

**Isao Takahata's "The Tale of the Princess Kaguya": why *Taketori*  
*Monogatari's* final scene was omitted**

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*“Now when I am about to don the robe of feathers, I think longingly of my lord.”*<sup>1</sup>

In the final scene of *Taketori Monogatari* this is what Kaguya writes in the poem she sends to the Emperor before she returns to the moon. It might seem odd to those who have seen the film “The Tale of The Princess Kaguya” but do not know the original story behind it. That is because the film version of Kaguya would never have written such a thing with the Emperor in mind. It would be out of character. One of the possible reasons for this is the contrast between the mountain hamlet and the capital.

Therefore, the question this paper seeks to answer is as follows: how are the mountain hamlet and the capital presented in Isao Takahata’s “The Tale of The Princess Kaguya” and why does this presentation not allow for the final scene of the original *Taketori Monogatari* to happen?

## **1. *Taketori Monogatari* and “The Tale of The Princess Kaguya”**

### **1.1. *Taketori Monogatari***

*Taketori Monogatari* is usually dated to the late ninth or early tenth century, and thought to be the oldest surviving work of Japanese fiction.<sup>2</sup> It is a *Monogatari*, which – in its earliest usage – referred to a supernatural or fantastic story that has its origin in oral folk tales or Chinese Buddhist miracle stories.<sup>3</sup>

The story begins with the bamboo cutter who finds a little girl in a bamboo stalk. He decides to raise the girl with his wife and after that often finds gold in bamboo stalks, gradually growing rich. After three months the girl was already fully grown and received the name Nayotake no Kaguya-hime (the Shining Princess of the Young Bamboo).

Kaguya became wildly desired. Among her suitors were five whom she orders to bring her certain objects as proof of their worth. All of the suitors either fail to obtain the object or fail in their attempt to fool Kaguya into believing they had obtained it. She turns each of them down and is afterwards pursued by the Emperor, who offers her father a court rank. Kaguya warns her father that she would die if she served the Emperor at court, after which the

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Keene, “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 11, no.4 (1956): 354

<sup>2</sup> Keene, “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter,” 329

<sup>3</sup> Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press (2000): 61

Emperor visits her without her knowing and sees her radiant beauty. When he tries to take her with him and she vanishes, he realizes her extraordinary nature and leaves.

For three years he and Kaguya exchange poems, and Kaguya constantly stares at the moon and weeps. She eventually explains to her parents that she was sent from the Palace of the Moon as a punishment and has no choice but to go back. At the request of her father the Emperor sends two thousand guards to keep her on Earth, but to no avail. Before Kaguya is given the robe of feathers that would take away her grief she writes a letter to her weeping father as a keepsake and she sends a letter and an elixir of immortality to the Emperor. Upon receiving these the Emperor writes a poem and along with the elixir has it burned on top of Mount Fuji, the mountain closest to Heaven.

## **1.2. The Tale of the Princess Kaguya**

‘The Tale of the Princess Kaguya’ (*Kaguya-hime no Monogatari*) is a cinematic retelling of *Taketori Monogatari* made by Studio Ghibli, directed by Isao Takahata and released in 2013.

The film largely follows the original story, but there are several changes the film made.

Firstly, the three months in which Kaguya grows up are merely mentioned in the original story, yet they are elaborately shown in the film. Kaguya is seen playing with kids from the mountain hamlet and she is seen enjoying her life there.

Secondly, after those three months, instead of staying in her house, Kaguya is taken by her parents to a villa in the capital, where she is taught rules of behavior. She clearly does not enjoy her lessons and often protests.

Thirdly, during the event of her name-giving – which is also mentioned in passing in the original story – Kaguya is shown in seclusion for the full three days of the festivities. Eventually she’s deeply agitated by the words of the men she hears and runs away to the mountain village only to find out that her friends have gone and would return after ten years to give the mountain time to heal from their wood collecting activities. It appears to her as though the surrounding nature is dead, but she learns that winter will pass and life will return in spring. She wakes up in her secluded room and stops protesting.

Fourthly, when the five suitors come for Kaguya, it is not she who determines the objects they must obtain to win her hand in marriage. Rather, the men compare her to legendary objects and she orders each man to bring her the object he had compared her to, hoping they would give up their quest to win her hand. Prince Ishizukuri, whom she ordered to bring her the stone begging-bowl of the Buddha, returned with a flower and told Kaguya about his fantasy to run away with her – unlike the original story in which he brought her a fake bowl –

and in his desperation he moves aside the bamboo rolls and Kaguya learns that he had been lying.

