

# Gazing at a Princess: The Tale of the Princess Kaguya®

Dr. Paul S. Price

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*[All photos are taken from the movie "The Tale of Princess Kaguya" and are the property of Universal Studios]*

Takahata Isao's film "The Tale of the Princess Kaguya" is a modern retelling of a ninth century story of a celestial visitor from the moon. In the story a visitor has irrupted into the family of a simple bamboo cutter. The key events in the tale are a female infant is found in a bamboo stalk, grows quickly into a beautiful woman, turns away suitor after suitor, and departs for the moon. At its heart this tale is a mystery. We do not understand why she has come, why she has arrived in the manner that she did, why she rejects her suitors, and why she leaves.

Because the visitor's actions are unexplained, the story is malleable and is used as a vehicle to express a range of views. As a result there are large number of variations of the story. The princess was sent here for her protection during a period of war on the moon. She was sent here as punishment for an unnamed sin. As a celestial maiden she was far above all nobles, even the Mikado, and thus had to reject all earthly suitors. She rejected the suitors because she was too grateful to the bamboo cutter and his wife to abandon them. She wanted to return to the moon because the duration of her punishment had been completed. She did not want to return because she loved the earth. She takes her adopted parents with her to the moon. She leaves them on earth. Takahata's version of the story is driven by his creation of a new and quite modern backstory to the tale.

This paper examines the film using the media study concept of the gaze, specifically investigating who is allowed to see the Princess and the impacts and context of these acts of viewing. In Takahata's film the visitor is indeed a Princess from the moon. She is, however, a renegade from the pure, but emotionally empty, life of the moon kingdom. She was inspired (or corrupted) by the experience of another celestial maiden. That maiden had visited the earth, and as was custom, forfeited her memories of her time on earth upon her return. Despite the loss of her memories, she longs for the life that she has left behind and cannot now remember. Takahata implies through a series of flashbacks that the maiden had in fact married and had a child on earth. In returning to the moon she had been unwillingly separated from her earthly family. Husband and child are seen desperately running to follow her as she is swept into the sky to return to the moon. Now the maiden gazes at the earth and sings:

Go round, come round, come round, O distant time  
Come round, call back my heart  
Come round, call back my heart  
Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers  
Teach me how to feel  
If I hear that you pine for me, I will return to you

The unspoken horror of this is that she has forgotten her family and their voices cannot reach her. As a result she will never “hear that they pine for her.”



**FIGURE 1. A CELESTIAL MAIDEN GAZES AT THE EARTH FROM THE MOON KINGDOM.**

Takahata conveys the power of this story by the view of the earth from the moon (Figure 1). In this view a celestial maiden gazes upward at the earth. While modern eyes see this view of the earth as technically accurate depiction of how the earth looks from its moon, the choice of this scene is not by accident. Takahata has chosen this view to elevate the earth over the moon and to present it as an object worthy of desire. This order of elevation is not repeated. In later portions of film the earth is always presented as being below the moon, and travel to the earth is implied to be a movement from the higher to the lower.

Inspired by the feelings the song conveyed, the Princess wished to go to the earth seeking to “truly live just like the birds and the beasts” and to “learn how to feel.” This led to her “breaking of the rules”. While the breaking of the rules is not explained, in the Buddhist tradition her

desires are highly problematic. To choose to embrace the illusory joys, impurities, and pain of the cyclical world is to reject enlightenment and to commit the sin of attachment. The punishment meted out by her father, the emperor of the moon, for breaking the rules was to be sent to the earth. To be born with no knowledge of her divine station and to live in the impurity of the earth. Takahata states that he had a vision of the Princess listening to nothing her father says about the punishment, but with shining eyes, only thinking that she was going to the earth.

