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Feminism and Studio Ghibli

Studio Ghibli is easily the most well-known Japanese film studio outside of Japan. Many Studio Ghibli films are known within the United States, and it is relatively common on the internet to laud Ghibli films as feminist, typically at the expense of Disney. While asking people in real life produces a wider range of opinions on the feminism of Studio Ghibli, the animation studio is still more often than not viewed as feminist, with the dissenting voices claiming it is neither feminist nor non-feminist. The point used most often in Studio Ghibli's favor is the prevalence of female characters and the lack of stereotypes impinged upon them. But is this an accurate depiction of Studio Ghibli films? And even if it is, is that an adequate standard to make Studio Ghibli feminist? To argue the feminism of Studio Ghibli, I will focus on the extent that women are treated as equal to men, if there are truly a wide variety of roles for women, and how common stereotypes of women are either subverted or reinforced.

I will draw examples from various Studio Ghibli movies as they apply, but will focus on three of the studio's more popular films: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, as the film credited for starting Studio Ghibli, and considered a Studio Ghibli film for the purposes of this paper; *Princess Mononoke*, as it has many counter examples to common Studio Ghibli archetypes; and *Howl's Moving Castle*, as a film based on a book written by a woman that was drastically rewritten for the movie.

Looking at the entire body of Studio Ghibli films, the vast majority¹ manage to pass The Bechdel Test, mentioned in Ariana's presentation about lesbians in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The test stipulates that a movie must have at least two women in it who talk to each other about something other than a man. However, the test is "truly just a guideline; there are ... films with powerful female characters and feminist themes that actually don't wind up passing the test ... just as there are films that meet the criteria that don't necessarily do anything to further gender equality or female empowerment" (Wilson). Still, while The Bechdel Test cannot be used to determine if an individual movie is or is not feminist, it is a strong indicator that the studio could be feminist when so many movies pass the test.

While female characters are prevalent on screen, it is also important to look at the representation of women behind the scenes. In general, "women are sadly under-represented in the worlds of cinema," and Studio Ghibli does not differ from the norm (Muir). No woman has ever directed or produced a studio Ghibli film, and only six movies have had a female screenwriter². Additionally, in only one of these cases is the woman the sole screenwriter and not joined by a man³. In this way, there is certainly room for improvement within Studio Ghibli for more high level positions to be filled by women.

With so many positions within Studio Ghibli held by men, there is a danger that the male gaze may become dominant, since men typically produce a masculine point of view (Muir). However, while studio Ghibli is led by men, the films more often than not feature young female characters. Moreover, these young women are placed in situations where they gain courage and

¹ Of the twenty feature films produced by Studio Ghibli - and the addition of *Nausicaä* - seventeen pass, three do not have data (*Only Yesterday*, *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, *Tales from Earthsea*), and one fails the test (*Pom Poko*) (Bechdel).

² Reiko Yoshida for *The Cat Returns*; Keiko Niwa for *Tales from Earthsea*, *Arrietty*, *From Up on Poppy Hill*, and *When Marnie Was There*; Riko Sakaguchi for *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (IMDb).

³ Reiko Yoshida was the only screenwriter for *The Cat Returns* (IMDb).

self-respect (Iles). This can be seen in *Howl's Moving Castle*, where the entire narrative focuses on Sophie realizing her importance and self-worth. Throughout the movie, Sophie's physical appearance changes from an old to young woman as she becomes more assertive, willing to stand up for herself, and stops putting herself down. Other examples include Chihiro's journey navigating the dangers of the spirit world in *Spirited Away* and Kiki's gains in self-confidence after leaving home in *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

Women are often treated as equal to the male protagonist in many Studio Ghibli films. The leading women both learn from and teach their male counterparts, instead of presenting male characters who "single-handedly inspire the female characters to emulate them" (Iles). It is a very mutual arrangement, where women and men repeatedly help and save each other. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Nausicaä rescues the downed pilot Asbel, who within the span of minutes also defends her when she falls unconscious. This equality is also seen in *Princess Mononoke*, where San and Ashitaka must work together to protect the forest spirits. This cooperation is visually enforced at the end of the movie, where the two return the head of the forest god by lifting it up together. In this way, Iles claims that Studio Ghibli films are "feminist in its blindness to gender," where female and male characters interact equally, each teaching and learning from the other.

The flowing narratives of Studio Ghibli, where the simplistic view of 'good guys' vs 'bad guys' is typically discarded, allows for more flexibility within roles initially categorized as 'hero' or 'villain'. The very nature of this storytelling technique allows for more complex and nuanced portrayals of women that subvert gender norms. Women are seen in prominent leadership positions in many Studio Ghibli films (Iles). In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Nausicaä is a warrior princess and a pacifist with an interest in ecology. She also fulfills the prophecy

mentioned at the beginning of the movie that predicts a savior will arise “to join bonds with the great earth and guide the people to the pure lands at last” (Miyazaki, *Nausicaä*). It is important to note that this role was originally coded male, with an image of a bearded man to go with the words, causing Nausicaä to subvert the trope of a male savior. Nausicaä isn’t the only woman of the film in a position of power. Kushana is both an empress and a military commander who receives total respect from her soldiers and stands her ground in the face of danger.