Fifthly, when spring arrives and Kaguya rides in her carriage, she sees Sutemaru – one of her childhood friends and potential love interest – who is beaten for stealing a chicken. She meets him again after she learns of her return to the moon and they speak of running away together. While they fly around Kaguya becomes frightened by the moon and begs Sutemaru to hold her tighter, but she falls nonetheless. These scenes are all additions from the film, since the character Sutemaru does not exist in the original story.

Sixthly, when Kaguya is taken away she leaves her father no letter. The three years of Kaguya and the Emperor exchanging poems are omitted, as is the part where Kaguya sends a letter and the elixir of immortality to the Emperor and he has them burned on top of Mount Fuji.

## 2. The mountain hamlet and the capital

By having Kaguya move to the capital the film paints a stark contrast between the life in the mountains and that in the capital. The mountain hamlet symbolizes freedom, as opposed to the capital which symbolizes confinement. This contrast is brought to the forefront both visually and verbally.

### 2.1. Visual contrast

As mentioned above, the contrast between the mountain hamlet and the capital is visually shown in several ways. In summary these are: the space, facial expressions, drawing style and visual symbolism.

The space is probably the most obvious one and mainly refers to background.



Figure 1. Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*



Figure 2. Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*

Whereas the mountain hamlet is filled with wild trees, animals and the like, the capital looks quite bare, with its occasional tree carefully planted where it needs to be.

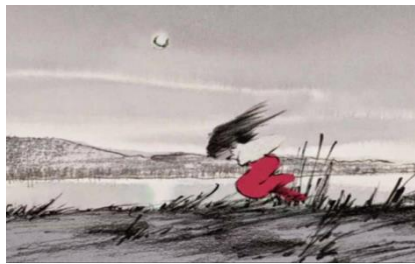
Secondly, facial expressions are used to create the contrast between happiness and sorrow.



**Figure 3.** Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*

Whereas nearly every scene in the mountain hamlet – with a few exceptions – shows Kaguya with a smile on her face, the smiles in the capital are rare.

Thirdly, the drawing style doesn't change that much throughout the film, apart from one scene, when Kaguya breaks out of her isolated room during her name-giving celebration, runs away and leaves her many layers of kimono on the road.



**Figure 4.** Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*

This scene is drawn in a particularly rough style, which represents the chaos of Kaguya's inner emotions. It is only after this breaking point that she stops protesting and accepts her bars.

Fourthly, the film uses visual symbolism. An example of this would be the kimono on the road from the runaway scene which symbolizes Kaguya rejecting the system and – temporarily – breaking free from her confinement. In contrast to this, her plucked eyebrows and blackened teeth symbolize her surrender. Whereas she initially refused make-up because it would not allow her to be 'human' she now accepts the change. The make-up scene is presented as a defeat, as she succumbs to the strict rules imposed on her.



Figure 5. Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*

Another example of visual symbolism is the bird in the cage Kaguya receives as a gift.



Figure 6. Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*

Along with her act of setting the bird free, this is a subtle but powerful way of showing Kaguya's captivity. The literal cage represents the invisible one Kaguya is in. She might not actually be locked away, but she cannot act of her own free will and she is forced to keep her true emotions hidden. If not too farfetched, the scene in which Kaguya flies away with Sutemaru might refer back to the bird that flew away from its cage.

## 2.2. Verbal contrast

Apart from visually, the contrast between the mountain hamlet as a place of freedom and happiness and the capital as a place of oppression and sorrow is conveyed verbally, especially in scenes of dialogue about 'happiness'. For example, in the conversation with Sagami about Kaguya's five suitors, it's obvious that Sagami's idea of happiness does not match with that of Kaguya. The dialogue is as follows:

Kaguya: お会いしたこともないのに<sup>4</sup> (*Even though I have never met them*)

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<sup>4</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*, DVD, directed by Isao Takahata (Tokyo: Toho Co., Ltd, 2013): 1:02:16 – 1:02:17

Sagami: ...何と姫様はお幸せなのでしょう<sup>5</sup> (*How happy the princess [you] will be*)

Kaguya: 幸せ？私はまだどなたとも添うつもりはありません<sup>6</sup> (*Happy? I do not intend to marry anybody yet*)

Kaguya clearly does not want to marry someone she's never met and she seems confused when Sagami assumes her to be happy with her suitors.

