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Triumph OF THE PAST

Fish will not live where the water is too clear. But if there is duckweed or something, the fish will hide under its shadow and thrive. Thus, the people will live in tranquility if certain matters are a bit overlooked or left unheard. –Yamamoto, *Hagakure*

April 2003: Princess Mononoke

From 1985 to 1994, while writing the "heavy" *Nausicaa* manga,¹ Hayao Miyazaki made wistful, lighthearted films: *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Porco Rosso*. When he was no longer writing the manga, he made a "heavy" film, *Princess Mononoke* (1997). It resumes many of the same themes as *Nausicaa*.

The Story

The emperor's government has collapsed, and Japan is in a century of civil war (1467-1573). A commercial class is rising, and skepticism. There is a burgeoning iron industry, and primeval forests are cleared in the name of progress. Far from all this, in a remote corner in the far northeast, dwell what remains of the Emishi, the indigenous people of Japan.

Ashitaka, prince of the Emishi, is forced to kill a giant boar that has become transformed into a demon. A mass of writhing black tongues roars and rages like fire around the boar's body, devouring and driving him. Riding his red elk Yakul, Ashitaka lets an arrow fly into each eye, killing it. But his arm bears a painful blotch where the demon latched onto it, a curse (*tatari*).

At a meeting of the elders, the Oracle-woman tells Ashitaka he must leave:

O: Prince Ashitaka, are you steeled to gaze upon your fate? A: Yes, I was resolved when I let my arrow fly. O: The scar will seep deep into your bones and you will die. . . . You cannot change your fate. You can, though, rise to meet it. . . . Calamity has befallen the land in the west. Journey

there and see with eyes unclouded. There might be a way to lift the curse.

She gives Ashitaka an iron ball found in the boar's body. It is what drove him mad and turned him into a demon.

Ashitaka has become, through no fault of his own, a stranger to his own people and departs alone in the dead of night on Yakul. Only his beloved, Kaya, breaks the rules to say goodbye and give him a gift--a jewelled dagger. He travels west through the forests, following the monster's tracks backward. Defending some villagers from attack, he finds that his marked arm, throbbing painfully, has a strange power that enables his arrows to lop off men's heads and limbs.

Jiko, agent of the emperor and worldly wise, takes an opportunity to introduce himself. They camp together, and Ashitaka tells about the boar. Jiko tells him that far off in the western mountains is a primeval forest where the beasts are giants, as they were in ages past. These are the *mononoke*--the animal-gods--and their king is the Deer God.

There is a walled town in the forest, Tataraba (Bellow's Place), whose chief is a woman, Lady Eboshi. A huge furnace roars night and day, to melt the iron ore that they extract from sand. Tataraba was built under the protection of Eboshi's riflemen, and it was she who shot the boar-god Nago and drove him mad. Eboshi's chief escort is all women, former prostitutes whose contracts she has bought, and the most gifted of these is Toki.

It is morning when Ashitaka reaches the western mountains, and the story from here takes three days. Rain. Eboshi's people are struggling up the mountain when they are attacked by wolves. Eboshi bravely stands her ground and shoots the mother, the wolf-god Moro, who falls into the gorge. The other two escape. One of them has something hunched on its back, the girl San. San was literally thrown to the wolves as an infant while others escaped. Moro raised her as her own child, and San does not know that she is human.

Down below, Ashitaka sees the wolves and San on the other side of the river. San's mouth is smeared with blood from where she has tried to suck the poison out of her mother's wound, but her mother is mortally wounded. They gaze on each other, her earrings faintly tinkle, and she leaves. San has seen humans before, but this is the first time she her eyes and those of another person have met.

Ashitaka has rescued two men from the river, one of whom needs serious medical attention. Led by kodama--tree-spirits that look like baby ghosts--they go through the Deer God's forest. At the heart of the forest is a secluded pool bright with light. For a fleeting moment, Ashitaka sees the Deer God in silhouette, with his upward-thrusting crown of antlers. Clearly, Ashitaka has been brought there for a purpose.

