

Articles

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From Little Mermaid to feral child

From Little Mermaid to feral child: The rebellious trajectory of the wild girl in Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo*

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Abstract

Hayao Miyazaki, the acclaimed Studio Ghibli director, has long been known for crafting complex portraits of women and girls in his films. Arguably, the most popular and compelling

of these characters is Princess Mononoke's self-determining San, a monstrous woman who has attracted scholarly attention in texts like Rayna Denison's *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess* (2018). However, a more overlooked figure in Miyazaki's pantheon of female characters is Ponyo, the *ningyo* star of the titular film ([Miyazaki 2008](#)) who transforms into a human and causes a spectacular tsunami in Miyazaki's reinterpretation of 'The Little Mermaid' ([Andersen 1837](#)). In this sense, Ponyo is a fascinating re-evaluation of this fairy tale character, altered from a symbol of pubescent curiosity and feminine irresponsibility to a powerful figure that serves as a rare female example of the 'feral child' in fiction ([Brodski 2019](#)). In doing this, Miyazaki transforms the character into a feminist symbol of girlhood joy and agency, diverging from conventional male depictions of feral children. This article examines the history of the fictional feral child and Ponyo's deviation from this tradition, particularly in the context of animation and Ghibli's own oeuvre. Utilizing narratological theories and aspects of adaptation studies, this work seeks to position Ponyo as an especially disruptive figure in the Ghibli canon, with a feminine trajectory all her own.

Introduction

Discussing children who were raised by animals in the wilderness throughout history – otherwise known as 'feral children' – Caitlin Schwarz concludes that 'despite one being biologically human, the process of becoming human and therefore being identified as human, is taught through socialization and culture' ([2016](#)). This is a theme that carries through a significant number of mythologies, literature and media that centralize such feral characters. Through these figures, many elements of society can be exposed through fresh eyes in a range of ways, from discriminatory or nonsensical, to intrinsically valuable for an individual's development. However, a majority of these characters throughout history have not been feral children, but feral boys specifically, tying traits like impulsivity, a lack of self-consciousness, and freedom from societal mores in such stories to masculinity. By removing female characters

from these narratives or placing them in the roles of those who tame the feral boys, these stories reinforce notions of men and boys being more innately 'wild'. This is an idea that – when present in children's stories – reinforces the widespread cultural notion of girls being inherently more passive and less prone to reaction that permeates even academic study ([South Richardson 2005](#)).

[Ponyo \(2008\)](#) is an animated film by Hayao Miyazaki, a founder of the critically acclaimed Studio Ghibli, that loosely adapts elements of the short story 'The Little Mermaid' ([Andersen 1837](#)). Following a young boy named Sosuke who comes across the titular Ponyo, a fish who transforms into a human girl, Miyazaki's story transposes the supernatural events of the tale to a contemporary Japanese setting, also reducing the ages of the characters from pubescent to toddler age. In doing so, and in altering the underwater world from which Ponyo was born from a civilization into a more naturalistic realm, Miyazaki reinterprets the character of the 'Little Mermaid' into a feral child. In doing so, he drastically alters the ideological messages associated with Andersen's work while aligning the film more with Studio Ghibli's feminist oeuvre ([Denison 2023](#)). As a character free from the obligations of femininity enforced onto girls in most societies from a young age, she is able to express a level of independence and agency typically absent from young female characters in such stories. She also now stands as a prominent example of the feral child archetype that severs its ties to masculinity, demonstrating that such a character can be female and inherently questioning the gendered dichotomies of wildness and civilization promoted by many feral child narratives.

In this article, I will argue for the significance of Hayao Miyazaki's transformation of Hans Christian Andersen's 'Little Mermaid' into a 'feral child' figure. I will begin by establishing the concept of the 'feral child' and its conventional ties to the masculine in mythologies, **fairy tales** and children's literature specifically. I will follow this with an exploration of what can be deemed the 'heroic feminine' in Miyazaki's work, showing how his

many female protagonists fit into mythological moulds of femininity while still being widely considered subversive and feminist characters. From here, I will analyse the titular character of [Miyazaki's *Ponyo* \(2008\)](#), examining how in aesthetics and actions she functions as a novel cinematic example of the feral girl, contributing to what Dalila Formi calls one of several 'new female identities' in animation for children ([2023](#)). I will finish by exploring the significance of reworking this mythological trope for the film and for an adaptation specifically, investigating how this ties back to feminist discourses around Miyazaki's authorial voice. Methodologically, this article will, in addition to formal textual analysis and studies around the historical and fictional presence of 'feral children', utilize two primary theoretical frameworks: narratology and the idea of the 'Monomyth' ([Campbell 1949](#)), and elements of adaptation studies. In doing so, I will chart the significance of the character of Ponyo in the wider contexts of both the 'hero's journey' narrative frequently connected to Studio Ghibli in academia and the film's transformation of 'The Little Mermaid' and similar **fairy tale** texts.

