultural village, headed to Irontown, where the iron slug was manufactured. What he sees with his unclouded eyes is an absence of villains, only Aristotle's flawed tragic heroes. In Irontown, Lady Eboshi has found employment in manufacturing for lepers and prostitutes—a capitalist utopia where those at the bottom of feudal hierarchy of samurai culture are given the opportunity to flourish. Unfortunately, Irontown is open-pit mining and destroying the sacred forest of the Shishigami. Lady Eboshi is participating in the development of the Japanese matchlock, which was developed from Chinese and Portuguese sources and became a historic political tool (Perrin 1979). In Oda Nobunaga's armies at the end of the Muromachi, rifle squads spelled the beginning of the end of the feudal shogunate, and the movement toward bureaucratic rule of law in the Edo period (1603–1867). The context implies that Lady Eboshi is part of Nobunaga's buildup of rifles.

Lady Eboshi, like *Antigone's* Creon, puts the laws of progress before the laws of the gods. She is neither foolish nor greedy, but she sees the

social progress possible with the weakening of the samurai class and puts that before the health of the environment. Implicitly, she argues that subsistence agriculture and feudal agronomy are both too unjust to sustain only to protect an abstract idea of wilderness. Lady Eboshi agrees to help the shogun's man Jigo kill the Shishigami.

The Shishigami is the deerlike god of the forest, more numinous than the other gods, who are its protectors. The Shishigami has two forms, both exquisitely animated. The starry night Shishigami and the unreasonably happy daytime Shishigami, a realistic green kingfisher and the forest path bending into sacred space, all are detailed and beautiful to the point of surreality. Miyazaki personally reviewed every cell, his exhaustion inspiring his first false retirement, before directing *Spirited Away* (2001) or *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) (Odell and Le Blanc 2009, 111–12). The beauty of the animation is the film's first, best argument for the need to protect the environment. The film's representations of battle, despite evoking representations of Muromachi samurai in screen paintings of the Tosa school, colorful representations of small figures in multiple groups, all pale in comparison to the rich colors of the forest (Paine and Soper 1981).

The forest is never an uninhabited resource in *Mononoke-hime*; the land is always full of indigenous peoples and natural gods, contrasting with the feudal farmers and capitalist ironworkers. Ashitaka sees the forest of the Shishigami populated by the *kodama*, the rattling spirits of the trees invented by the movie. The workers from Irontown see the forest as haunted and evil but full of agency. The animation of the kodama tells the audience that Ashitaka, as usual, sees the situation clearly. The kodama are white, with irregular black faces, like walking mushrooms. Their coloring and their heads are uncanny, but their bodies are infantile and cute. Their sound is like a child's toy. The ironworkers' reactions make sense to the audience; but because they lead Ashitaka to safety and because of his reassurance that the kodama represent the health of the forest, the kodama become iconic. In part, their popularity is owed to the fact that they are cute, but it shouldn't be neglected that they represent the health of a sacred, natural environment. They feature on shirts and gifts even now, reproduced just like iconic San herself.

Like Sophocles's *Antigone*, Miyazaki's title character, San, shows up surprisingly late in an eponymous text, 22 minutes into a 134 minute film. The audience's first view of San sees her sucking the blood around Moro's

gunshot wound—bloody and unprincess-like. San, like Antigone, is only a princess in title. Their positions are those of outsiders, inadequately connected to other human people. They are morally right, and yet their positions are untenable and unstable. San and Antigone are both very young women who choose the law of the gods over any relationship with humanity. Like Antigone, San refuses to yield her love for her adopted twin brothers, wolf gods, to the march of human history. The wolf Moro calls San “my beautiful, ugly daughter.” Moro adopted San as an infant when San’s human parents threw their baby at Moro to make their own escape. Ashitaka says more than once that San can’t renounce her humanity, although both San and Moro assert that she can.