Howl’s Moving Castle also features many powerful women, both in terms of position and magical ability. The magical advisor to the king is an older woman, Madame Suliman, and The Witch of the Waste is seen as a powerful and dangerous woman. Aside from Howl and his various aliases, no other male wizard is mentioned by name.

Princess Mononoke has some of the best representations of women in power, specifically in the role of Lady Eboshi, the leader of Irontown, “a commune independent from patriarchal domains” (Yoshida). Through her leadership of the town, Lady Eboshi actively opposes the encroaching samurai and easily sees through the manipulations of Jigo. She is so confident that she lets Ashitaka, a stranger looking for evidence against her, wander anywhere within the town with no supervision. The women of the town follow her example and are dominant and self-sufficient, traits typically seen as masculine (Sugihara). Led by Toki, a former prostitute, the women of Irontown get more speaking time and characterization than the men. One unfortunate downside and less positive portrayal is the trope of the nagging wife and henpecked husband, shown with Toki and her husband Kuroku.

Still, it is important to recognize the amazing job Studio Ghibli has done here giving women voices. Toki is able to freely criticize Captain Gonza, without fear of being reprimanded. While at work in the bellows, the women speak freely and crudely and are not shy expressing

their sexuality by loudly commenting on Ashitaka's appearance, calling him "gorgeous" and "beautiful" (Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*). There are two scenes specifically where the women are reprimanded by the men and then are allowed to speak back and assert themselves. In the first, the men of Irontown talk down to the women, saying, "Look, woman! We risked our lives to bring you the rice you're all eating tonight, so watch your mouth," to which one of the women replies, "And who made the iron that paid for that rice," ending the conversation (Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*). The second instance occurs when faced with a messenger from Lord Asano, who says, "You ladies need to be taught some respect!" and gets "Respect? What's that? We haven't had any respect since the day we were born!" in reply (Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*). These shots are all strongly framed in a way to suggest that the women are in the right for speaking back to these men. Both instances offer positive, feminist representation by allowing these women to speak out against the men, some of which hold positions of power.

Mentorship roles and female friendships are also featured in several Studio Ghibli films. In *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Kiki is supported by the bakery owner Osono, and in *Spirited Away*, Chihiro is guided and helped through the bathhouse by Lin. As mentioned previously, the Irontown women in *Princess Mononoke* form a strong group that supports each other. One counterexample would be Nausicaä, who has no female mentors and a dead mother only briefly seen in a flashback. Instead, she gets Lord Yupa, a classic male master swordsman. Had Lord Yupa been an old woman instead of an old man, the story would have gained a positive female mentor, as well as a master swordswoman that would have been a great addition to a collection of diverse and subversive female roles.

Regarding stereotypes, Studio Ghibli films dismantle much of what is seen in Cool Japan ideology, where young women are allowed to be "cute, feminine, and fun" but also must be

cooperative and docile (Miller). While many female characters within Studio Ghibli works have conventionally feminine attributes, like “Nausicaä’s cute voice and Kiki’s big red ribbon and shy demeanor,” these characters are not necessarily docile (Yoshida). In addition to the titular character, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* also features Kushana, who is a hard woman with a missing arm, divergent from the ideal female body type. Still, Kushana is supposed to be read as an antagonist, and contrasted with the protagonist Nausicaä’s childlike purity and optimism, it seems like Nausicaä’s personality traits, as opposed to Kushana’s, are what is being pushed as ideal. These traits are more closely aligned with the problematic portrayal of women in Cool Japan ideology. Even when Nausicaä goes against the orders of the men in her life to enter dangerous situations, her purpose is always to help others – she never does anything selfishly. When Nausicaä is covered in the blood of a giant bug she still looks cute instead of disgusting, with the only difference a change in the color of her dress from pink to blue.

Within *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Sophie presents an excellent counter example to the women of Cool Japan, as she is far from cooperative or docile and often stands up to Howl. It is also interesting that she is portrayed as an old woman throughout most of the film, which directly goes against the idea that women in media should be young and cute (Miller).

Even more extreme are the female characters in *Princess Mononoke*, specifically the wolf mother Moro and San. The first shot where the audience sees San’s face is when she glares at the camera with her mouth covered in blood, actively challenging the idea of passive femininity (Yoshida). She continues to stay wild and untamed throughout the film, even after meeting Ashitaka. Moro also subverts typical femininity by being both nurturing and protective as well as violent and cruel. She focuses on revenge for the forest, presented as a masculine attribute (Yoshida).