[The feral \(boy\) child](#)

When discussing the construction of the feral child **on-screen**, relating it to the popular idea of the 'wild child', Michael Brodski argues the following:

A significant equation between the discourses of childhood and the wild can be observed: the naughty child functions as an allusion to the wild child. The latter serves even more as a symbol of the adult's nostalgic fantasies of youthful energy and virility which the adult has inevitably lost. [...] Simultaneously, the wild child with its allegedly uncivilised and primitive disposition – more than its naughty counterpart – seems to challenge the adult's need to influence it as they pretend to erase the quality of the wild and primitive he secretly desires. The main possibility of upholding the relationship therefore lies in the child's resistance since the animalistic wild child resists the civilising process.

[\(2019\)](#)

Here, Brodski makes a subtle acknowledgement that is simultaneously obvious and rarely stated: the perspective of a child is almost always absent from the filmmaking process, which is almost invariably dominated by the artistic tendencies and practical abilities of adults. As such, depictions of feral children in cinema tend towards a belief that the child represents a quality lost in the process of maturation, inextricably tied to what Brodski calls ‘the civilizing process’. However, in this nostalgia lays a subtext of the inevitability that their animalistic tendencies will come to an end when they reach adulthood, if not before, leading to a sense of loss and tragedy when the child is eventually domesticated. Therefore, in such stories, this process often occurs either at the close of the film or far into the future of the fictional world – nonetheless, it remains an implication that quarantines wildness strictly to childhood, with civility coming as an inevitable consequence of maturation.

While feral children have become a presence **on-screen**, both fictional children and real-life examples – and what they represent – have presented various ontological challenges throughout history, as discussed by Julia Helena Wilde:

The phenomenon of children raised by animals has always been perceived as puzzling due to the unclear ontological status of such individuals. While in numerous myths from around the world being nursed by a nonhuman mother could indicate divine status or hint at the child’s exceptional future (e.g., Romulus and Remus nursed by the she-wolf in Roman mythology or one of the characters of the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, who was raised by wild animals of an unspecified species), in early-modern Europe it started to be perceived as a troubling anomaly, threatening the clear division between animals and humans.

(2024: 4)

By invoking periods dating back to Ancient Greece, Wilde emphasizes the longstanding trope of the feral child in stories of all kinds, as well as the ways in which these characters have been able to confront the societies from which they have been narratively distanced. This interpretation of the feral child character appears to depend upon the popular theorization of children as a *tabula rasa*. This is a much-debated notion within studies of philosophy,

psychology and human nature that Robert Duschinsky states ‘continues to slide between an image of originary potentiality or openness and an image of originary purity’ ([2012](#)). The *tabula rasa* is often at the heart of the fictional feral child, their untamed nature functioning as a demonstration of their purity and therefore standing in opposition to those who have been corrupted by human civilization. Though not necessarily psychologically accurate, this concept is clearly identifiable in many depictions of feral children – more specifically, in feral boyhood.

Ultimately, these examples and theorizations of feral children have one significant element in common: the children are almost invariably male. This is especially interesting given that one of the most prolific real-life (though not strictly true) cases of feral children ever reported involved a pair of girls: Amala and Kamala, sisters from Bengal allegedly raised by wolves ([Benzzaquen 2001](#)). Despite this, feral girls in media tend to be few and far between, with the rare instances of these characters often being tied to an inevitable domestication or the presence of a naïve sexuality designed to appeal to a voyeuristic male gaze. For example, one popular example of the latter can be seen in another mermaid film, Ron Howard’s *Splash*, with its depiction of an attractive young mermaid who is oblivious to her own sexual appeal, resulting in situations in which male characters (and viewers) are able to derive voyeuristic pleasure with her own innocent persona remaining intact.

In theorizing the construction of boyhood in American society, Kenneth B. Kidd cites the influence of what he calls the ‘feral tale, a narrative form derived from mythology and folklore that dramatizes but also manages the “wildness” of boys’ ([2004](#): 1). Returning to Brodski’s notion of the nostalgia of the feral child in fiction in conjunction with Kidd’s theory, one can conclude that the apparent ‘wildness’ of boys is tamed by the implication of an inevitable growth into adulthood – however, rather than disappearing entirely, Kidd asserts that this behaviour is simply managed, suggesting that the innate desire to act this way remains in the individual. When a majority of feral children depicted are male, and this narrative of the

feral is baked into coming-of-age narratives of boys becoming men, a familiar pattern emerges: the 'wild' behaviour of boys is transformed into a gendered trait, rather than attributed to age alone.