These conflicting ideas of happiness are especially brought to the forefront when Kaguya tells her parents about the moon. She explicitly says that the happiness her father gave her, merely caused her pain:

Father: これまで姫様の幸せだけを願ってお仕えしてきましたものを...<sup>7</sup> (*So far I/we have worked wishing only for the princess's [your] happiness*)

Kaguya: お父様が願ってくださったその幸せが私には辛かった。そして我知らぬ間に月に助けを請うてしまったのです。御門に抱きすくめられ私の心が叫んでしまったのです。「もうここには居たくない」と。<sup>8</sup> (*The happiness father [you] wished for was painful for me. And without realizing it I asked the moon for help. As the Emperor grasped me, my heart screamed out: 'I don't want to stay here anymore.'*)

Another important thing Kaguya says here is that her heart cried for help because of the Emperor. I will return to this in the following chapter.

To conclude the debate on happiness, when Kaguya meets Sutemaru again in the final scene they share, she says: 捨丸兄ちゃんとなら私幸せになれたかもしれない<sup>9</sup> ...きっと幸せになれた<sup>10</sup> (*If it were with Sutemaru [you], I might have become happy ... I surely would have become happy*)

Saying with such certainty that she would have been happy with Sutemaru in a way seals the contrast. All the wealth and security of the capital could not make her happy, but the freedom and love of the mountain hamlet could.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* : 1:02:30 – 1:02:33

<sup>6</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* : 1:02:34 – 1:02:40

<sup>7</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* : 1:43:21 – 1:43:26

<sup>8</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* : 1:43:27 – 1:43:45

<sup>9</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* : 1:52:35 – 1:52:40

<sup>10</sup> *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* : 1:53:22 – 1:53:31

## 2.3. Purpose

“[Kaguya] wrote in reply: ‘How could it be that one who has always lived in a house overgrown with weeds should visit your jewelled Palace?’”<sup>11</sup>

Two things can be said about this quote: it indicates that Kaguya never left the mountain hamlet in the original story and it shows that she does not idealize her home like she does in the film. In fact, she speaks of her house in a rather negative way, referring to it as “overgrown with weeds” and contrasting it with the “jewelled Palace”.

The contrast between the free mountain hamlet and the confining capital is integral to the film, so why is it completely absent from the original story? To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the historical context of both.

*Taketori Monogatari* dates to the early Heian period (794 – 1185), known for its rich courtly culture and its developments in art and literature.<sup>12</sup> Courtiers wrote poems revolving around the impermanence of life<sup>13</sup> and they appeared to worry more about their poems and outfit coordination than the affairs of state.<sup>14</sup> The courtiers were distanced from the rest of Japanese society; Sei Shōnagon described the poor as wearing “hideous clothes” and in *Kagerō nikki* beggars were referred to as “defiling masses”.<sup>15</sup> Like most aspects of the court’s way of life, emotions were stylized and received a ceremonial approach in which courtiers were to repress their impulsive behavior.<sup>16</sup> In this code of behavior women were socialized to remain silent in the face of male aggression.<sup>17</sup> This aspect of Heian court culture is elaborately shown in the film. However, the life of women was not all restricted. Economically women were relatively independent, since the law guaranteed that they could rightfully inherit and keep property.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, their position in the societal hierarchy was more fluid than that of men, due to the system of “marriage politics”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, despite their unquestionably inferior position Heian women were not as unfortunate as they are often portrayed.<sup>20</sup> Another

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<sup>11</sup> Keene, “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter,” 349

<sup>12</sup> Britannica Academic, “Heian period,” accessed on December 15, 2018, <https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/levels/collegiate/article/Heian-period/39814>

<sup>13</sup> Brett L. Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2015): 35

<sup>14</sup> Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 41

<sup>15</sup> Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 35

<sup>16</sup> Doris Barga, *A Woman’s Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1997): 1

<sup>17</sup> Barga, *A Woman’s Weapon*, 3

<sup>18</sup> Ivan Morris, “Women of Ancient Japan: Heian Ladies,” *History Today* 13, No. 3 (1963): 163-164

<sup>19</sup> Morris, “Women of Ancient Japan,” 165

<sup>20</sup> Morris, “Women of Ancient Japan,” 166



important thing to take from the Heian context is the fact that the Emperor was seen as being divine.<sup>21</sup>

