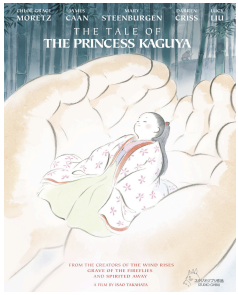


The Tale of the Princess Kaguya

Kaguya-hime no Monogatari, 2013, Japan

Film Overview



The Tale of the Princess Kaguya is a retelling of one of the most well known Japanese folk tales of all time. The original story, while being quite brief, gives this film its bare bones material, which it then fills in with Japanese storytelling motifs, breathtaking art, and the struggles of one teenage as she struggles to have a normal life. One day, an old bamboo cutter goes out to the forest to do his job, and sees a bamboo stalk glowing brightly. Inside the bamboo is a miniature girl clothed in a kimono. The bamboo cutter is amazed at this development, and brings the girl back with him to show his wife. Once his wife takes the girl out of her hands, she instantly grows into a regular babe. After this, the elderly country folk set out to raise the girl as their own, giving her the name Hime, which is Japanese for princess. They raise Hime in the countryside, but the Bamboo Cutter soon slices into other magical bamboo stalks, finding fine silk dresses and vast amounts of gold. Believing these are signs from Heaven that Hime must be given a wonderful life, the Bamboo Cutter moves them to the capital so that Hime can have the education appropriate for a princess. As she grows up, suitors hear of her beauty. She gives the suitors who come to see her impossible tasks, which brings a comedic strength to the film. These trials and tribulations presented to a woman with a fierce soul in a world dominated by hierarchy and men culminate in a story that is ultimately about family, love, and premature loss. The story of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is one about growing up, the complicated dynamics between men, women, families, and society, and ultimately about what it is to find love and losing that love before you're ready to let go. Keeping within the standards of Studio Ghibli, this film is not only a cinematic masterpiece, but has the feeling of a Japanese *ukiyo-e* having come to life. The story also plays to the strengths of Ghibli's female characters, Hime being a fiercely independent and introspective character who is at times crestfallen and saddened by her living situation. Isao Takahata has outdone himself. *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is a masterpiece.



Isao Takahata is a prominent Japanese filmmaker of many popular animated feature films. He is a co-founder of Studio Ghibli, an animation studio and production company, producing the popular films *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Pom Poko*.

Cultural Notes

- ***The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter/The Moon Princess*** *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is based off of a Japanese folk tale usually referred to by either of the two titles mentioned above. The tale is much simpler than the film itself, with Takahata fleshing out the personalities and conflicts between characters that were not present in the folk tale. The folk tale provides the bare bones for the movie – The bamboo cutter finds a small girl in a bamboo stalk, he and his wife raise her, they move to the capital where the girl gives her suitors impossible tasks, and then the girl returns to her home on the moon.
- **The Setting** The setting is never explicitly stated, nor is the name of the capital where Hime moves to, but the Japanese viewer would understand what time period the movie is placed in at once. The capital where Hime and her family moves to is governed heavily by court culture and aristocratic ideals, which is in line with the customs and culture of Heian-kyo, known today as Kyoto. Heian-kyo was the capital of Japan for over 1,000 years (794-1868) when Emperor Kammu established the capital there, ushering in the Heian Period (794-1185) of Japan. Another giveaway as to the period is the presence of the Emperor as a character. His power and stature in the capital speaks to how there have yet to be any takeovers by shoguns at the point in Japanese history this story is set in.
- **Pure Land/Mono no Aware** (Spoilers) Two other aspects of Japanese culture that appear in the movie is the appearance of Pure Land symbology at the end of the film that is used to highlight the impermanence of Hime's presence on earth, referred to in Japanese culture as *mono no aware* (lit, "the pathos of things"). Hime is taken away by a figure that appears as a Buddha who is accompanied by his heavenly *devas* and other such servants. (which looks strikingly similar to the image to the left). The Pure



Land is similar to how Hime describes her life on the Moon before she arrived to Earth. It is a place of peace and divine solitude, where the feelings and pathos that plague humans are not felt by the denizens of the Moon. However, the Pure Land is also a place where practitioners of Jodo Shinshu and Shingon Buddhism believe they go to when they die. In this way, we could possibly see the whisking away of Hime to the moon, a place of pure bliss, by the Buddha as a metaphor for her untimely death. In this, the story registers an awareness of how fleeting and impermanent the things we cherish in this life really are, calling back to the perennial Japanese theme of *mono no aware*. These two aspects of the film make for a bittersweet ending.