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Nature, Technology, and Ruined Women: Ecofeminism and Princess Mononoke

Abstract

This article examines the popular anime Princess Mononoke through the lens of ecofeminism. In particular, we provide a close reading of the two female lead characters, San and Lady Eboshi, to demonstrate the problematic gender tropes that are often woven into films about ecological issues.

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NATURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND RUINED WOMEN: ECOFEMINISM AND PRINCESS MONONOKE

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INTRODUCTION

To Western audiences unfamiliar with the genre, the Japanese film genre of anime might at a first glance look like a children's program. Certainly the visual style of the genre, including the hand-drawn animation, the often fantastical settings, and many colorful characters and anthropomorphized non-human characters are reminiscent of Disney cartoons and other films directed at prepubescent audiences. However, unlike most animated features in American culture, Japanese anime often tackles serious, adult themes in a more careful and nuanced way. While American cinema has at times tried its hand at animated features targeting adult themes and audiences, *Through a Scanner Darkly* (2006) being a recent and highly-awarded example, Hollywood (and American animation in particular) is "notorious for its happy endings even when those are improbable" (Levi 10). Where American animated cinemas, Levi argues, often use sadness or grief as a smaller piece of an ultimately heroic narrative for main characters, Japanese anime more commonly deploys grief, loss, and death as the centerpiece of their narratives. Indeed, Levi describes *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, one of the most popular anime series in America, as "a celebration of sadness and loss" (12). Furthermore, Shinobu Price explains that anime, in contrast to much of what we see from feature-

length animation in the West, has a “much freer palette from which to choose its audience and subject matter” (153). It is true that there are many anime made for children, including the wildly popular *Ponyo*, but an equal (or possibly greater) number of anime films address serious issues from a mature perspective, not shying away from death, heartache, and pain.

The film *Princess Mononoke* is an excellent example of the depth and complexity that anime has the potential to convey. While *Mononoke* features a fantastical story with talking animals, a dashing young hero, and a princess, it is as far from a traditional Western cartoon as one can get. The film deals in nuanced ways with the conflict between the natural world, represented by the intelligent animal spirits of the wood and their champion San, and industrialization and technologies, represented by Lady Eboshi’s weapon-producing Iron Town. The personification of nature within the film is both obvious and vibrantly alive; the forest itself is ruled by a creature dubbed “The Great Forest Spirit” who rules over both life and death within the realm and maintains the forest for all the inhabitants. And even though there are a slew of human characters who have their own important stories, the story of the forest and nature itself is an important backdrop to the film and is what contains the overall message about how to respect nature, even in the face of advancing technology and civilization.

The increasing popularity of anime in America, coupled with the complex and weighty subject matter they often tackle, makes the genre an ideal focus for analysis. In this essay we explore the classic and highly successful *Princess Mononoke* from an ecofeminist perspective. While the film has often been praised for its strong female characters and its positive environmental message, an ecofeminist reading shows us how *Princess Mononoke* problematically recreates some troubling archetypes related to women and their connection with nature. In particular, *Princess Mononoke’s* portrayal of Lady Eboshi and San ultimately reflect subconscious anxieties about women in positions of power.

ECOFEMINIST READING OF ANIME

It should, of course, be noted that like most anime, *Princess Mononoke* was initially produced in Japan with a Japanese audience in mind. While many anime now enjoy world-wide popularity, there are substantial elements of the cultural context of many anime that may be missed by viewers outside the culture. Anime has become an extremely important industry both in Japan and outside of it, a fact that may lead to some confusion as various films and TV series are often edited specifically to “Americanize” them. Often these attempts to minimize Japanese cultural influences go hilariously wrong: in one of the first anime shown on American television, *Starblazers*, a character is shown eating an onigiri (a rice ball wrapped in nori) while the dialogue refers to the food item as chocolate cake (Levi 7). However, more common than these intentional alterations are simple misunderstandings or missed allusions. Indeed, Samantha Nicole Inöz Chambers argues most audiences in America are “oblivious to the pervasiveness of Japanese culture in what they watch” (94). Levi uses *Ghost in the Shell*, a popular anime about a cybernetic woman in a futuristic world, as an example of how this obliviousness often manifests itself in contemporary anime. She notes that the main character, Kusanagi Motoko, is not visually marked as Japanese in any way. The futuristic struggle of *Ghost in the Shell*, ultimately questioning what it means to be human in a world filled with technology, certainly applies broadly to audiences in America and Japan. Nonetheless, there are a number of subtle references and cues that, to audiences unfamiliar with Japanese culture and mythology, will go unnoticed. Most notably of these, the character’s very name “references the fabled kusanagi sword of Japanese mythology” (Levi 4).

