



4-1-2004

Between the Worlds: Liminality and Self-Sacrifice in Princess Mononoke

Christine Hoff Kraemer
Boston University, chk@bu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Hoff Kraemer, Christine (2004) "Between the Worlds: Liminality and Self-Sacrifice in Princess Mononoke," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.08.02.01>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Between the Worlds: Liminality and Self-Sacrifice in Princess Mononoke

Abstract

In the Japanese animated film *Princess Mononoke*, nature and humankind are represented by two strong female leaders, each intending to protect her way of life by annihilating the other. Between the two comes Ashitaka, a foreign-born warrior prince whose deep compassion, empathy and insight leave him suspended between their worlds, and therefore in a position to stop the warfare. This liminality, the quality of being "betwixt and between," empowers Ashitaka to play the Christ-like roles of mediator, martyr, and finally, savior. The film functions cross-culturally to demonstrate that in both Japan and the West, liminality, or being on the threshold between two states, may be an enabling condition of holiness, particularly in the context of peacemaking.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Although Japanese animation is becoming increasingly popular among American youth, scholars are still largely unaware that there is more to the world of anime (AH-nee-may, the Japanese term adopted by many Western fans) than the children's market. In Japan, animation is understood to be as flexible as any other artistic medium, containing all possible genres and appealing to all age groups. As a fully mainstream art form in Japan, anime addresses and wrestles with the deepest concerns of first - world societies in the postmodern era - ranging from apocalyptic tales such as *Akira* to nostalgic, pastoral reflections such as *Only Yesterday*. These are films that are worthy of study in their own right, but they also offer a significant challenge to the cultural imperialism represented by Hollywood. In both Europe and America, young people are turning to anime for films that offer alternatives to Hollywood's tired tropes.

Hayao Miyazaki is perhaps the most famous anime director in Japan today and, because his studio produces mainly family films, he is often compared to Walt Disney in the West. Miyazaki's films, however, are far more complex and challenging to watch; where Disney films tend to affirm existing cultural values, Miyazaki's perform a complicated dance between performing Japanese cultural values and destabilizing them. Despite the continuing rigidity of gender roles in Japan, nearly all Miyazaki films feature strong, intelligent, independent heroines who put supposedly feminist characters such as Disney's *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* to

shame. Miyazaki is also well-known for the environmentalist bent of his films, which combine warnings of environmental disaster with a strong note of hope for the future.

Miyazaki's 1997 film *Mononoke Hime*, or *Princess Mononoke* in English, struck a deep chord in Japanese society and was the highest-grossing Japanese film ever until the 2001 release of Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*.¹ Though less well-known in the U.S., it performed well enough to break out of the independent art theatres to which most anime is confined and was shown in mainstream theatres across the country. A quintessential example of Miyazaki's genius, the film is also one of his darkest and most ambiguous texts, notable for its balanced exploration of the conflict between nature and technology. Lady Eboshi, leader of an iron-working town, is competent, intelligent, powerful, and set on destroying the sacred forest that thwarts her mining efforts. She is not, however, the stereotypical Disney villainess, destroying the forest for profit alone. Though the town manufactures munitions, it is also a utopian home for lepers, ex-prostitutes, and others marginalized by society. Opposing Eboshi is the wild wolf-girl San, a fiercely independent creature of the forest and adopted daughter of the wolf god Moro.² San has led the sentient forest animals in attacks against the townspeople, resulting in the loss of many lives. Both sides have justifiable grievances; both sides care deeply for the protection of their own groups. Into this conflict steps Ashitaka, a young

warrior prince. Ashitaka has journeyed far from home to free himself from the curse of a dying boar god, who became a demon after being shot by Eboshi. A powerful warrior, but peace-loving and compassionate, Ashitaka is the last prince of a dying tribe, one that lives in tune with nature but remains fully human. With his enormous capacity for both empathy and suffering, the young man is destined to try to end the conflict between the ironworks and the forest. Just as Ashitaka refuses to take sides, so also does Miyazaki - both San and Eboshi are drawn as sympathetic characters, representing worlds that have their own unique beauty, as well as their own savagery. Miyazaki avoids the clichéd Western trope of good vs. evil and explores the issues of technology and nature in a way that affirms both.