Arriving at Tataraba, Ashitaka has an audience with Lady Eboshi, a skeptical and sarcastic sort, reminiscent of Kushana in *Nausicaa*. Ashitaka is intelligent, innocent, earnest, and very strong and is a big hit with the women. When Ashitaka says he has come to "see with eyes unclouded," Eboshi bursts out laughing. She likes him because he is such an original. Eboshi shows him her private garden, where lepers are designing a lighter gun for her women to handle. Ashitaka wants to kill Eboshi for the curse she has brought to his door, but he is

interrupted by a faint voice, a dying leper: "She is the only one who looked upon us as human. Without fear of our disease, she washed our rotting flesh, bandaged us."

Night. In the first of three flashes, Ashitaka "sees" San. She has come scrambling across the rooves, wearing a ceramic animal-mask. When her mask is shot off, her earrings again tinkle. Eboshi's guards are no match for her, and soon the woman and the girl are fighting like furies. But Ashitaka, moving like one possessed, his arm surrounded by dark, undulating serpentine forms, walks between them, knocks both unconscious, and takes San over his shoulder. One of Eboshi's women shoots a hole in chest, but, losing blood, he presses open the huge gate and walks out to Yakul and the wolves.

Shortly thereafter, San comes to. She is on Yakul, and at that moment Ashitaka falls off. San jumps on him ready to plunge a dagger into his throat for thwarting her revenge. Looking up, he simply says, "You're beautiful." At this, she jumps back, flustered. The apes-gods accuse her of being human, and for the third time her earrings tinkle. She makes friends with Yakul, and we begin to see her sweetness. She brings Ashitaka to the Deer God's pond. Sniffing her own armpit, she says, "Humans stink."

The sun rises, the second morning. Jiko and a group of hunters and scouts are spying on the Nightwalker, the Deer God's tall, graceful, translucent night-form, wading through the trees with his head in the sky. Jiko has a pardon from sin from the divine emperor if he kills the god and takes its head, which is supposed to confer immortality. They watch as the Nightwalker changes back into the Deer God. He has a human face.

The Deer God comes to Ashitaka and heals the hole in his chest. San returns with an edible plant. Finding Ashitaka too weak to chew it, she chews it for him and feeds him from her mouth like a baby bird.

Hundreds of boar-gods have followed their leader, Okkoto, from South Island. A Last Battle is preparing, gods against humans. Wolves and boars meet. In the quiet afterwards, San, Ashitaka, and Yakul see the Deer God walking on the water.

Jiko has hunters and scouts with him and wants Eboshi (who has already killed one god, Nago) to kill the Deer God. Eboshi thinks it unnecessary because the gods are being weakened gradually by the humans' encroachment on the forest. But Tataraba would be a tempting prize to capture, and Eboshi finds it politic to oblige.

Ashitaka awakens in the wolves' cave, high above the forest. San is still asleep. San is still asleep. Outside, Ashitaka and Moro have a midnight talk:

A: Can't humans and the forest live together in peace? Can't this be stopped? M: The humans are gathering. Their fire will reach even here. A: And San? Do you intend to take her with you? M: How like a human to think only of himself. She is a daughter of our tribe. When the woods die, so will she. A: Set her free! She's human! M: Silence, boy! What can you do for her? The humans who violated the forest threw her in my path as they ran from me. Now she cannot be human, and she cannot be wolf. My poor, ugly, lonely daughter. *Can you save her?* A: I don't know. But together we can live. M: How? Will you join with San and fight the human race? A: No. All that does is cause more hatred. M: There is nothing you can do, boy. Soon the scar will kill you. Leave here when the sun rises.

Ashitaka returns to the cave. San wakes briefly. He thanks her, and she is happy. They go back to sleep. This night scene is accompanied by a lovely female vocal. The words are by Miyazaki:

In the moonlight I felt your heart
quiver like a bow-string's pulse
In the moon's pale light you looked at me
Nobody knows your heart

When the sun has gone I see you
beautiful and haunting, but cold
Like the blade of a knife so sharp, so sweet
Nobody knows your heart

All of your sorrow, grief and pain
locked away in the forests of the night
Your secret heart belongs to the world
of the things that sigh in the dark,
of the things that cry in the dark

Third morning. Ashitaka awakes alone. San has left him wrapped food and a wolf to lead him back to Tataraba.