Levi has noted that American audiences of anime in particular have a tendency to interpret elements of Japanese culture as merely another part of the fantastic, a tendency perhaps encouraged by the fact that anime narratives often contain elements of science fiction or fantasy (16). Thus, while the spirits and aspects of nature depicted in *Princess Mononoke* are “unabashedly Shinto,” Western audiences are likely to interpret the emotive creatures and personified forest spirit as

fantastical elements of the plot and not question their historical or religious significance (Levi 10). Western audiences will most likely miss other elements of Japanese culture inherent to anime. Like *Ghost in the Shell*, many of the names in *Princess Mononoke* provide further insight into character motivations and/or context. For instance, many viewers outside Japan might not know the meaning of the title and usage of the word “Mononoke,” and the connotations that are associated with the word. Takako Tanaka explains some of the symbology that Japanese viewers would likely be familiar with, but other audiences would not:

As it is used in the Heian period, *mononoke* is something highly elusive, intangible, and unfathomable. In the film, however, it assumes a very concrete form, often appearing as an animal, such as a great wolf or wild boar. It is unclear why Miyazaki chose the word *mononoke*, but partly due to the influence of the film, the term has recently come to be used to refer to any concrete thing with a strange or eerie aspect, and is sometimes used interchangeably with *yōkai*, a monster, ghost, or apparition (“Understanding Mononoke”).

Within the film, the eponymous “princess” is formally named San. For a viewer ignorant of both the Japanese language and the cultural context, it may seem peculiar that she should have two names.

We highlight these distinctions and slippages because, in this paper, we interpret the film from the perspective of a Western audience—a perspective we argue is warranted given the film’s incredible popularity for non-Japanese audiences. As Chambers and Levi have demonstrated, a lack of familiarity with cultural contexts has not prevented either the increasing prevalence of anime in American culture or American audiences’ ability to find their own meaning and connection with the genre. While a fuller examination of the historical and mythological references is outside the scope of this analysis, Takako Tanaka’s “Understanding Mononoke Across the Ages” provides a thorough overview of how the film connects both with Japan’s history and with the “Japanese perception of the spirit world”.

Princess Mononoke follows the struggles of two women, women scholars and fans often read as strong female characters. Certainly both characters are seen to be powerful women who defy traditional gender stereotypes and roles at the outset of the film. In many ways, they are foils for each other. San, the eponymous Princess Mononoke, lives wild in the forest and is more comfortable in the presence of the various animal spirits that live within. Lady Eboshi, the warrior-like ruler of Iron Town, champions progress at nearly any cost and has little care or compassion for the natural world. Nonetheless, they are similar in their defiance of conventional roles. Indeed, many characters throughout the film refer to both women as unnatural: Eboshi for her leadership of the town and “masculine” ways, San for her wild nature and apparent lack of civilized behavior or appearance. While, as previously mentioned, both women are commonly referred to as strong characters, the conclusion of the narrative complicates this reading. Eboshi is maimed and removed from her position of power, replaced by the male hero Ashitaka, and San essentially exiled to the forest.

The Perils of Performing Strength: Lady Eboshi’s Fall

Lady Eboshi, the main antagonist of *Princess Mononoke*, demonstrates how many “strong” women who oppose traditional gender tropes often ultimately pay the price for challenging those gender roles. While the narrative introduces her as a strong character, both politically and emotionally, she is physically maimed and forced to resign from her place of power by the conclusion of the film. Though some critics have read Eboshi’s character as a positive representation of a woman’s authority, using ecofeminism as a lens illustrates how her character follows a common character arc in films about nature and natural disasters, an arc that reflects deep-seated anxieties about women, nature, and power.