Mononoke is of particular interest to religious scholars because of the way in which Ashitaka's liminality enables him to play a salvific role that may be recognized cross-culturally as sacred or holy. Drawing on his sympathy with both nature and human society, Ashitaka is uniquely able to recognize the interdependence of the two. He responds by playing the roles of mediator, martyr, and finally, savior. In a Japanese context, Ashitaka's character resonates with Buddhism's commitment to asceticism, peace, and compassion, as well as Shinto's call to harmony with the natural world and respect for tradition. Yet to Western eyes, Ashitaka may be easily read as a saint or Christ figure. In this paper, I will compare Ashitaka's story with the Christ story -- although not in order to suggest

that such an identification was the director's intention. The ability of Western audiences to relate to Ashitaka as a sacred figure may be linked to the cross-cultural importance of liminality in portrayals of the sacred. Ashitaka's essential ability to "see with eyes unclouded"³ and relate to both Eboshi and San with empathy can be compared with Jesus' ability to speak the language of the religious establishment of his day while also identifying with the marginalized; Ashitaka's suspension between the human town and the sacred forest is similar to Jesus' status as both human and divine.⁴ Just as Ashitaka remains liminal throughout the film, never truly one thing or the other, Mononoke's conclusion is problematic and in-between, serving to connect the film's dilemma to our modern social context. As Asian studies scholar Susan Napier remarks, ". . . Princess Mononoke's world is one in which nature, emblemized by the inhuman shishigami, remains beautiful but threateningly and insistently Other. This is also a world in which technology cannot be erased or ignored but rather must be dealt with as an unpleasant but permanent fact of life."⁵ Plurality, otherness, and conflicting interests are fixed features of living in our world, and both Ashitaka and Jesus serve as models of how these relationships might be negotiated.

The first few moments of Ashitaka's appearance onscreen show both his connection to the forest and his commitment to human community. He is riding competently through the dark and sacred forest, yet his first action in the film is to

enter a human settlement to warn the village girls of approaching danger. As a demon emerges from the forest and hurtles toward the village, the audience is able to observe both Ashitaka's skill in combat and his reluctance to use those skills to do harm. With the camera fixed on him and the landscape racing past, emphasizing his speed and desperation, we watch Ashitaka ride ahead of the charging demon, shouting, "Calm your fury, O mighty lord! Whatever you may be, god or demon, leave us in peace!" At this crucial moment, however, Ashitaka must bring not peace, but a sword: when it threatens the lives of the three fleeing village girls, he draws his bow to slay the beast.

Cursed by the dying boar god, Ashitaka leaves his tribe and travels to the West in search of a cure. On his journey we see repeated signals of the young man's connection with the world of nature and his sympathy with his fellow human beings. He and his mount Yakul share the same bag of food, and he lets the elk eat from his hand before he feeds himself from the same hand. Later, when attacked by a pair of samurai who are chasing women and children, he kills them, but confesses later that he regrets their deaths. Finally, when Ashitaka comes across two wounded men floating in a river and left for dead, he acts as a good Samaritan -- he binds their wounds and, carrying one on his back, brings them home to the ironworking town. On the way the party passes through an enormous and magical forest that is densely populated with spirits. The forest is taboo to the townspeople, but though

his wounded companion is terrified to the point of gibbering, Ashitaka is delighted. They pass through the forest safely and arrive at the ironworks, where the main action of the film begins

Ashitaka's rescue of the wounded men wins him entry into the ironworking town, where Lady Eboshi shows him her ironworks, her munitions manufacturing, and the leper colony that she cares for and protects. Ashitaka is horrified at the production of the guns, and accuses Eboshi of breeding new hatreds with the weapons. Against his will, his scarred right hand leaps to his sword, and he forces it back with the left. When Eboshi asks him levelly, "Would your right hand like to kill me?", he replies, "To lift the curse, the left would, too. But I fear it would not stop there." Ashitaka is well aware of the capacity of violence to feed on violence, and so stays his hand. Later, he wanders through the town, and stops to observe the work of the cheerful women who pump the huge bellows of the ironworks. To their surprise, he asks to try his hand at the work, and they laugh uproariously as he sets a far too rapid pace. As when he entered the sacred forest without fear, here we see Ashitaka violate boundaries that are scrupulously observed by others - in this case, gender distinctions. Those familiar with the gospels will recall Jesus' similar penchant for such boundary violation, as when he talked with and taught women as well as men, or ate with the poor, the unclean, and other marginalized groups. Significantly, the town that Ashitaka interacts with so warmly is largely made up

of former outcasts - in addition to the lepers, many of the women have been rescued from brothels.

