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Maiden and the Moon: A Feminist Analysis of Japanese Lunar Aestheticism

When a humble bamboo cutter cut down a particular stalk that seemed different from the rest, he discovered a perfect little princess inside: pure and untouched by earthly things, like a tiny Buddha. It was only years later, near the end of the story, that the bamboo cutter (and the readers in turn) discovered the truth about the unlikely princess: that she was originally a resident of the moon, and came down to earth to repent for wrongdoings. She is of the moon and that is why she possesses so many of the qualities Japan associates with the moon. Her enlightened Buddha-like nature is so much like a full moon shining brightly and purely at the top of a composition. When she must return to the moon it is an inevitable regression, as she is too pure to remain on an earth that would tarnish her. The symbol of the moon in the myth of the bamboo cutter is deeply connected with the aesthetic of purity and enlightenment and furthermore with the archetype of the “pure woman”.

The concept of the moon being pure is deeply entrenched in Japanese culture. In historical artworks the presence of a glowing full moon implies enlightenment and is always purposefully included to convey that meaning to embellish or further the story told by the rest of the composition. Artist Alex Reyes studied a woodcut by Kobayashi Kiyochika and commented multiple times on the significance of the moon's presence, saying “the moon is also in its full moon phase, suggesting the Buddhist concept of “enlightenment”” (Reyes) and, “The full moon situated in the upper-left corner symbolizes enlightenment in Buddhism” (Reyes).

In folktales in which the moon is prevalent besides that of the bamboo cutter, there are similar themes of enlightenment. “The folktale is a Buddhist tale in which a monkey, hanging from a branch, tries to reach for the moon, as the moon would (as aforementioned) be “enlightenment.” However, this monkey fails to realize that what it is reaching for is in fact a mere reflection of the moon, and thus falls into the water when the branch it is hanging onto breaks. This tale is a warning of disillusionment” (Reyes). Whereas Kaguya had already reached enlightenment from the start and in fact embodied it, serving as a sort of personified metaphor for enlightenment, the story of the monkey serves as a relatable anecdote for humble earth dwellers who have made missteps in their lives and in their journeys towards self-improvement. Other Japanese stories still feature the moon whilst teaching its audience about the nature of enlightenment: “a rabbit gave its life to feed a Buddhist deity that had been disguised as a weak, elderly man. Because this deity was touched by the rabbit’s selflessness, he put the image of the rabbit onto the moon, where it can be seen pounding rice into *mochi*” (Reyes). Like Princess Kaguya, the rabbit is also sent up, up, into the sky and to the moon due to its virtuosity and purity of spirit. Like a woodcut artist purposefully adding the detail of a full moon, these stories also all very intentionally utilize the image of the moon to instill the concept of enlightenment in their audiences minds.

Similarly, the concept of a desirable, marriageable woman is also tied with the pristine and glowing nature of the moon. In the story of the bamboo cutter, many important suitors gather in hopes of glimpsing and winning the hand of the moon-like princess Kaguya. They haven’t seen her yet but she is rumored to be unbelievably beautiful and so they crowd outside her parents home for days on end. They desire her in a greedy sort of way with no desire for a sincere and human connection, which can be gleaned by the way that many of them would rather

lie and deceive her than complete the tasks Kaguya levies them with. The suitors' grasp for the moon like monkeys from the aforementioned story, only to find the moon's reflection rather than the real thing due to their approach being a deceitful and lazy shortcut.

The dichotomy between the men and Kaguya is interesting to analyze: While it is within her power to choose one of them or reject them, she is ultimately expected to decide on one as her husband, and then essentially belong to him. Within Japanese history there is a fraught and saddening decline that can be observed in women's autonomy and agency. "Many historical studies have shown that Japan made the transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal descent system fairly late in historical terms. As late as recorded times in the seventh and eighth centuries women continued rule as sovereign." (Hsiao Chun, Scanzoni). Before women were pristine moons to be caught in a man's hand, they had authority within their communities and could make their own decisions regarding significant matters such as inheritance. Intriguingly, Buddhism which colors so much of the story of Princess Kaguya, also played a part in disempowering women in society: "Confucianism and Buddhism not only lent support to a patrilineal descent system which had replaced matrilineality but also ascribed an inferior social and religious status for women. Moreover, tied to this patrilineal system, an aristocratic class was developing at this time, making one's descent a matter of public record and linking it to the male." (Hsiao Chun, Scanzoni) This particular quote refers to the proto feudal period which lasted from 1185 to 1603, which came directly after the Heian period in which the bamboo cutter story is theorized to have been written ("In 1185 Japan Began"). Buddhism is prevalent in the story of the bamboo cutter, and so this patriarchal leaning of the Buddhist perspective must be taken into account when reading the story. The aforementioned feudal era was one of empowered samurai, and in turn, disempowered women. "After the breakdown of the imperial state system and the

rise of a warrior class, Japanese women's position was even more declining... Women began to be viewed as legal incompetents and appendages to men” (Hsiao Chun, Scanzoni), that was the mindset with which women were perceived around the time of Princess Kaguya, and although the “legal incompetent” clause isn’t stated explicitly within the text, the suitors who try to trick her do not consider her competent enough to discern a dirty bowl from a magic one that glows with heavenly light, and in winning her deceitfully they do hope to make her their “appendage”. The text critiques this sort of treatment of a woman as well as creating a space in which readers of any time, whether they be listeners gathered at an oration during the Heian period or modern twenty first century readers, can witness how Princess Kaguya, a veritable enlightened moon of a character might be mistreated.