The Princess arrives as an infant in a loving but humble family of the bamboo cutter, Sanuki no Miyatsuko. He and his wife are elderly and childless. The village is composed of families of craftsmen producing goods from the trees and bamboo of the forest. In this rural life gazing on the Princess is reciprocal and communal. The Princess's first appearance is to Miyatsuko. He is attracted by a bamboo stalk that shines as if it were lit by intense moonlight. Emerging from the bamboo the Princess has the form of a doll dressed as a noble lady. Their first sight of each other is a mortal facing the supernatural. But Takahata places the eyes of Miyatsuko and Princess at the same level (Figure 2). Their eyes are both open and they stare at each other in wonder. She smiles and falls asleep and he carefully carries her home. This is a meeting that is not about hierarchy or privilege. They will, for the entire film, face each other as individuals in a reciprocal and nurturing relationship. She will be a blessing and he will be responsible for her.



**FIGURE 2. MIYATSUKO AND THE PRINCESS GAZE AT ONE ANOTHER.**

This reciprocal gaze is rapidly extended to the bamboo cutter's wife. At her touch the doll vanishes and the Princess takes the form of a newborn infant. Together the three of them become a family. The Princess's first interaction with the village community is also marked by this reciprocal gaze. The local children spy her and announce that there is a new baby and "she looked at us" (Figure 3). In the village the Princess and the other villagers are free to see and

interact with each other. The Princess is readily accepted as a member of the community and named Takenoto (Little Bamboo) — because she grows rapidly (Figure 4).



**FIGURE 3. VILLAGE CHILDREN'S FIRST SIGHT OF TAKENOTO.**



**FIGURE 4. AN OLDER TAKENOTO LEADS VILLAGE CHILDREN IN A SONG .**

Takahata presents a loving description of Takenoto's growing up in a single summer. In the countryside surrounded by friends and family, Takenoto is part of a troop of children of all ages who spend their days gathering food and in rough-and-tumble play. The group is under the watchful eye of Sutemaru, the oldest of the children of the village and leader of the group. In the village clothing is patched, utilitarian, and minimal. Swimming is done in the nude and the summer heat removes the need for shoes and coats. Little is hidden and pretense is limited to games of pretend. The mantra of the community is a song celebrating the cyclic ephemeral nature of life.

Round, round, go round, Waterwheel, go round. Go round, and call Mr. Sun.

Go round, and call Mr. Sun.

Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers

Bring spring and summer, fall and winter. Bring spring and summer, fall and winter.

Round, round, go round, Waterwheel, go round. Go round, and call Mr. Sun.

Go round, and call Mr. Sun.

Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers, flower, bear fruit, and die.

Be born, grow up, and die.

Still the wind blows, the rain falls, the waterwheel goes round. Lifetimes come and go in turn. Lifetimes come and go in turn.

In a single night Takenoto's pastoral life is ended. She enters an enclosed cart at evening and wakes the next morning to a new world. From a small and open house she moves to a mansion consisting of walls within walls. From a life as one of a troop of children she becomes a single child surrounded by adults. From mountains, forests, streams, and lakes she moves to a single house. From gathering food from the forest she now spends her days learning the role of a noble lady. From the simplest clothing she now dresses in robes made of layer upon layer of finest fabrics. She is examined by Lord Akita and named as "Shining Princess of the Supple Bamboo" (Princess Kaguya). Her looks are taken away as her hair, makeup, eyebrows, and even her teeth are remade according to the standards of the court.

Essential to her new role is the control of all access to her. Kaguya's value is inversely proportional to her availability. Hidden, she becomes invaluable. The net effect is that Kaguya is made a prisoner of the male gaze that confines and objectifies her. The imprisoning that began with her new home intensifies with the three-day celebration of Kaguya's coming of age and eligibility for marriage. While the party is in celebration of Kaguya, and she is stationed in a private pavilion sufficiently near for her to hear conversations, but she is not allowed to speak to or join the celebration. She has become the object that justifies the celebration but no longer a person allowed to participate (Figure 5).



**FIGURE 5. THE NEW MAIDEN IN HER PRIVATE AND ISOLATED CHAMBER.**

The imprisoning continues as the crowds of suitors throng around her house and send her gifts. Her maid is free to leave the house and enter the community but Kaguya cannot. Kaguya recognizes that she, like the bird that has been sent as a gift, is now caged in her home (Figure 6).