Perhaps the key scene for encapsulating Ashitaka's character and his role in the film is the wolf-princess San's attack on the ironworks. Ashitaka puts himself in San's path, insisting, "I don't want to fight you," but gets nothing for his trouble but a knife-cut to the face. Ashitaka, however, is still willing to turn the other cheek; he narrowly saves San from being shot, but she rushes toward Eboshi, who is waiting to fight her one-on-one. The two warring sides are guilty of a hatred that bursts into violence both between them and within their ranks (a neighboring lord wars on Eboshi; the various species of sentient animals quarrel and fight). As Ashitaka steps between the two women, separating them forcibly, the scar on his arm erupts in a halo of groping, transparent tentacles. As an emblem of hatred, the scar demonstrates hatred's working - it destroys the one who hates as surely as it destroys the enemy. Yet Ashitaka's commitment to compassion and discernment enable him momentarily to harness the scar's power -and his own anger - and use it to halt the conflict. As he holds Eboshi and San's weapon arms firmly, his participation in the curse that inhabits all three of them gives his words added weight. He tells Eboshi, "There is a demon inside you. And in her," but adds as the scar bursts its ghostly tentacles forth, "Look on this! It is the form of the hate within me!" Ashitaka experiences and participates in the cycle of hatred without allowing

it to master him. In a Christ-like fashion, he is fully engaged in the suffering of the human experience while still transcending it enough to call for a stop to violence. Later, his commitment to minimize violence as he carries San from the town leaves him mortally wounded - much as Christ, though possessed of divine power, allowed himself to be crucified. As he tumbles from his mount's back, he is in danger of becoming a martyr to the cause of peace.

Though dying and almost unable to speak, Ashitaka's courage and gentleness win San over, and she brings him to the glade of the Shishigami, or Forest Spirit, to be healed. An almost hallucinatory sequence follows where the Shishigami, a deer-like creature with a face that is reminiscent both of a beast and a human being, restores Ashitaka to wholeness. Where the creature steps, plants bloom and then instantaneously wither away, suggesting its function as arbiter of both life and death; the near-silence that marks the scene emphasizes its aura of the uncanny and the sacred. When Ashitaka awakes, the wound in his chest is gone, but the blackening scar on his arm is still growing. Though Ashitaka has nearly lost his life trying to prevent violence between the forest and the town, hatred's curse remains in his body. To lift it, he must negotiate some kind of genuine reconciliation between the warring parties.

In the last third of the film, the creatures of the forest make full-scale war on the human forces, while Eboshi unwisely cooperates with the Emperor to slay

the Shishigami. Ashitaka demonstrates liminality and engagement by both assisting the people of the ironworks in defending their town and striving to protect San and the Shishigami. His adherence to a higher ideal of peace and co-operation is both mysterious and maddening to the other characters. The greedy priest Jiko is heard to wonder, "Whose side is he on?" San herself accuses Ashitaka of siding with the humans, even stabbing him with the crystal dagger he gave her as a gift. As before, he does not flinch from the blow. Her anger spent, San allows him to gather her into his arms and comfort her gently. Again, Ashitaka's willingness to meet violence with love, even at the expense of his own body, is a signature characteristic of his role as a Christ-like mediator in the film. Interestingly, the only character that mirrors Ashitaka's pacifism is the Shishigami, who smiles gently at Eboshi and does not resist even when she aims her gun. This parallelism marks Ashitaka as being in tune with the primary source of divinity in the film - another characteristic of Christ.