Lady Eboshi is the leader of Iron Town, a place she helped to build and make thrive. She was able to take her role at the head of Iron Town because she led a ruthless attack against Nago, a boar god and protector of the mountain with her warriors. This fierce display secured her role as Iron Town’s unquestioned leader. It is her continued displays of

dominance and brutality toward nature, both in the form of resource acquisition/destruction and through physical violence against the living embodiments of the forest's spirits, that help her hold that position. It should be noted here that, while her attitude toward nature is violent and uncompromising, she treats her own citizens with care and compassion. Thus, Eboshi's character is one that is a constant contrast between her words, actions, and appearance. In many ways she is at war with her own self, as well as the rest of the natural world, as she tries to maintain a leadership position in the face of limiting societal ideals that value men and masculinity as superior. Eboshi continuously makes efforts to maintain her power through a mask of masculine behaviors and leadership style, though she does visually perform aspects of a feminine presentation through her elegant clothing, styled hair, and make-up. Thus, while her physical gender presentation is not by any means androgynous, her behavior and interactions with her townspeople continue to reinforce a masculine persona.

In *Princess Mononoke* technology is clearly associated with masculinity and destruction through Lady Eboshi's defiance of (and ultimate submission to) gender expectations. Indeed, while Eboshi's character might at first glance seem to challenge traditional gender roles, she is in fact a perfect demonstration of the "natural disaster heroine" archetype, as described by Cynthia Belmont:

The disaster films, which in some cases overtly connect the destructive power of nature with a disapproving view of women in positions of authority, portray the trouble with nature as being tied to the dissolution of traditional gender roles: as they foster a fear of and drive to conquer nature, they also feed cultural anxiety about women's empowerment and suggest that meekness and passivity are required of women if order is to be restored to a chaotic, unstable world (350).

Even as the ruler of Iron Town, Eboshi must operate in a patriarchal system; she must perform gender on both ends of the spectrum to maintain her place. She plays her emotions close to the chest and is even careful not to allow herself a wide range of facial expressions. Even when

her words might echo pity or sympathy, her actions and expressions seem nearly void of emotion at all. She wants the men under her control to see her as machine-like, as cold and hard as the iron itself. It is precisely because she outwardly denies any character traits that might be read as feminine, that the men in the village respect her. However, as Belmont suggests above, this is ultimately an untenable situation; Eboshi's "unnatural" drive toward leadership must be cowed if order is to be returned to the chaotic world. Belmont states "women with authority - - including the construct of Mother Nature -- are dangerous and must be contained" (370). Recounting how she destroyed Nago, one village man states excitedly, "She isn't even afraid of the *gods*, that woman!" (*Princess Mononoke*). It is important to note that she is the only respected woman within the fortress that is Iron Town. This is because of her presentation of masculinity that projects her feelings that she cannot be contained and her determination that she will not be stopped. Minnie Driver, who voiced Lady Eboshi in the English version of the film, was interested in "the challenge of playing [a] woman who supports industry and represents the interests of man, in terms of achievement and greed". Driver is using "man" here to refer to the standard "human versus nature" conflict that many environmentally themed/natural disaster movies portray, however her words are especially telling given that it is truly Eboshi's "masculine" will to power that causes her downfall.

We see Eboshi possesses big ambitions with her industry of iron. She seeks to perfect technology--not just the billows used to manufacture the iron--but the resulting product: Eboshi's weapon of choice is her specialized guns. The film makes a point of demonstrating to viewers that Eboshi will not be content simply as Iron Town's leader. Instead, she seeks power on increasingly larger scales; she already took over the valley and she wants to destroy the mountain, though her long-term goal is to rule the world. In hopes of accomplishing this, she drives her people to continuously perfect her designs. Interestingly enough, in destroying the mountain to gather the iron within the terrain and continue the production of her weapons, we see a symbolic destruction of that which