Of course, the moon historically being a deeply important symbol within Japanese media, it wasn’t constrained to only symbolize Buddhist enlightenment. It’s evershifting face which is so bright and intense on one particular day of the month is reminiscent of one of the prominent aesthetic concepts of Japan; that of “Mono no aware.” *Mono no Aware* is prevalent in Japanese works and one of the teachings of Buddhism. The Buddhist teaching aims to lessen peoples suffering by making them accept the fleeting quality of life, the inevitability of change, and the transient quality of all good things. “Buddhism holds that life is marked by three key qualities: impermanence, insubstantiality and suffering. Suffering occurs because humans try, but fail to hold onto the impermanent and insubstantial aspects of life” (Lomas). The moon is caught at its most vibrant and arresting phase in the woodcuts that can be appreciated from ancient Japanese periods, and it is usually referred to in its full phase in allegorical stories. The viewers of those works are put in the position of beholding that temporal beauty and being forced to acknowledge that it is something precious that must be treasured in the moment. “Mono no aware suggests that

impermanence should not just be accepted, but appreciated. This does not mean impermanence is welcomed or celebrated. There is still sadness present in *mono no aware*, a sorrow at the loss of people and things that are precious to us. However, there is also a quiet rejoicing in the fact that we had the chance to witness the beauty of life at all. We are sighing rather than weeping” (Lomas). When aesthetes view beautiful art or when students study the old stories of Japan, it may bring tears to their eyes, but the underlying lesson is one of appreciation for what occurred rather than grief.

Much like the ever shifting moon, Princess Kaguya as a character is entrenched in the philosophy of *Mono No Aware*. In the story of the bamboo cutter she is initially a baby for the titular bamboo cutter and his wife to raise, but she grows at a rapid pace, more reminiscent of a bamboo stalk than a regular child. Her adopted mother and father barely have the time to appreciate the gift of parenthood as Kaguya’s childhood slips by in a matter of months. Once she has grown into a resplendent beauty they are able to enjoy her presence for a number of years, however ultimately they can do nothing when the people of the moon arrive to take Kaguya away. In this way, through the bamboo cutter’s perspective, the audience experiences a fleeting relationship with a treasured daughter and perceived blessing from the heavens. When his daughter informs him of the grave news that she will soon be forced to depart from the earth, the bamboo cutter certainly weeps quite a bit, and even goes so far as to request the Emperor's help to prevent the inevitable. It is in these details that the bamboo cutter's behavior can be analyzed as a perfect juxtaposition to the tenets of *mono no aware*. Where it may have been wiser to appreciate that he had been blessed with raising Kaguya at all, he instead dug his feet in and made the parting as painful as possible. Perhaps later on, after the proverbial curtains closed and the story came to an end, the character of the bamboo cutter could be theorized to come to the

right conclusions about the experience, but in that moment when Kaguya's departure was at hand he cannot be said to have sighed and acknowledged the beauty of life's transience. Rather than a critique of his character however, it is more so a lesson to readers. It is not in the bamboo cutter's nature to follow the tenets of Buddhism. He is a stark foil to his daughter, who is a sort of Buddha from the very start. For his part, the bamboo cutter embodies sentiments that the average person who cannot help but try to preserve impermanent and insubstantial things can resonate with. Where the bamboo cutter is the monkey, Kaguya is the moon, and when he requests the Emperor's men to guard her from the moon people, he grasps at a reflection of the moon in the water.

Princess Kaguya represents *mono no aware* perfectly, and perhaps that is why it works so well that the moon which also embodies fleeting beauty is her place of origin. "Woman's nature and nature itself, however, are connected" (Parker). Indeed, Kaguya's nature is inherently pure and enlightened the way the natural world is, the way that the moon is, and it is solely the follies of mankind that threaten to mar her. Where she would only marry out of a sincere kind of love fostered through human connection, those that vie for her hand do so with deceitful intent. When the Emperor approaches her and attempts to touch her she disappears into thin air and is so distressed by his actions that she accidentally calls for the help of the moon people, cutting her time on earth tragically short. These instances are further examples of ways in which men might fail to acknowledge *mono no aware*, by attempting to possess a woman, hoping to look upon her astonishing beauty for the rest of their lives and preserve it for themselves, rather than appreciating and sighing over it.

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