The apocalyptic sequence comes to a climax when Eboshi, ignoring Ashitaka's cries, shoots off the Shishigami's head. Out of its body gushes a mindless black sludge that kills everything in its path. The Shishigami reforms into a blind, rampaging, headless mass: trees fall; grasses and flowers turn black; the smaller spirits of the forest tumble from their perches, dying; the town is destroyed. Only at the last possible moment do Ashitaka and San wrest the head away from its carriers and, certain of their own deaths, stand arm in arm to offer it to the

Shishigami. The head is returned by human hands, symbolically ending the conflict between forest and town. For a moment the spirit stands whole again, then explodes, covering the ruined town and surrounding hills with fresh, green growth. In the aftermath, Ashitaka and San awake to find that Ashitaka's scar is finally gone, and the curse lifted. By an act of self-sacrifice, San and Ashitaka have redeemed not only Ashitaka himself, but all those in the conflict who were being eaten away by hatred. In one character's remark that "I didn't know the Deer God [Shishigami] made the flowers grow," we see a dawning realization in the townspeople's minds that the forest and the town are interdependent. Yet this is not an entirely happy ending. Ashitaka and San agree to live "together" in the sense of continuing contact and cooperation, but apart in the physical sense - San in the forest, Ashitaka in the town. Though the war is over, San cannot forgive the other humans. Both she and Eboshi have had a change of heart, but their interests are still in conflict.

It is easy to see how Ashitaka's behavior in *Princess Mononoke* can be described as that of a saintly or Christ-like figure - he uses force only in the immediate defense of life, steps into conflicts even at personal risk, participates fully and deeply in human suffering while not being mastered by anger, crosses boundaries of gender and group allegiances that are taboo to others, and in the end demonstrates his willingness to lay down his life to end the killing. The film makes it clear that Ashitaka is in a unique position to perform this task, as he is the only

one to truly see "with eyes unclouded." As a creature of both the forest and the town, Ashitaka calls San and Eboshi to become like him, fully human but also fully in touch with the natural world. Although neither woman learns to move between the worlds as Ashitaka does, their willingness to attempt to live in peace at the close of the film shows how Ashitaka's example has allowed each to broaden their worldviews.

Yet Ashitaka's peace-making abilities have not come without sacrifice. The gospels portray Jesus as being rejected by many of his people, most particularly by his hometown of Nazareth; Ashitaka has also lost his home, as he has been forced to leave his dying tribe behind forever in order to lift the curse. These two compassionate, boundary-crossing figures are perpetual outsiders, in some ways able to sympathize with more than one group because they belong to none, and never can. Liminality and status as a holy person, it seems, has a cost; there is a tragic dimension to Ashitaka that is not fully addressed either by his personal healing or by his success in ending the conflict.

In considering the role of a holy person in a world that is full of political, economic, and religious conflicts, we might do well to reflect upon the text from Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Ashitaka's behavior in *Princess Mononoke* is a clear example of a philosophy that violates all of society's boundaries and rigid

dichotomies - for Ashitaka, there is neither beast nor human, forest nor town, but one world that must learn to live in harmony in order to avoid destruction. Though set in a fantasy of the past and populated with fantastic creatures of all kinds, this film contains a highly relevant message for the contemporary viewer. It offers us hope while acknowledging a world that is complex, tragic, and deeply conflicted, and calls us to take a more holistic and integrated view. Through the character of Ashitaka, *Princess Mononoke* invites us to understand the essential interdependence of our world and its uncomfortable plurality, while challenging us to continue our struggle to approach Otherness with empathy.

¹ For Mononoke statistics: McCarthy, Helen. Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1999, p. 186. For Spirited Away statistics: Hollis, Kim. "Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi)," *Box Office Prophets*. 3 Feb 2003 (<http://www.boxofficeprophets.com/tickermaster/sep2002/spiritedaway.asp>).

² A note on the context of the word 'gods:' the gods of the forest range from sentient animals to the uncanny shishigami (translated as Deer God or Forest Spirit), who seems to rule over life and death itself. They are examples of kami, the ancient traditional gods of the Japanese who are linked to or embody the forces of nature. Napier, Susan J. *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*. New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 177.

³ All quotes from the dialogue are taken from the English subtitles of the U.S. DVD release. *Princess Mononoke (Mononoke Hime)*. Dir. Hayao Miyazaki. 1999 (orig. Japanese release 1997). DVD. Miramax, 2000.

⁴ San shares Ashitaka's liminal status in that she is a human being who has been adopted by the forest and who considers herself to be a wolf. Her denial of her human origins for the majority of the film, however, prevents her from playing a peacemaking role until the stakes involved have grown truly apocalyptic.

⁵ Napier, p. 192.