represents femininity and nature, so that she can secure her place as Iron Town's head and her masculine mask may reign. She is war, she is destruction and she is power. Her poison bullets spread her violent and destructive influence, first against Nago and now Ashitaka. And yet, in her efforts to destroy nature, the oft-viewed feminine opposite of masculine technology, she claims women are superior to their male counterparts. This is clearly seen when Jigo presents a letter from the emperor to Lady Eboshi, granting them permission to slay the Great Forest Spirit. Eboshi sarcastically remarks that it is "impressive, for a piece of paper." She goes on, showing the letter to two of her village women, saying that the letter is from the emperor. Their responses are, "That's nice, who's he?" and "Is he supposed to be important?" Feeling that she demonstrated her point that she does not even acknowledge the power of men, not even the emperor himself, Lady Eboshi dismisses the women.

At the same time, Lady Eboshi is a walking contradiction; she balances the public performance of her aggressive and masculine leadership necessary to keep her position of power, while expressing her more characteristically feminine traits in secret. She looks for increasingly dominant, more powerful roles so that she can be a woman, but must give up measures of her femininity to do so. She must compromise, keeping most of her feminine behavior hidden away from the public sphere. Eboshi's traditionally feminine behaviors show in the fact that she has taken in "her girls." Lady Eboshi rescues the women who work the iron billows and who bought out their brothel contracts. The women are given free rein and allowed to eat as much as they like. Eboshi affectionately refers to these women as "her girls," and she places nearly all of her trust in them and only what she must in the men of her town. For display only it seems, Lady Eboshi nearly always has Gonza at her side, a sort of right-hand man. However, it becomes obvious that he is simply for show and her true right-hand is Toki, a former brothel girl. Still, the women are worked hard, with shifts of working the billows that run four days long at a time. Though they remain safely inside Lady Eboshi's fortress, unlike the men who risk their lives to travel and

deliver iron, Eboshi still utilizes the women and puts them to work. This helps to dilute suspicions of Lady Eboshi being soft-hearted. Any evidence of her coddling or acting truly soft are kept from public eye, away from the able-bodied males of her town.

It is in secret that Lady Eboshi allows herself to fully take up caretaking, loving, and almost maternal behaviors. In her private quarters, she reveals to Ashitaka her “secret” in the form of a room full of handicapped lepers. These people are treated strictly in a compassionate manner. As much as Eboshi seems to want to embrace herself as a fully feminine, powerful woman, the softer she is the more hidden away she keeps her actions. She speaks of wanting to destroy the Great Forest Spirit, for this will allow her town and her influence to grow. Yet, she goes on to express that the blood of the Great Forest Spirit might be the key to “cure [her] poor lepers”. It is interesting that she is out to kill that which is part of nature, the feminine opposite of technology, in order to maintain her femininity as well as her masculinity.

Eboshi knows that the world views men as those worthy of power. She plays along, though she does not share this mindset. When plotting with the women of her village, Eboshi stresses, “Remember, you can’t trust men”. In private, she asserts her belief that women are superior, and yet her femininity is her downfall by the end of the film. It is, as Belmont says, “In general, while the male protagonists rise to heights of physical, intellectual, and emotional fortitude, achieving national/international recognition for their victories over nature, the heroines degenerate from strong, capable professionals to disoriented, dependent weaklings” (364). While she is initially presented as a strong woman who is coded as masculine, she is undermined and manipulated by Monk, Jigo, and his men. The climactic scene of the film finds her removed from power and reduced to a classic damsel in distress, ultimately rescued by Ashitaka. She must go on in a way that completely contradicts her character from the beginning of the film, being punished for behaving in an unwomanly fashion and for her pursuit of technology at the expense of nature. “By making the character [Eboshi] a woman, and one who can both destroy and rebuild, the film problematizes the

facile stereotyping of technology, armaments, and industrialized culture as evil... [Eboshi]’s tragedy is that she is not actually evil” (Napier 185).