San and the wolves are watching the humans' preparations. Like Kushana, Eboshi is a great general. They will provoke the boars into attacking at a place where they can be massacred with mines and grenades. San buries her face in her mother's fur, says she will go to war to be the eyes of Okkoto, blinded by smoke. Moro, who knows she hasn't long to live, says, "There is a life for you with that boy." "I hate humans," San replies. But when the one wolf brings a gift from Ashitaka-the jeweled dagger-San says, "It's pretty," and her earrings tinkle for the third time.

Ashitaka and Yakul. A sudden storm. In his second flash, Ashitaka "sees" San and explosions. The storm abates and the fog blows off, revealing Tataraba under attack by a local lord, Asano, with whom there has been friction. The walls have been breached, but the women and lepers are defending the stockade. Ashitaka gets to the walls and promises to bring Eboshi. As he goes off, an arrow wounds Yakul in the rump.

Ashitaka comes to the battlefield of gods and men. There are piles of bodies-men and boars. In his third flash, Ashitaka "sees" one of the wolves alive in one of the piles. He rescues it, and the two go off to find Eboshi and San, leaving Yakul to rest.

Okkoto, maimed and bleeding, is going to the Deer God to be restored, with San on his back. Jiko's hunters and scouts, wearing boar-skins and smeared with boars' blood, follow, intending to let Okkoto lead them to the Deer God. The maddened Okkoto imagines they are his dead, returned. He collapses, and writhing red tongues begin to burst from his body. When he rises again, he is a demon, and San, knocked out by a well-aimed stone, is buried under the raging red mass.

Ashitaka learns by wolf-howl that San is in trouble, and his wolf takes him on its back and bounds off. Passing Eboshi, he jumps off long enough to report that Tataraba is attacked, but she is resolved to finish this war first.

Ashitaka finds Moro near death. He calls San's name, and she answers from Okkoto's head, "Ashitaka!"--the first time she has spoken his name. Trying to rescue her, however, he is hurled into the water, and it is Moro who summons her last energy to save San. Then Moro's voice, no longer mocking, comes to Ashitaka under the water: "Can you save her?" He receives San from Moro's mouth, and the Deer God comes walking on the top of the water. Eboshi shoots the Deer God through the neck, causing him to stagger for an instant. He calms the heart of Okkoto and then gently takes his life, and Moro's.

Ashitaka pulls San through the water to safety. Then as the sun sets, the Deer God's neck begins to elongate into that of the Nightwalker. "Watch closely," marks Eboshi. "This is how you kill a god." She runs directly under him and fires straight up. The body explodes in inky globules. She recovers the head and tosses it to Jiko, who has a box for it. At that moment, Moro's head comes to life one last time and, detaching itself, flies at Eboshi, cleaving off her right arm.

Swimming back, Ashitaka saves Eboshi as well. This San cannot abide. "You are on their side," says San. "I hate humans!" Ashitaka says, "I am a human and so are you!" "Shut up! I'm a wolf!" she yells and tries to stab him with the jeweled dagger, but his chest is stiff like rawhide. "I'm sorry," he says. "I tried to stop it." She melts. He puts his arms around her. "It's over," says San. "Everything. The forest is dead." "No it's not," he says. "We're still alive. Help me." They will return the god's head. The globules have formed into an ill-formed giant whose neck spews ink across the sky and then down into every nook and cranny, looking for its head.

Predawn. In Tataraba, people are still asleep. A leper fixes Toki's gun, and they talk together in hushed tones. A groaning sound awakens everyone, and black ooze pours over the hill. Two wolves come running, bearing San and Ashitaka. Ashitaka tells Toki she must evacuate, and she promptly takes charge in the crisis. In seconds, Tataraba is engulfed.

Ashitaka and San chase down the box. Surrounded by a sea of ooze, both their bodies blotched by the curse, they hold up the Deer God's head, and Ashitaka puts his arm around San's waist.