The film, however, was made in an entirely different context. When compared to Heian times women's position has significantly improved and nowadays love marriages, rather than arranged marriages, are the norm in Japan, which has caused family lineage to lose most of its influence on marriage decisions.<sup>22</sup> This could partially explain the grim picture the film paints of the capital, as opposed to the mountain hamlet. Another source of explanation lies in the concept of *satoyama* ("village mountain") which is used to support the idea of Japan's traditionally harmonious life with nature.<sup>23</sup> *Satoyama* are a prominent subject of popular and media discourse – and particularly films have greatly contributed to its popularization<sup>24</sup> – and are often presented as (1) a cultural and geographical space that has (2) a harmonious relationship with nature and (3) a sustainable use of natural resources.<sup>25</sup> Culturally speaking, Kaguya's mountain hamlet differs from the capital; particularly the children's song shows their harmonious life with nature; and to make sure they do not run out of resources, the woodcutters leave every ten years. Thus, these three themes that recurrently appear in discourse on *satoyama* are present in the idealization of the mountain hamlet. Kaguya's longing for the place of her youth, can be likened to the Japanese nostalgia for the times before urbanization and industrialization took the place of the idyllic agrarian Japan.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the contrast can be explained by the change in attitude toward the emperor; society became interested in the real emperor, rather than its divine counterpart.<sup>27</sup> Speaking of the emperor, Takeo Doi interestingly argues that the emperor embodies infantile dependence and therefore has the highest rank<sup>28</sup>, which is likely related to infants and elderly people being accorded the greatest freedom and self-indulgence.<sup>29</sup> This freedom of youth can be seen as another cause for the contrast, along with the change in perception on growing up. Whereas, youth used to be eager to reach adulthood, nowadays growing up seems to be done

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<sup>21</sup> Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 35

<sup>22</sup> Sawako Shirahase, "Marriage as an association of social classes in a low fertility rate society: towards a new theory of social stratification," *Social Class in Contemporary Japan*, Routledge (2010): 66

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Knight, "The Discourse of "Encultured Nature" in Japan: The Concept of *Satoyama* and its Role in 21st-Century Nature Conservation," *Asian Studies Review* 34 (2010): 422

<sup>24</sup> Knight, "The Discourse of "Encultured Nature" in Japan," 430

<sup>25</sup> Knight, "The Discourse of "Encultured Nature" in Japan," 426

<sup>26</sup> Knight, "The Discourse of "Encultured Nature" in Japan," 436

<sup>27</sup> Kazuhiro Tateishi, "The Tale of Genji in Postwar Film: Emperor, Aestheticism, and the Erotic," *Envisioning The Tale of Genji*, ed. Haruo Shirane. New York: Columbia University Press (2008): 309

<sup>28</sup> Takeo Doi, "The anatomy of dependence," 58

<sup>29</sup> Doi, "The anatomy of dependence," 59

reluctantly.<sup>30</sup> This, as well, fits with the idealization of the mountain hamlet, which is the place of Kaguya's youth, in contrast to the capital, where she is forced to grow up.

### 3. Princess Kaguya and the Emperor

In *Taketori Monogatari* Kaguya gives two reasons for denying the Emperor. She says it would be shameful because it would make people think of her rejection of previous suitors as heartless.<sup>31</sup> The other reason is that she is not originally from earth. Circumstances force her to reject him, but the love between Kaguya and the Emperor in and of itself seems to have potential. Kaguya says herself: "Had my body been born on earth I should have served you."<sup>32</sup> Not to mention that the Emperor sent her poems for three years and her replies "were by no means unkind"<sup>33</sup> – something that is also completely omitted from the film – showing that she does have an interest in him. Moreover, when she is being taken away, she not only writes a letter to her father but also to the Emperor stating:

*"Now they are taking me with them, to my regret and sorrow. I would not serve you ... It weighs heavy on my heart that you must have thought my stubborn refusal to obey your commands an act of disrespect." ... 'Now when I am about to don the robe of feathers, I think longingly of my lord.'"*<sup>34</sup>

This implies that, had the circumstances allowed it, Kaguya would have likely obeyed the Emperor.

However, the film Kaguya could not have shared the same feeling. It would have compromised her character and it would have gone against the contrast that was so carefully constructed throughout the film. The Emperor is part of the capital and its strict lifestyle that Kaguya's come to despise, not the mountain hamlet she idealizes.

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<sup>30</sup> Doi, "The anatomy of dependence," 163

<sup>31</sup> Keene, "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," 347

<sup>32</sup> Keene, "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," 348

<sup>33</sup> Keene, "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," 349

<sup>34</sup> Keene, "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," 354



Figure 7. Film still from *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*

The moment he grabs Kaguya, he becomes the embodiment of all that confines her; his arms around her are a prison she escapes from with her supernatural disappearance, which can be likened to how the capital imprisoned her and forced her to seek refuge in the moon (the supernatural). This is why, in the end, the final scene could not happen.

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