In the end, the real tragedy is not that she is evil but that she is female. The technology is not destroyed completely nor is nature destroyed; Eboshi is destroyed for trying to alter the social and natural order. Ashitaka takes over, declaring that Iron Town is to be rebuilt in a way that works in harmony with the natural spirits and the forest. Eboshi must submit to the leadership of a man. Napier argues that the film “ is a wake-up call to human beings in a time of environmental and spiritual crisis that attempts to provoke its audience into realizing how much they have already lost and how much more they stand to lose” (Napier 180). This is especially true for Eboshi. The hyper-aggressive, uncompromising persona she must adopt in order to defy the patriarchal power dynamic of her time ultimately proves to be her undoing, as she is unable to compromise without endangering her position in Iron Town; she is engaged in a losing battle. It is not enough that she is removed from power in the film, but she is crippled as well and can no longer operate her machines. She is powerless, losing both symbolic and physical parts of her being.

Being the “Bad Mother”: The Exile of Princess Mononoke

In many ways San, the eponymous Princess Mononoke, is Eboshi’s opposite. Both are, in different ways, “bad” women, but they exist at opposite ends of the spectrum. Where Eboshi embodies the strong, masculine woman usurping male authority, San becomes a cipher for nature as “bad mother”. San is clearly coded as feminine, but she displays characteristics of the savage, unrefined and uncontrolled femininity of nature, a femininity that cannot remain within the cultural system and must be either dominated and controlled or exiled. She is depicted as the princess of the forest even though she is not specifically a spirit of the forest. San is human; her human parents gave her as a sacrifice when the wolf goddess, Moro, attacked them for damaging the forest. However, while it seems they expected the wolf goddess to kill her, Moro instead raised San alongside her wolf children.

Catherine Roach explains that the concept of Mother Nature can often be split into two categories: good mother and bad mother. In her good mother guise, Nature is a true representation of the idealized mother in a patriarchal system: “providing, caring, self-sacrificing, and inexhaustible. Mother is she who feeds and cleans and comforts and warms us, she who satisfies our wants” (Roach 40). Ecofeminism has often looked at the problematic connection between nature/nurturing/woman. However, in her bad mother form, which Roach argues we still recognize inherently female, “nature is dangerous, cruel, and torturous, as she attempts to drown, burn, freeze, and blow us away” (76). This is precisely the version of nature we see in *Princess Mononoke* and, as Roach observes, the fear of Mother Nature as bad mother is directly related to “the anger in general of a woman who has been crossed” (76).

When we first meet San, it is in this role of avenging Mother Nature. With her two brothers by her side, San intercepts Eboshi and her men moving exposed through the forest and mountains, outside the safety of technology in Iron Town. While Eboshi’s guns and troops protect her from the assassination attempt, they are able to completely disrupt the procession, reinforce their role as an ever-present threat (bad nature lurking and waiting for the weaknesses of technology to become apparent), and injure two of Eboshi’s party. San and the rest of her clan are dressing their wounds by the river when they first encounter Ashitaka, who is immediately stunned by the sight of the wolf goddess and a girl about his age standing across from him. Thus, in her first appearance, we see San as wholly savage. While we do not yet understand either her motives or the situation, this depiction immediately “links her to premodern archetypes of ferocious femininity--the shamanesses, mountain witches, and other demonic women who are the opposite trope of the all-enduring, all-supportive mother figure” (Napier 245).

Eboshi, San’s rival, tells both the viewer and Ashitaka the story of San and how she came to be in her unique position as savage woman among the nature spirits. Hearing her story, Ashitaka “[leaps] into the

romantic, ecological drama, becoming "ecoknights" ready to protect and save helpless "Lady Nature" from the big, bad dragon of human irresponsibility" (Heller 219). When he next meets San, Ashitaka attempts to take up this role as savior, intervening in Eboshi and San's fight and walking out of the town with San over his shoulder in order to keep her from being harmed by Eboshi or the other townsfolk who are openly hostile toward San. Despite repeated demonstrations of San's strength and prowess, in this scene, she is robbed of her agency as Ashitaka attempts to both subdue and protect her. However, while Ashitaka may attempt to take on the role of stalwart savior and defender, San's savagery and ferocity as the embodiment of "bad Mother Nature" will have none of it.

