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Gender Studies

Dr. Kind

10/9/2013

Deconstructed Gender Norms in *Princess Mononoke*

I've loved anime ever since I was a little kid. I remember staying up late every Friday night to watch Toonami with my older brother. However as I've grown up, I've begun to resent the one sided femininity displayed by the majority of female anime characters. Anime is notorious for its stereotypical portrayal of female characters. Girls are usually naive and wide eyed, rushing stupidly into trouble only for the brave hero to pull them out of it. My frustration with carbon copy female heroines had gotten to the point that I considered putting my love for anime to rest. Then, one Saturday during sophomore year, I watched the movie *Princess Mononoke*, and I was practically spirited away. The animated film *Princess Mononoke* provides a beautifully rendered alternative to anime's usual gender codes. In multiple instances throughout the film, female characters violate gender norms by acting as both leaders and warriors. *Princess Mononoke* challenges partisan female gender roles with its richly textured female characters, each of whom embody a typically masculine trait.

Before the gender deviations displayed in *Princess Mononoke* can be fully analyzed, it is necessary to evaluate the culture of gender stereotypes that make such deviation possible. Many researchers in the field of gender studies believe that gendered behavior is biologically ingrained during gestation. This essentialist's argument is stiffly opposed by the constructionist view that

gender is a social construct. Although cultural understanding of gender roles has varied greatly across history and cultures, overarching stereotypes concerning masculinity and femininity in the West remain terribly static. Masculinity has been continually characterized by traits such as “independence, confidence and assertiveness” (Leaper). It should be noted that these traits relate directly to aspects of dominance, authority, and success (Leaper). Men are also viewed as more physically aggressive and it is assumed they place a greater emphasis on power, politics and competition (Cohen 164,165). These traits of masculinity are heavily linked to a Western “culturally idealized form of masculine character” (Cheng).

Anime reflects several of Japan’s fundamental beliefs concerning the role of the female in society. Unlike in the West, where comics and cartoons are usually seen as vestiges of childhood, Japanese manga and anime target a national audience. Although several anime series and film studios have regularly produced shining examples of gender equality, the majority of anime is still dominated with rather backward, heavily chauvinist ideals. Anime is a medium in which comedic sexual harassment, damsels in distress and curiously short skirts are in ample supply. The treatment and development of the female characters of *Princess Mononoke* are clear deviations from this usual portrayal of women. *Princess Mononoke* is one of the crowning masterpieces of Japan’s world renowned film studio, Studio Ghibli. Told against a backdrop of Japan’s turbulent Muromachi era, the film is unique in giving its female characters status and respect which in the West would have been reserved for men. Like many of the movies produced by Studio Ghibli, *Princess Mononoke* has a female lead (LadyGeek).

Aside from the aforementioned lead, the animated film boasts an impressive cast of commanding female characters who portray masculine traits of strength and leadership. In the

opening scene, a young prince named Ashitaka is cursed by a possessed boar that was turned into a monster after being shot by an iron bullet. Ashitaka leaves his village after being told by the resident wisewoman that he would die unless he found the source of the boar's affliction. By beginning with Ashitaka's consultation with the wisewoman, the movie deviates from the course of traditional animated films. The wisewoman holds a position of utmost spiritual leadership, a position that although not odd in African and Asia cultures is still rarely seen in cultures with strong ties to Judaism and Christianity. Although Ashitaka is a prince and the oracle is a woman, her wisdom and influence are absolute and her directions unquestioned.

At the border between the boar's forest and civilization, Ashitaka meets the film's second female leader, Lady Eboshi. Lady Eboshi is the ruler of Irontown, a small mining settlement at the border of the boar's forest. Inside the fortified walls of Irontown, Ashitaka learns that before Lady Eboshi became ruler of Irontown its people were under constant assault by angry gods of the forest. Then with guns and gunmen in tow, Lady Eboshi fought off the gods, renewing the prosperity of the mining town. Eboshi also revolutionized the process of turning the ore into iron, hiring society's outcasts, both lepers and prostitutes alike, to work the bellows and design the guns (Hoff Kramer).

Lady Eboshi's political and industrial genius bends many of the gender rules emphasized by Western society. Lady Eboshi is a beautiful, slender woman. Her indubitable femininity would suggest she play the subservient role of a distressed damsel. Ironically, of all the female characters in the film hers most clashes with the western female stereotype. Her dominant and innovative character is epitomized by her military and economic role in the transformation of Irontown. She embodies the concept of the leader. She is unwavering, astute and firm; the first

time the audience sees Lady Eboshi, she is coolly staring down the barrel of a gun, taking aim at the snarling jaws of the wolf goddess Moro. Her influence is such that the men under her command obey her without question and never make reference to her gender or the dichotomy it and her personality represent. There is no prejudice against Lady Eboshi, even from the neighboring lord who attacks Irontown. “It's simply accepted that she's a capable, intelligent noblewoman whose actions have helped her settlement to prosper” (J. Shea).

Princess Mononoke's central female protagonist is a human girl named San. San's role as a warrior and her cool emotional control deviates from anime's standard dewy-eyed female character. Although she is typical in her youth and beauty, San manages to possess several unsterotypical traits, notably her self-awareness, strength and fearlessness. San is also shown as very aggressive, a trait which according to Baron-Cohen is essentially male (165). In the scene where San attempts to assassinate Lady Eboshi she moves with great agility and shows no hesitation, not even when Lady Eboshi brings out her guns.

The seamless connection between San's gender, personality and abilities calls into question the western version of femininity. The media heavily implies that female characters with multiple “masculine” traits are perceived as unrealistic, deterring an effective viewer reception. However, In *Princess Mononoke* San's aggressiveness and cold determination doesn't alienate her from the audience. In the film San acts heroically and she shows concern for both Ashitaka and Moro. In a sense, San could be the poster child for constructional feminism. San was abandoned as an infant and raised by the wolf goddess Moro. So, because of her unique parentage, San was never exposed to the cultural practices which create the widely accepted views on masculinity and femininity. Rather, in the freedom of the forest, San was allowed to

grow naturally, unencumbered by burdensome gender roles. Ashitake never seems to think San's control or aggressiveness is unfeminine, and just like Lady Eboshi, no one remarks on her gender deviance.

The women of *Princess Mononoke* are stark deviations from the Western notions of masculinity and femininity that often perpetuate stereotypical gender roles. Masculinity in America relies upon being strong, independent, and dominant (Rachel). However the possession of all of these traits by the women of *Princess Mononoke* raises questions concerning the assumption that there is a categorical difference between men and women in terms of biology and behavior. It's almost possible to overlook the fortitude, strength and independence of the wisewoman, Lady Eboshi, and San because in the world of *Princess Mononoke* it's never a big deal. Nobody mentions their gender as being either a boon or a detriment or believes their actions deviate from some overarching guideline of female behavior. The layered femininity delivered throughout *Princess Mononoke* helped me hold on to my love for anime and, if yours was ever in doubt, it will likely do the same for you.

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