The Nightwalker bends down, down to receive his head and resumes his graceful form. But then, rising high into the sky, he plunges on what remains of Tataraba, splintering it and sweeping it all away. There is a stunned pause, and then slowly, the barren site turns green again before their eyes. Toki's good-for-nothing husband Korkoku puzzles, "I didn't know the Deer God made the flowers bloom."

Fourth morning. Ashitaka and San wake up in tall grass with the two wolves and Yakul:

S: Even if they grow back, they won't be the Deer God's woods. The Deer God is dead. A: The Deer God can't die. He is life itself. Life and death are his to give and take. He is telling us we should live. [He looks at his mark, which is faded, barely visible.] S: I like you but I can't forgive what people have done. A: That's alright. You live in the forest, and I'll live at Tataraba. Together we'll live. Yakul and I will visit you.

She and the wolves depart. Eboshi is back with her people. "Can you believe it?" she says. "Saved thanks to a wolf! . . . We'll start over again. We'll build a good

village"--while Jiko grumbles: "I give up! You can't win against fools!" A little kodama on a tree bobs its head and clicks in greeting to the god.

Interpretation

Miyazaki has said:

I think that the Japanese did kill Shishi Gami [Deer God] around the time of the Muromachi era. And then, we stopped being in awe of forests. . . . From ancient times up to a certain time in the medieval period, there was a boundary beyond which humans should not enter. Within this boundary was our territory, so we ruled it as the humans' world with our rules, but beyond this road, we couldn't do anything even if a crime has been committed, since it was no longer the human's world. . . . After Shishi Gami's head was returned, nature regenerated. But it has become a tame, non-frightening forest of the kind we are accustomed to seeing. The Japanese have been remaking the Japanese landscape in this way.²

Eboshi is the god-killer in this story. She mortally wounds Nago and Moro and kills the Deer God outright—the first two to defend her people from attack, the last to win needed allies in a period of great uncertainty. Miyazaki calls her a "revolutionary."³ She has great virtues, is brave and heroic, would lay down her life for her people. Too proudly human, though, she defies even the gods and spurns tenderness as weakness. In fact, Eboshi is a lot like her nemesis Moro. Both are sure that humans and gods can't live together. For Eboshi, the gods are on the way out, and the future belongs to humans.

Ashitaka is also a god-killer, for he delivers Nago's death-blow. As Eboshi is leader of her people, so Ashitaka is leader of his. But their attitudes could not be more different. Whereas Eboshi, the revolutionary, acts with irreverent insolence ("Watch closely, this is how you kill a god"), Ashitaka, a cultural dinosaur, acts equally resolutely but with superstitious dread. He has always had one foot in the world of the numinous.

His supersititious dread, it turns out, is fully justified: he must pay with his life. The oracle-woman says: "You cannot change your fate. You can, though, rise to meet it." Go and "see with eyes unclouded," and then—who knows? From these words, the plot takes its rise.

San, too, has a foot in both worlds—in her case, because she is a human raised by a god. Her hatred of humans and final acceptance of her own humanity is one of the great motifs of the film, beautifully punctuated by the tinkling of her earrings. We first see her sweet side when she smilingly tells her wolf-siblings that no, they may not eat Yakul!

Miyazaki has said of Ashitaka, "The moment he cut his topknot off, he was no longer human" because he no longer belonged anywhere.⁴ He becomes a cursed man, an exile. He and San are soul-mates because she, too, lives a brutal life in exile from her own kind, only she doesn't know it.

When their eyes meet for the first time, it causes a revolution in both their souls, but only Ashitaka feels it as love. For Ashitaka, it brings the world back to have a soul-mate even if he must die. For San, it threatens the only world she has ever known. She is unprepared to be told, "You're beautiful." She has never thought of herself as anything but an ugly wolf.

The song "In the moonlight I felt your heart" is the song of the suddenness

of love in a dark world and reads equally well as his song to her and her song to him. To put it in my own words: "Our eyes met in the dark, and suddenly I felt your heart. It was like the twang of a plucked bow-string that sends an arrow flying. You are so alone. At night I see you in my dreams, and it is like the piercing blade of a knife. You are so alone, like me. Your heart sighs and cries in the dark forest where no one can hear, but now I hear it."