When San recovers her senses she is instantly on the defensive, retrieving her knife and pointing it at Ashitaka's throat. The following descriptive scene is from the official *Princess Mononoke* screenplay, translated into English by Fiona M. Smith:

"Why did you interfere?" she growled.

"Because I didn't want to let you die," he replied.

"I'm not afraid of dying! If the humans are driven away I don't care about my life!" she yelled.

"Live," Ashitaka feebly said as he gasped for breath.

"You're still talking? I don't take orders from humans!" She retorted.

"You are... beautiful," Ashitaka gasped. At these unexpected words San jumped back as though she'd been struck (Miyazaki 29).

Here we clearly see Ashitaka attempting to fulfill classic medieval romantic tropes, which Heller argues is a common theme in broader conversations about ecology by politicians and activists. We see a clearly "courtly" theme to Ashitaka's actions: while he has saved and admired his lady, his love is a chaste and protective one. San's rebuffing of these advances continues to demonstrate the savagery of nature.

As she holds the knife around Ashitaka's throat she explains that she does not trust him, and displays confusion about having a human choose

to help her succeed in something that would potentially be bad for him as well as other humans who live in a technological age. She is even more confused and angry when he explains that he did this because any human, even her own parents, has never valued her. Her confusion causes her to lash out at Ashitaka and explain, in a sense, that she is fearless and willing to risk her life for the greater good of the forest. In the interaction between San and Ashitaka, we see two common tropes of nature colliding with each other: “Lady Nature”, as defined by Heller, who needs to be shielded and protected from the horrors of technology, and “Bad Mother Nature”, whose savagery and power threaten to overwhelm and engulf humanity.

San’s fierce independence and strength leave her permanently outside of human society, and while this is sometimes read as a positive, it’s important to note that neither of *Princess Mononoke*’s strong female characters are able to be part of human society while they remain active agents of their own. San embodies what it means to be one with nature, but in her wild strength, she must live forever outside of culture. Belmont argues that having a woman closely associated with nature while portraying a hostile, unpredictable character, is not good for environmentalists or ecofeminists. “...their representations of gender in the specific context of a vision of nature as a threatening, destructive force that must be subdued by authoritative male figures and masculinist institutions reinforce the ideologies responsible for environmental degradation and social injustice - issues which are of the utmost importance to ecofeminism” (351). This pattern of a woman becoming too wild, and thus needing to be restrained and controlled by a male figure, has become far too common in disaster films and films in general. This is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it one that is no longer applicable to our modern media, *Taming of the Shrew* (1593), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1953), and *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) all have something in common. Each film features a wild woman who needed to be tamed by a male in order for them to be happy because the male protagonist was able to bring them into civil society. The man is seen as a hero for

“taming the beast” and is celebrated at the end of the film when the woman is revealed as “tamed”; when it was her will that was broken.

San ends this pattern of a strong woman who must always be tamed by a man, but is only able to do so by remaining entirely outside of the human system of culture and society.

Ashitaka, the bold knight defending “Lady Nature,” manages to save the city of Iron Town, but he is not able to convince San to return to Iron Town with him after the ecological disaster is thwarted. Heller notes that “romantic ecology often veils a theme of animosity toward woman under a silk cloak of idealism, protection, and a promise of self-constraint”, and Ashitaka’s invitation to San attempts to play out this narrative. Kozo Mayumi, Barry D. Solomon, and Jason Chang read this primarily as a statement about her feelings and her traumatic past, explaining her decision was made because “her hatred toward humans never disappears” (5). We argue that San’s exile at the conclusion of the film holds two important meanings, both of which demonstrate that *Princess Mononoke* participates in some problematic ideology: “in reinforcing masculinist institutions, [natural disaster films] operate counter to both feminism and environmentalism” (Belmont 370). First, by remaining outside of the cultural system, San reminds us that Mother Nature, vengeful and powerful, is ever-ready should humanity/technology overstep its bounds. Second, we see that a powerful woman, in control of her own body and destiny, has no place in polite and ordered society. San’s options are simple: submit to Ashitaka’s courtly love, a love built on the sexist desire to shield, control, and protect, or remain independent but exiled.

