

The Heike Story is a Beautiful Modern Retelling of a Historical Epic

By Deanna Nguyen January 26, 2022

Every anime season always has one underrated gem, and for me this past fall, that gem was *The Heike Story*—a historical anime adaptation of the epic prose, *The Tale of the Heike*.

Having studied Japanese history in college, I was curious to see how the story would translate into anime form. Once I finished watching it, I came to a conclusion: *The Heike Story* is not a show—it's an experience.

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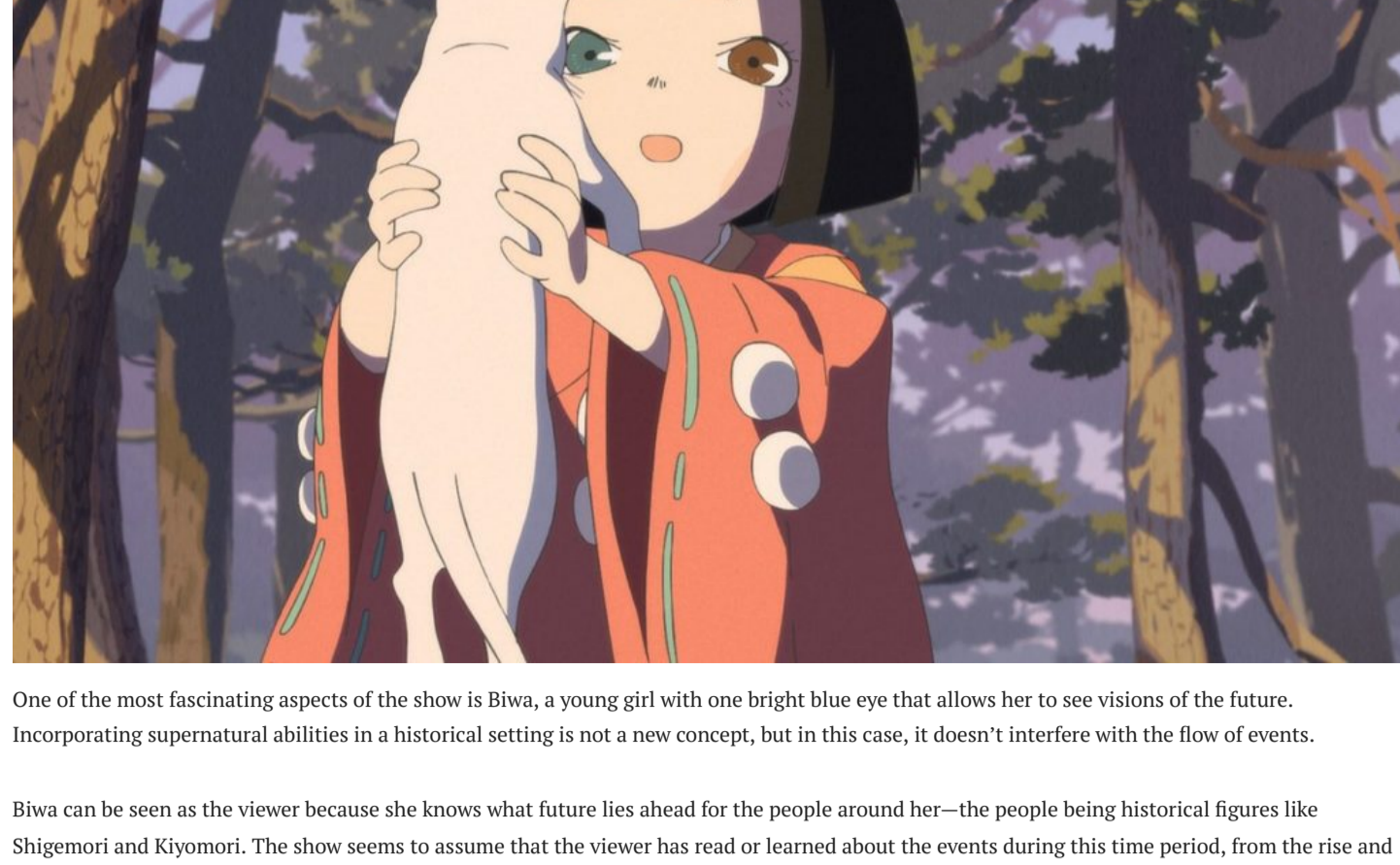
What director Naoko Yamada simply does in *The Heike Story* is meshing the past and the future together—Yamada offers a lens (the show) through which we, the viewers of the modern era, can look into and witness the historical events unfold.