Within the context of anime, where the primary case study of *Ponyo* lies, there are a number of feral child characters that are almost overwhelmingly male. For example, although not as well known as his adult incarnation, *Dragon Ball*'s Goku ([Okazaki and Nishio 1986–89](#)) certainly fits this mould as a young boy living without parental guidance in the jungle when he is found by Bulma, a female character who takes issue with his uncivilized actions for comedic effect. Based on the character of Son Wukong from the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West* ([Wu 1592](#)), Goku even possesses traits like a functioning tail, superhuman energy and strength, and an ability to transform into an uncontrollable giant ape at the sight of the moon, all contributing to his construction as a feral child.

Additionally, several feral child characters from western literature have been adapted into animated feature films by western studios that have undoubtedly influenced animated works in Japan. Two of the most prominent of these examples include the man-cub Mowgli from *The Jungle Book* ([Reitherman 1967](#)) and the titular character of *Tarzan* ([Lima and Buck 1999](#)), both produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios. Notably, like Goku's partial domestication by Bulma, both of these characters are also brought to contemporary civilization through their affection for a member of the opposite sex by the end of the film: an unnamed village girl for Mowgli, and Jane for Tarzan respectively. Though the latter chooses to remain in the jungle, he does so with his new bride and her father, naturalizing the eventuality of a human nuclear family and bringing Tarzan further from his feral origins.

Of the few female characters in anime who can be considered feral children, one provides an interesting case study for how girls tend to lose these feral characteristics: Yuki from [Mamoru Hosoda's *Wolf Children* \(2012\)](#), a half-girl half-wolf who can transform at will.

Although she begins the story as the more feral of her and her male sibling Ame, by the end of the film she has chosen to live entirely as a human, while Ame leaves human civilization behind to live as a wolf permanently. Once again, this arguably implies that the ultimate natural state – and coming of age – for a female character is to conform to the will of society, while men are complete once they are able to run free beyond the constraints of civilization. Indeed, this decision to remain human is precipitated by her growing relationship with a male classmate, who in this case functions to ‘tame’ this side of her personality. Though this reverses the narratives displayed in films like *Tarzan*, it nonetheless promotes the notion that women are intrinsically more tied to society, with her brother’s choice to remain wild reinforcing this binary. Indeed, this narrative stands in contrast to the real-life wolf girls Amala and Kamala, instead gendering this feral upbringing by associating girls with an innate drive for society and conformity.

Hayao Miyazaki and mythical female characters

One of the primary associations with Hayao Miyazaki for audiences in and out of academia, alongside hand drawn animation and ecological concerns, is a regular use of female leads that diverge from conventional gender roles. This is ultimately best summarized by Miyazaki himself, in an interview quote that has since become popular amongst fans of Studio Ghibli in internet spaces:

Many of my movies have strong female leads- brave, self-sufficient girls that don’t think twice about fighting for what they believe with all their heart. They’ll need a friend, or a supporter, but never a savior. Any woman is just as capable of being a hero as any man.

([Miyazaki in Badran 2023](#): n.pag.)

Within existing scholarship on Studio Ghibli and Hayao Miyazaki specifically, feminism has been a prominent trend since the emergence of anime studies. For instance, writing in reference to Susan J. Napier’s seminal book *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, scholar Montserrat Rifa Valls discusses how his use of female protagonists ‘defamiliarizes the idea of (Japanese)

women as passive and domesticated' ([2001](#)). Though referring specifically to *Princess Mononoke*'s San in this quote, a figure who will be discussed shortly, this phrase can be applied to a majority of his leading female characters, who are united in their determination, sense of justice and their assertion of their agency. Her invocation of the formalist notion of defamiliarization here, an idea that encourages critique through the distancing of a viewer from a normalized and widely accepted construct, reminds us that the notions of passivity associated with women – and consequently of activity with men – have been naturalized. I argue that, cinematically, this naturalization has been contributed to by both the popularity of the 'feral boy' narrative and the neglect of female feral children.

Throughout Miyazaki's oeuvre, one can identify female characters that align with, or combine elements of, various mythological and classical archetypes, particularly those highlighted by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* ([1949](#)). For example, the character of Sheeta from *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* ([Miyazaki 1986](#)) could be defined as what Campbell deems the 'Herald' ([1949](#): 42), her falling from the sky into the arms of Pazu with her magic amulet leading him to the subsequent adventure. Similarly, the character of Gran Mamere in *Ponyo* can be straightforwardly classified as the 'Goddess', meeting with her daughter Ponyo as a 'final test' ([1949](#): 99). However, Miyazaki's female leads are not strictly resigned to the supporting roles often reserved for women in mythologically aligned texts; characters like Kiki of *Kiki's Delivery Service* ([1989](#)) and Chihiro of *Spirited Away* ([2001](#)) more closely fit the central character of the conventional 'hero's journey' narrative. This is prominently explored in a variety of academic writing, including (but not limited to) Cheng-Ing Wu's article 'Hayao Miyazaki's mythic poetics' ([2016](#)) and [Justy Engle's book chapter 'The prototypical cross-cultural female hero' \(2023\)](#). However, the most prominent example of a study of Miyazaki's use of mythological archetypes in his female characters is Deborah Scally's book *Miyazaki and the Hero's Journey* ([2022](#)), which analyses