LOOKING FORWARD

The central tenant of this argument is certainly not to imply that *Princess Mononoke* is in some way a “bad” film. Indeed, *Princess Mononoke* is one of the most highly regarded anime of our time, and for good reason. Napier notes that, in its native Japan, the film’s appeal “seems to extend to all parts of Japanese society... despite its complex, ambiguous, and often dark text,” and it was the highest grossing film in

Japan until Miyazaki's next film, *Spirited Away*, overtook it (176). Further, *Princess Mononoke* addresses an increasingly important topic, the impact of human intervention and technology on the world we all share, in a complex and nuanced way. This is a topic Miyazaki himself is committed to, and he has said "I've come to the point where I just can't make a movie without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem", highlighting just how essential this topic is to him as a creator and director (qtd. in Smith and Parsons 27). Indeed, in the more child-focused *Ponyo*, Miyazaki tackles similar environmental concerns (impending destruction stemming from the incompatibility of nature and humanity) from a different perspective. The mother figure in *Ponyo* strongly echoes Roach's definition of the sustaining, nurturing "good mother nature", while Ponyo's father challenges gender roles in his effeminate appearance, emotional behavior, and his unique ability to bridge the nature/human dualism.

Still, ecofeminism as a critical lens helps to illuminate some of the more problematic ways the film depicts gender in connection with nature and technology. As discussed above, Eboshi nearly perfectly conforms to the problematic model Cynthia Belmont explores in "Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine", as a one of so many "heroines who are initially characterized as "modern women"—capable, intelligent, and employed—are quickly returned to the domestic sphere and to helpless dependence on masculine physical prowess and technological know-how" (350). Thus, like so many heroines in the natural disaster genre, both live-action and animated, Eboshi is hobbled both physically and socially. Similarly, San acts as the literal personification of nature, and it is through her character that viewers experience "nature as iron bitch": "Nature is an evil "bitch" because she is an overwhelming female entity who threatens humans and fights with frustrating strength against their efforts to escape from and subdue her" (Belmont 359). While Anthony Lioi reads San's rejection of Ashitaka's advances as a demonstration of Miyazaki's commitment to strong female characters, arguing that "Miyazaki tends to disrupt such [marriage] expectations – his male and female protagonists often are not allowed to stay together, or choose to

separate – creating a lack of closure from an American perspective” (np), an ecofeminist perspective suggests otherwise. If, as Smith and Parsons have suggested, environmentalist films directed at younger audiences are indeed attempting to use “children’s popular films as a form of public pedagogy”, it behooves us to think not only about what these films may be teaching viewers (both young and old) about environmentalism, but also to consider what they say about the complicated relationships between technology and nature, between male and female.

These problematic depictions also aren’t limited to either *Princess Mononoke* or to Miyazaki’s films. The complicated relationship between nature, humanity, and technology is frequently explored in anime. Christopher A. Bolton describes another classic anime, *Ghost in the Shell*, as a visually evocative film that “explores the boundary between information, human, and machine,” highlighting in particular the fluidity the film experiments with by both “transcending and endorsing fixed gender roles” (730). The narrative of *Ghost in the Shell*, which is explored through a variety of media, tells the story of a cyberpunk future in which technology is directly integrated into the human body. Thus, the series often explores the tension between the “dream of a natural world”, often problematically coded as feminine, “free from technology’s monstrous encroachments,” often coded as masculine (731).

Looking at anime through the lens of ecofeminism provides a rich and evocative means of enriching our understanding of both. Anime, often more narratively complex than their Western counterparts, frequently tackle issues regarding the intersections between humanity, nature, and technology. Sometimes they do so in a direct, nearly evangelical manner, as Miyazaki does in many of his films. Other times, this tension is a subtle undercurrent that runs through the larger narrative, as in *Ghost in the Shell*. In either case, using ecofeminism as a lens with which to approach anime helps us to move toward a more critically reflective interpretation of these media. Likewise, as anime becomes increasingly popular in the living rooms across mainstream

America, these films can help us see how environmental issues and feminism often intersect.

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