The story does not end in happily-ever-after, however, for he cannot live in the forest, she cannot live at Tataraba. San says, "I like you but I can't forgive what people have done." As Moro said, "She cannot be human, and she cannot be wolf." Yet he says, "Together we'll live. Yakul and I will visit you"—and this has to be enough. Ashitaka here echoes Nausicaa's last words in the manga: "No matter how difficult it is, we must live." To live with painful contradictions is still to live. Eyes meet across the loneliness of immense space and make fleeting joy real: "Life is the light that shines in the darkness."

Miyazaki calls San's last words

a thorn that stuck in Ashitaka without being resolved. Ashitaka is the kind of person who is willing to live with the thorn. . . . [Ashitaka] has a distrust of the humans' acts to survive in the ecosystem as a thorn. And at the same time, he can not turn a blind eye to people dying from starvation. Ashitaka has no choice but to suffer and live, while being torn between such conflicts.⁵

Thus, Ashitaka will accept Eboshi's invitation to stay, he will help rebuild Tataraba. And we know it will be a new and better Tataraba because we see in Eboshi a new humility. She is not a revolutionary any more. The Deer God is life itself, and she will no longer war with life itself, pitting men against gods.

Eboshi says, "Can you believe it? Saved thanks to a wolf!" What does she mean? In the beautiful scene where San buries her face in her mother's fur and Moro says, "There is a life for you with that boy," Moro is saying farewell and giving a mother's blessing to the love in her daughter's heart that San herself does not yet know she feels. But there is no life with that boy without Tataraba (for Ashitaka cannot live in the forest and San cannot live anywhere else), and there is no Tataraba without Eboshi. Although she cannot know the reason, Eboshi understands that Moro, by taking only her arm, spared her life.

We noted a Christian feel to the theme of redemptive suffering in the *Nausicaa* manga, and we see the same thing here, too. The Christ story, too, is about the God of Life with a human face, who walks on water and is murdered.⁶

The "curse" originally came from Eboshi's iron ball when Tataraba was being founded, and Tataraba also sounds like the word for curse, *tatari*. Tataraba is a black mark on the landscape just as Ashitaka's curse is a black mark on his arm. Yet for people to build a town in the wilderness to give themselves a better life is human, just as for Ashitaka to prefer his village over the life of Nago is human.

Miyazaki has observed:

Ashitaka was cursed for a very absurd reason. Sure, Ashitaka did something he should not have done—killing Tatari Gami [Cursed God]. But there was reason enough to do so from the humans' viewpoint. Nevertheless, he received a deadly curse. I think that is similar to the lives of people today. I think this is a very absurd thing that is part of life itself. . . . It's not like we can coexist with nature as long as we live humbly, and we destroy it because we become greedy. When we

recognize that even living humbly destroys nature, we don't know what to do.⁷

Thus, it seems, paradoxically, that a curse is wedded to life itself. There may have once been an age of lost innocence, but the way back is not the way we came. Our life may be spared, but not our tears. Tears are a sign that the God of Life is bringing good out of evil in us, a blessing out of a curse. Ashitaka's mark has faded, but it will never disappear completely. (And if it disappeared from his skin, it would never disappear from his heart.) Tataraba will be rebuilt, and it *will* be better than before. It will be better because Ashitaka will be there, because Moro's daughter will be nearby, because Eboshi will not forget her debt to a wolf, and because Koroku now knows who makes the flowers bloom.

Notes

1. The "Nausicaa *manga*" is the thousand-page comic book, *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind*; see "A Comic Book That Moveth to Tears," *Triumph of the Past*, January and February 2003.
2. Miyazaki, "Miyazaki on *Mononoke-hime*," interview, *Mononoke-hime* Theater Program, July 1997, p. 5. This interview can be found at www.nausicaa.net. Page numbers are as printed out.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5f.
6. The Deer God's trefoil foot would then suggest the Trinity.
7. Miyazaki, "Miyazaki on *Mononoke-hime*," pp. 1, 10.

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