**FIGURE 6. KAGUYA VIEWS A CAGED BIRD AND SEES HERSELF.**

The imprisoning is focused in the attention of the five noble suitors. Representing the highest levels of society, they simultaneously compete for Kaguya's hand. Their competition raises her value as a desired object. But in the presence of their focused unwavering gazes, Kaguya is held motionless in her pavilion. She is defined by their attention and her speech is restricted to responding to their petitions (Figure 7).



**FIGURE 7. KAGUYA UNDER THE PARALLEL VIEW OF FIVE NOBLE SUITORS**

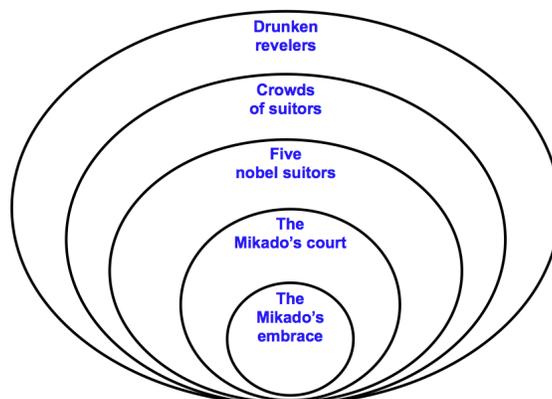
In response to the five suitors, Kaguya gives each an impossible quest. Over the next few years all of the suitors fail and Kaguya remains unmarried. The failure of the five nobles now brings the question of who will possess Kaguya to a head. The Mikado concludes that Kaguya would only reject the five noble suitors because she would not settle for anyone below his station. He invites her to serve in his court and become his concubine. She says no. Her refusal, equivalent to treason, only serves to further increase her value in his eyes. The Mikado concludes that he must break all tradition and consent to go to her. He arranges a nighttime visit. He observes Kaguya in secret through a gap in a curtain and approaches her from behind. Such an approach maintains the supremacy of his gaze. He sees her but she is not allowed to see him. The Mikado places his arms around her and claims her as his possession (Figure 8).



**FIGURE 8. IN THE MIKADO'S EMBRACE**

In Takahata's story, Kaguya's time in the city is a battle to maintain her identity as a person and to resist being reduced to a prized object. As the story progresses, the power of the male gaze increases as individuals of ever higher rank seek to make her their possession (Figure 9). This increasing gaze limits Kaguya's space as a person as well as her ability to initiate actions. Kaguya's impossible requests buy her time, and with each suitor's failure her chance to remain free from an unwanted marriage increases. Her victory is short-lived. Her rejection of the suitors brings her to the attention of the Mikado. His wishes cannot long be denied and soon she is reduced to a passive object to be dragged away from her home.

### The restrictive male gaze



**FIGURE 9. EVER SMALLER CIRCLES OF CONFINEMENT. IMPOSED ON KAGUYA**

In addition to the male gaze of the court, the film provides the contrast of a second male gaze, that of Sutemaru, her childhood companion. The first time Sutemaru sees Takenoto is as a very young child in the wrong place at the wrong time. He rescues her from a feral pig and lectures her on her responsibility (Figure 10). His gaze in this relationship acknowledges his obligation to protect Takenoto and other children and the obligation of Takenoto to Sutemaru and the village community to learn from her mistakes.



**FIGURE 10. YOUTHFUL TAKENOTO AND SUTEMARU**

Through Sutemaru's leadership Takenoto learns to be part of the group, to experience life in the woods and streams of the countryside. She learns the ethics of the poor. You can steal melons but they must be shared with the group (Figure 11). She sees the communal effort required to manufacture wooden bowls by Sutemaru's family (Figure 12). The manufacture of the wooden bowls is presented as an economic and social effort where men and women work together: one cuts the tree, one hollows out the bowl, two operate the lathe, one collects the lacquer, and one sells the product. In this space, husband, wife, uncles, and children are all essential for the success of the family. This value leads to a mutual dependence and equality.