San and Ashitaka have a romantic relationship that challenges the marriage plot of the Disney context. Their “kiss” is painfully unromantic; San chews dried meat for Ashitaka when he is too weak to manage it. San nevertheless rescues Ashitaka more than once, but more because they are both outsiders than because, as Ashitaka suggests, San is willing to compromise her hatred of humanity. San and Ashitaka, the romantic and moral centers of the film, can’t agree on fundamental choices, but neither can anyone else, no matter how allied. In town, Lady Eboshi has no concern for the death of the gods. Women whose husbands have been killed by the wolf gods, on the other hand, would very much like to kill San and her family, while other men are simply afraid and would like to leave them alone. The shogun wants the Shishigami’s head as a source of eternal youth; his agent Jigo only cares for his duty to the shogun. The boar tribe want war with the humans and charge the humans, heedless of their own deaths, to make a symbolic point. Moro seeks to kill Lady Eboshi personally, as if Eboshi’s ideology is her own and not representative of a capitalist ideal. The Shishigami seems not to care for the fight at all but only for the cycles of nature—life and death, day and night, summer and winter. San vents her rage at humanity for its uncaring destruction of her home, while Ashitaka seeks a compromise.

Greek tragedy ends with a pile of corpses; and while hundreds have died in the course of the film, *Mononoke-hime* refuses to kill any of its principal human characters. More, they are all, like Aristotle’s tragic hero, noble people with flaws that pit them against the gods. They suffer and fall. Ashitaka loses his home but gains a new one in Irontown. San loses the forest, but she keeps her brothers and gains a lover in Ashitaka. Jigo—who in representing feudalism, superstition, and greed, comes

closest to being the villain of *Mononoke-hime*—is not punished by anything other than failing to meet his goal. Lady Eboshi loses an arm to Moro but survives to participate in history. A case could be made for Lady Eboshi as Moro's heir, as a "Princess of the Monsters," in the same way that Antigone and Creon take turns as tragic heroes of *Antigone*. The gods, on the other hand, almost all die. Only the young wolves survive, in an inversion of the deaths of Polyneices and Eteocles before the action of *Antigone*. *Mononoke-hime* denies the premise that the insoluble problem of human relations with the environment must end with an apocalypse.

Mononoke-hime asserts that the conflict between humanity and nature is an ongoing and insoluble part of the march of history. Ashitaka asks repeatedly, "Can't humans and the forest live together in peace?" The film's answer, like history's, is, "No. We can't." However, these extinction events, transformations of the world that destroy beauty, although distasteful or immoral, are not apocalyptic. Industrialization destroyed the forest, and the Japanese relationship to it as a sacred space, inevitably, was part of the growth away from feudal injustice and toward modernity. While modernity has more potential for social justice, everywhere it has destroyed the land and displaced indigenous peoples. Modernity is neither desirable nor escapable, but it is also not evil. Like any tragic hero, it means well. *Mononoke-hime* offers no solutions that will make everyone safe and happy. While Ashitaka and San long for one another, they cannot live together. Ashitaka proposes a compromise, but San only reconciles with him, not with humanity or history.

In *Mononoke-hime* there is no hero to rescue humanity, the natural world is both with and against us, and our best attempts at social justice depend on degradation of an other. Many make the case for *Nausicaä* (1984) as the most important of Miyazaki's environmental films; but *Nausicaä* relies on a messianic heroine, on nature looking to partner with humanity, and on a preexisting social utopia—all three of which are also part of its appeal as a film. *Mononoke-hime* promises, instead, that every day offers a new knife's-edge moral choice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen L. Abbey is an assistant professor of English at Felician University, the Franciscan university of New Jersey. Her expertise are in comparative literature, cultural studies, and popular culture. She teaches environmental approaches to literature and composition. Her bona fides as an otaku include watching Speed

Racer at 5:30 a.m. on Saturdays as a child; treasuring an Appa mousepad from the original *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, acquired as swag from the San Diego Comic Con; and convincing every teacher she knows to watch *Assassination Classroom*.

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