What is especially interesting about *Princess Mononoke* in its subversion of gender stereotypes is its rejection of the heterosexual relationship between the two main characters San and Ashitaka. While *Princess Mononoke* is certainly not the only Studio Ghibli film to end without a relationship, in most other cases it is simply not the focus, and while the audience may interpret the relationship as becoming romantic, it is not shown. Examples of this would be *Nausicaä and Asbel*, or *Kiki and Tombo*. What makes *Princess Mononoke* different is that it is implied that Ashitaka and San will become a couple by the end of the film, but they never do, and instead decide to remain in separate worlds (Yoshida). Throughout the film, the audience is told that Ashitaka has feelings for San, as Moro asks him “Can you save the girl you love,” and tells San that Ashitaka wanted to spend his life with hers. Additionally, Ashitaka himself calls San beautiful, and Lady Eboshi sarcastically tells Ashitaka “I’m sure she’ll make a lovely wife for you” (Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*). With all these comments the audience is led to assume that the ‘guy will get the girl’ in the end, which is specifically avoided.

Still, while there may be a rejection of the heterosexual relationship in *Princess Mononoke*, heteronormativity is strongly reinforced throughout most Studio Ghibli movies. This is a main theme throughout *Howl’s Moving Castle*, with the romance between Sophie and Howl. Admittedly, this is done better than the book, where Sophie’s sisters are also neatly paired off with eligible men. Still, much of the plot throughout the movie relies on Howl’s romantic relationships with women, such as *The Witch of the Waste*’s fixation on capturing his heart.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind also has several heteronormative side comments that seem awkwardly forced, especially since there are no explicit romantic relationships within the movies. When Kushana shows Lord Yupa her missing arm, she makes the comment, “Whatever lucky man becomes my husband shall see far worse than that,” forcing heteronormativity into a

situation that has no reason for it. Later on, Kurotowa makes the comment “She’s starting to look kind of cute to me,” after Kushana demands that the people of the Valley surrender (Miyazaki, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*). Neither comment affects the narrative and could have easily been left out. Even though Nausicaa’s relationship with Asbel is never explicitly romantic, the audience is led to believe that it could be, as he is a prince to her princess. While Nausicaa barely gets a chance to interact with Asbel’s sister, the scene where Nausicaa tries to save her could be read as romantic, as the princess Lastelle fulfills the role of damsel in distress while Nausicaa rushes into the fire to save her. The story could have been more interesting and subversive if Asbel’s and Lastelle’s roles were swapped in the narrative, so that Nausicaa instead saves Lastelle when she is acting as a fierce fighter pilot, and the two girls interact and help each other throughout the movie, possibly culminating in a lesbian relationship.

One of the biggest stereotypes that Studio Ghibli falls into is conflating women with nature and the home. As Timothy Iles writes, “Miyazaki often presents young women as being more in contact with nature or the forces of the spirit world, and so reflective of an essentialising view which sees women as potentially alien to the human, cultural, urban world.” This common theme in Studio Ghibli films reinforces the idea that women are closer to nature, which Carol McCormack explains is illogical and potentially harmful in her essay “Nature, Culture and Gender: a critique.” She explains that the root of this idea lies in the argument that the reproductive power of women places them closer to nature than men. Men, “lacking natural creative functions,” must create other more permanent objects to assert creativity. McCormack points out the fallacy of this argument and asserts that both men and women have equally essential procreative roles, concluding that there is no logic to support the idea that women are

more natural than men, and that “because of their naturalness, are opposed and subordinate to men.”

While the connection between female characters and the natural world is a common theme throughout many Ghibli films, there are some counterexamples. Even though *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke* have main female characters tied so closely to nature that it is a defining characteristic, both films also have at least one female character that opposes nature and works with technology. For *Princess Mononoke*, this is Lady Eboshi, who aligns herself with modern technology over nature and prioritizes human development at the cost of the forest and its spirits (Yoshida). Similar things can be said about Kushana, who tries to use technology to destroy and control nature, in this case a jungle instead of a forest, for the perceived benefit of humankind.

Regarding domesticity, women are often seen cooking and cleaning. These activities are often portrayed as positive and liberating. Sophie in *Howl's Moving Castle* is a prime example, as she considers herself the cleaning lady for Howl and the rest of castle and has several scenes where she is cleaning up after them. Other examples include Satsuki and Mei cleaning their new house in *My Neighbor Totoro*, Chihiro cleaning the bathhouse in *Spirited Away*, Kiki cleaning the room given to her in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and Umi leading the clubhouse cleaning effort in *From Up on Poppy Hill*. Other than the last example, men are rarely seen helping with the work, if at all.

On the internet, many people like to exult Studio Ghibli, and more specifically Hayao Miyazaki, as producers of great feminist media. More often than not, this includes some quip about how much better Studio Ghibli is than Disney (even though Ghibli movies are released as Disney movies in the United States). Often, this means looking over some of Ghibli's flaws and

focusing just on the positive aspects of the films. This is prevalent even within scholarly articles, seen when Iles recognizes that Studio Ghibli often presents women as closer to nature and therefore alien to the human, masculine world, but then goes on to say “this is an issue which I for one am prepared to overlook in favor of his relatively balanced perspective on the abilities of young women to determine for themselves courses of action in any given situation.” While these films are certainly more feminist than not, and include a lot of positive representation for girls and women, it is important to recognize that there is still progress to be made, and positive representation does not erase all flaws within Studio Ghibli.

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