The lens is also the main character, Biwa, who is essentially the viewer-insert and not based on a historical figure. Biwa, like us, is the witness and storyteller in *The Heike Story*, and she has the supernatural ability to see the future.

So, is *The Heike Story* worth watching? Short answer: yes. The long answer: keep on reading!

NOTE: Spoilers ahead for *The Heike Story*.

Biwa, the girl caught in between



One of the most fascinating aspects of the show is Biwa, a young girl with one bright blue eye that allows her to see visions of the future. Incorporating supernatural abilities in a historical setting is not a new concept, but in this case, it doesn't interfere with the flow of events.

Biwa can be seen as the viewer because she knows what future lies ahead for the people around her—the people being historical figures like Shigemori and Kiyomori. The show seems to assume that the viewer has read or learned about the events during this time period, from the rise and fall of the Taira, or Heike, clan. We have that knowledge and so does Biwa once she uses her ability to see the fates of the notable names we've read in *The Tale of the Heike*.

But Biwa doesn't actively participate in the events, as she's just an observer, like the viewers. The show switches between the current timeline and one set in the future where we see Biwa grown up, playing the biwa and singing about the battles and wars fought between the Heike and Genji clans. This oral tradition is the vehicle in which the story travels from one generation to the next, recounted differently each time.

After Shigemori passes away, Biwa inherits his eye, which has the supernatural ability to see the dead. She then becomes a person who's stuck in the middle—between the past and future, the living and the dead, and a girl with the appearance of a boy who doesn't age.

Biwa can't change the past nor can she speak about the future. In these moments, she frustratingly exclaims, "I can only see it. I can't change it!" It isn't until toward the end when the Heike clan accepts their fate that Biwa says, "I decided to witness it."

She's exactly like us, who can only watch events run their course. Biwa's eyes go blind at the end because she's seen everything there is to see. While her eyesight is gone, she lives on to tell the tale with her voice.

Women in the spotlight



A pleasant surprise of the show is how often we see women given just as much screentime, lines and importance as the men, despite the latter embracing themselves in power struggles. When Biwa starts living with the Taira clan, we see how she grows fond of the women she meets, namely Tokuko—Shigemori's valiant and dignified half-sister—and the Shirabyoshi dancers.

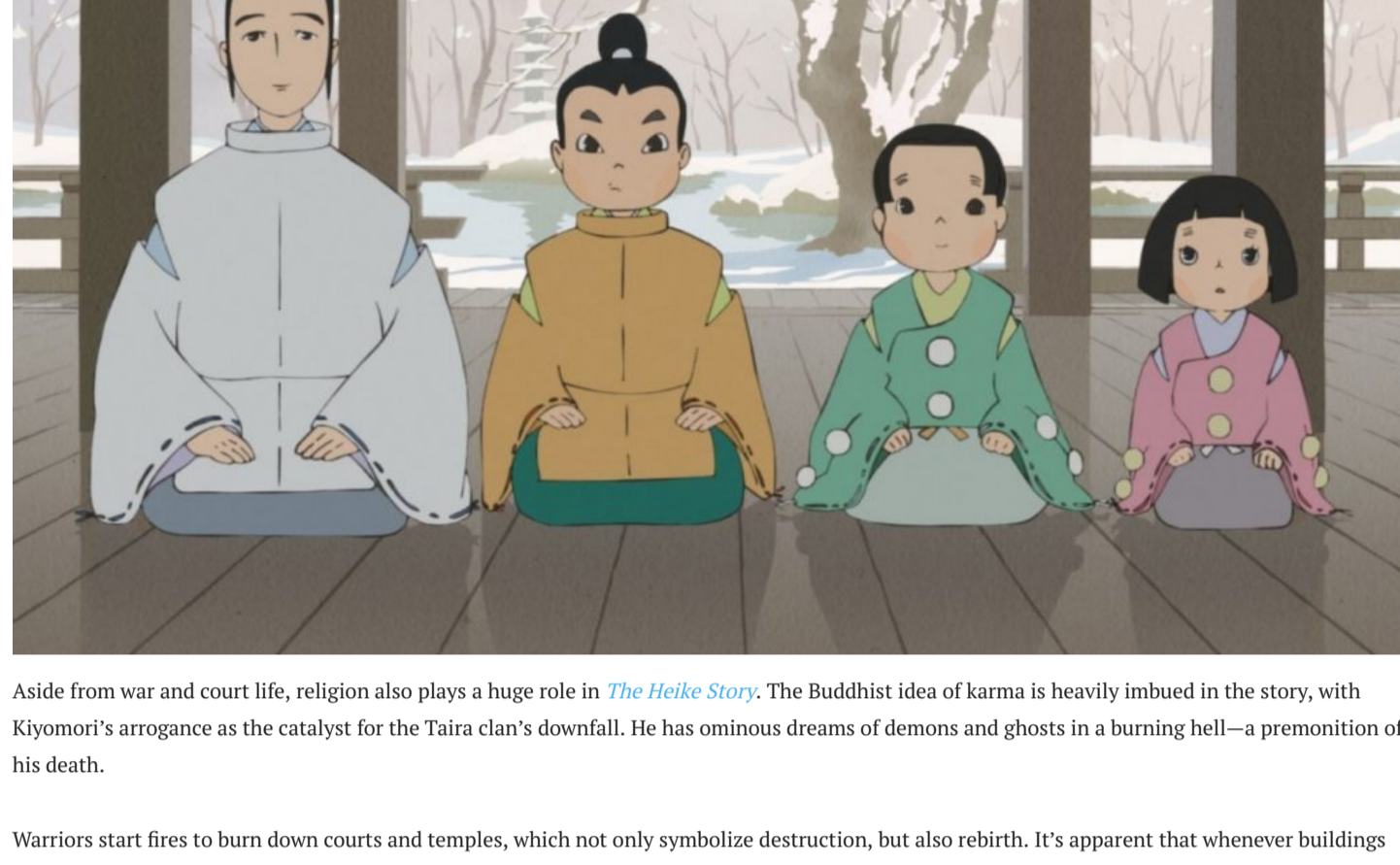
No one forces Biwa to become a woman of the court, not because she doesn't look like one, but because her role in the story is to be an observer who shares no blood ties with the Taira clan, and hence, holds no significance in the events. While history often omits or brushes off women, the show captures the quiet strength and beauty of notable women through Biwa.