**FIGURE 11. STOLEN MELONS TASTE SWEET BUT MUST BE SHARED**



**FIGURE 12. WOODEN BOWLS READY FOR SALE  
PRODUCED COMMUNALLY BY SUTEMARU'S FAMILY**

As the summer moves into fall, Takenoto is growing out of childhood. She joins Sutemaru in parenting the younger village children. Where once he protected her, she now is able to offer him aid by bandaging his injured arm. Sutemaru, with Takenoto's help, catches a pheasant and Takenoto finds edible mushrooms. Together they plan a common meal. Sutemaru finally comments on the rapid growth that has brought Takenoto to be a young women of his age and concern that she would leave him. Takenoto responds that she will always be part of the gang.



**FIGURE 13. TAKENOTO AND SUTEMARU**

They gaze at each other as equals and clearly as potential future partners (Figure 13).

The second time they view each other they are divided by class. He has descended to the level of a street thief and she has been trained to be a noblewoman of the imperial court. Kaguya traveling in her enclosed cart hears Sutemaru's name and gazing out from her cart she sees him and calls out his name (Figure 14). In the few seconds of their encounter, Sutemaru struggles to see Takenoto through her transformation. Kaguya takes his struggle as a measure of how she has lost her identity as a member of the village community. She can no longer be seen as a person by her childhood friend. She is now a noblewoman and is by the rules of society unapproachable. Too late Sutemaru cries out her name in recognition. They are separated and the moment is lost.



**FIGURE 14. KAGUYA AND SUTEMARU**

The third meeting is again a meeting of equals (Figure 15). They are now adults, but it is a meeting that occurs far too late. She is already doomed to return to the moon and he is already married with a son. But when they embrace it is face to face. They are fully willing to commit to each other as equals. In a dream they fly hand and hand through the sky. Alas, too soon the dream is over and they are parted.



**FIGURE 15. KAGUYA AND SUTEMARU MEETING AS ADULTS**

In all of these meetings the gaze of Sutemaru is one of protection, responsibility, and acceptance. As the Princess grows it evolves into a gaze of equals. It is not the gaze of ownership. Sutemaru will be her mentor, friend, protector, and potentially her mate but she will not be asked to become an object.

The final gaze in The Tale of the Princess Kaguya is the imperial gaze of the moon. Kaguya was never alone on the earth. Her every move was seen and every act of rebellion was blocked. Every step of Kaguya's life was directed towards placing her in the unwanted embrace of the Mikado and giving her no choice but to ask to be saved from her life on earth.

The moon's faithful but unwitting agent on earth is Miyatsuko. He is manipulated by the gifts of gold and bolts of fine cloth given by the moon. He becomes convinced that heaven's will for Kaguya is to become a noblewoman of the court (Figure 15). As he announces his plans for Takenoto, the moon peers around the edge of the roof watching in approval (Figure 16). Miyatsuko faithfully uses the wealth provided to him to arrange for a mansion, tutor, and



**FIGURE 15. MIYATSUKO'S PLANS FOR TAKENOTO.**



**FIGURE 16. THE MOON'S GAZE ON MIYATSUKO'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT TAKENOTO IS TO BE A NOBLEWOMAN**

introductions to the court. He separates Takenoto from village life and berates her and his wife for clinging to rural ways of weaving and raising a garden.

When Kaguya rebels against Miyatsuko's plans and flees back to her rural home, the moon is ready. Instead of trying to stop her flight and forcing her return, the moon watches over a flight from the city and from the confinement of royal clothing (Figure 17) that expresses her anger and divine power. When at last she reaches her former home and now clothed in only the simplest robe, Kaguya finds that the house is now filled by a new family who reject her. Sutemaru, his family, and the village community are gone and in the cycle of nature will not return for many years. Finally, Kaguya collapses in the snow (Figure 18). Under the watch of the moon she lies, eyes level with the newly-fallen snow. She remarks that she has seen this cold white landscape before (a reference to the barren lunar landscape of her prior life). The fairies of the moon transport Kaguya safely back to her pavilion in the city mansion and erase every sign of her flight. Kaguya may never decide if her flight was dream or reality, but she has learned that a return to her childhood rural life is no longer an option, and she resigns herself to becoming a noble lady.



**FIGURE 17. KAGUYA'S ESCAPE FROM THE CITY, NOBLE ROBES, AND DEMORALIZING DEMANDS**



**FIGURE 18. KAGUYA'S COLLAPSE AFTER FINDING THERE IS NO HOME TO WHICH SHE CAN RETURN**

Kaguya resists the five noble suitors by taking their courtly (but hyperbolic) promises at face value. If her suitors are noble and if the nobility of the Mikado's court is an expression of true value, then the suitors should fulfill their promises. If not, they are a fake, the entire court is a fake, and the expectation that she marry one of the nobles solely based on pedigree is unjustified. If so, she would be free to reject the life determined for her. But when the five noble suitors fail, Kaguya also fails. She had shown the pretentiousness of the noble suitors. But her demand that the suitors carry out their promises results in the death of the middle counselor Isonokam (Figure 19). Thus her demands have been as destructive as the foolishness of the court. She wallows in despair that she has made everyone miserable and is as fake as anyone. The moon watches her self-loathing and sees this as another step in the process of her retrieval (Figure 20).



**FIGURE 19. ISONOKAM DIES IN TRYING TO FULFILL HIS QUEST.**



**FIGURE 20. THE MOON WATCHES THE OVER THE DESPAIR OF KAGUYA**

By the light of the full moon, the Mikado finally decides that he will break with tradition and will go to Kaguya. He travels in secret to Kaguya's home (again by moonlight) and spies upon her through a gap in the curtains. The Mikado places his arms around her, claims her, and drags her off to his palanquin. And the deed is done. There is no space left for Kaguya to negotiate and

maneuver. To escape the Mikado she has no choice but to ask to leave the earth. She admits, for perhaps only a second, that she doesn't want "to be here."

Now when it is too late Kaguya remembers the history that brought her to the earth. Now the role of moon and the moon kingdom that had been a hidden player in her life is unmasked. Kaguya is revealed to be more than mortal and the Mikado departs having played his part. Kaguya faces the imperial gaze of the moon and night after night begs to be allowed to stay. But there is no mercy. After a brief trip to her rural home and a final taste of what might have been, the people of the moon arrive, remove her memories, and take her home.

Takahata recognized his film as a critique of imperial court and the moon kingdom. Takeo Chii, the voice actor for Miyatsuko is said to have asked Takahata if this was to be a movie that "denies the earth". Takahata replied, "No, you've got it backwards. This is a film that affirms the earth." And indeed it does. To Takahata the moon kingdom and the imperial court have much in common. In both there is a right way that cannot be deviated from without loss. In both the purpose of life is to make the correct choice. Both insist that the act of doing the right thing is identical to joy and happiness. Both reject nature and the cycle of life. The ambiguity of stealing to live, of suffering from hunger, and dependence on the cycle of nature are rejected as either impure or common.

In the Mikado's court, the gaze of the noblemen reduced Kaguya to an object in a box. She can be played with. And she can play with them (if she has the power and will), but such play can only delay the inevitable event. She will become someone's possession. In the eyes of the moon kingdom Kaguya is on the earth to merely learn that the earth is not for her. To see that she learns this lesson, the moon carefully watched over her life and directed it to that final embrace. The moon kingdom retained the ultimate say on how long she stayed and how little she brought back. She remains the moon's possession and is permitted only to remember sorrow.

Takahata contrasts the gaze of the men of the court and the moon with the reciprocal gaze of the rural village life. Here marriage, exemplified by Miyatsuko and his wife and Sutemaru's family, is presented as entering into a partnership. The wife works with her husband for a common goal, experiences the same risks, and is presented as a full partner. The open gaze of

the community values the role that each member plays. Kaguya concludes that despite the poverty and hardships she could have been happy with Sutemaru in such a life.

Kaguya's choice of the messy dirty cycle of life over the perfection of the moon could be viewed as a moral failing. Perhaps her celestial father is allowing her a taste of the world and the sorrow that attends it but will not let her fall prey to its dangers. But to Takahata, Kaguya is right and her father is wrong. The world with all of its sorrows and delights is better than the pure life in the moon kingdom. The rough and tumble family life of bamboo cutters and wooden bowl makers is better than the rituals and pretense of the imperial court.