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The juxtaposition of war and court life is comparable to gender roles of the Heian Period: men in positions of power must pick and fight battles to keep their power while women reside at court and bear children to ensure the clan's survival. The show pivots from gruesome battles on the field to intimate and peaceful moments between the women and their families. This acknowledges women like Tokuko and Kiyomori's wife, Tokiko, as being just as integral to the story as the men and their famous battles.

The show doesn't challenge the duties that women had to carry nor does it pity them, but rather portrays the women as inspirational even when they become nuns or are seen as emperor-bearers. Biwa's constant awe of women can be interpreted as our own, as we barely know much about them based on what little history tells us.

Symbolism in Paradise, Hell and Earth



Aside from war and court life, religion also plays a huge role in *The Heike Story*. The Buddhist idea of karma is heavily imbued in the story, with Kiyomori's arrogance as the catalyst for the Taira clan's downfall. He has ominous dreams of demons and ghosts in a burning hell—a premonition of his death.

Warriors start fires to burn down courts and temples, which not only symbolize destruction, but also rebirth. It's apparent that whenever buildings are destroyed, new ones sprout back up as a way of showing the clans' rebound and resistance to completely falling to chaos. Fires are horrifying, but not as much as water.

Water is symbolic of life and change, constantly flowing and moving forward. The Taira clan is fearful of change and therefore afraid of being in or near water. Many deaths of important characters involve water, mainly by drowning. As the story nears the end, the Taira clan eventually accept their fate and commit suicide by falling into the ocean, sinking into "paradise." They would rather die on their own terms than be humiliated by the Genji clan.

Acceptance



Buddhist law is about transience and impermanence—in other words, death is a natural part of life. The Taira clan overcome their fear of the ocean and, in turn, their fear of change by choosing and accepting death.

The theme of acceptance is essentially the moral of *The Heike Story*: humans are part of nature's cycle: to live, die and be reborn over and over again. It aligns with the Buddhist idea of reincarnation and how good karma in your previous life will grant you a better one in the next cycle.

Just like how Biwa learns to accept her role as an observer, so do we. Rather than try to change the past, we must accept life as it is and move on. A quote that resonates and perfectly ends the story is:

"The Buddha's temple bells toll the message that all existence is impermanent. The sakaki tree's blossoms turn white to grieve him: a reminder that all who flourish must fall. Indulgence does not last. It shall but be like a spring night's dream. The dauntless shall meet their end. They shall be as mere dust before the wind."

The quote pairs with the visual of five colored strings that eventually intertwine and are held at the end by Tokuko, one of the few or only survivors of the Taira clan who becomes a nun. Because Buddhism is at the core of *The Heike Story*, it can be interpreted as Tokuko seeking direct passage to paradise.

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And finally, we see older Biwa playing her instrument one last time in the dark with a flashback of the Taira clan, together and happy. It's as emotional for us as it is for Biwa, as we've only been with them for a short time, only to see them perish but with the hope that the future is a brighter one.