a majority of his feature films to identify the ways in which they align with Campbell's Monomyth. In doing so, she identifies at various points that Miyazaki frequently casts women in the role of the central hero, an archetype typically associated with men, and that the following through of their subsequent journey often leads them to behaviours and situations that go against traditional notions of gender. For instance, with reference to *Ponyo*, she describes the central character's narrative trajectory in the following way:

Ponyo fulfils the requirements for [Campbell's] Heroic Quest: she hears the Call when she meets Sosuke; she steps onto the Path to become human; her Initiation stage begins when she licks Sosuke's bleeding finger; her Road of Trials comes when her father takes her away and locks her up; her Apotheosis comes when she escapes and discovers her powers; her return is when she meets the Goddess, her mother, and is allowed to stay with Lisa and Sosuke.

([Scally 2022](#): 209)

Here, Scally maps Ponyo's narrative against Campbell's theorization of the hero's journey in order to demonstrate her central position in the narrative and the achievement of her goal of becoming human. However, I argue on two counts that this analysis, to some extent, diminishes Ponyo's agency in her own narrative. The first is that Ponyo's Call to Adventure is not strictly tied to Sosuke – she escaped her father initially and came to the shore of her own will because of her inherent curiosity, not because of her interest in Sosuke, which develops after they meet. Rather than being defined by her relationship to others, her call to adventure comes from within before we meet her, meaning that the audience has only known Ponyo as a curious individual who values her agency above the adherence to relationships with those around her. The second is that Ponyo is not strictly our lead character; Sosuke is. Although this is not necessarily a requirement of a hero's journey narrative, I argue that Sosuke's position as the protagonist actually enhances the audience's perception of Ponyo's power and determination. By witnessing this from the position of a meeker character, and specifically one who has been raised (like, presumably, the viewer) within the confines of contemporary civilization, we are

able to more greatly appreciate and admire her untamed spirit. Therefore, if anything, Miyazaki's construction of Ponyo in relation to the hero's journey actually reveals further diversions and novel interpretations that contribute to her position as one of Miyazaki's heroic women. As previously stated, Miyazaki intends to create female characters who serve as their own saviours – watching this from the point of view of Sosuke, a boy (understandably) dependent on a mother figure, enhances this aspect of her characterization.

It is also worth mention here that the concept of the feral or 'wild child' was of particular significance in 1990s Japan, as explored by anthropologist Andrea Arai. In her chapter 'The "wild child" of 1990s Japan' ([Arai 2006](#)), Arai discusses how "the child" and its development became the site of a newly intensified nexus of social anxiety' in this period, with the phrase *kodomo ga hen da* (roughly translating to 'children are turning strange') becoming regularly used ([2006](#): 216). Arai even points specifically to *Princess Mononoke*'s wolf girl San at the start of the chapter as a representation of this fear, her 'blood-smeared face' standing for this sociohistorical period of anxiety ([2006](#): 216). As such, depictions of the feral child in the specific context of 1990s and 2000s Japan can be seen as more politically loaded than characters like Goku prior, carrying with them associations of rebellion and a countercultural spirit in the wake of Japan's economic recession.

When discussing the presence of feral children, and particularly female feral characters, in Studio Ghibli features, it is imperative to discuss San, a young woman who was raised by wolves in the forest away from the society of Muromachi Japan. As well as fitting the literal definition, San exhibits traits one would expect from a fictional feral child: she lives in the wilderness, is suspicious of humanity and the growing industrialization around her and is undisturbed by violence. The latter trait is what has often separated San out as a notable example of a feminist Ghibli character, with Ghibli scholar Rayna Denison describing her wildness as it relates to her unrestrained sense of agency:

San is 'othered' repeatedly throughout the narrative. For example, Eija Niskanen argues [...] that San's costuming borrows from Japan's ancient past, and is symptomatic of the historical palimpsest at work in *Mononokehime*. As Helen McCarthy shows [...] too, San is a one-off female protagonist within Miyazaki's films, as she remains closely tied to the wild and untamed aspects of nature at work in *Mononokehime*, rather than becoming domesticated by love.

(2018: 4)

Though all these descriptions of San are accurate, I would argue that another character fits the latter description: Ponyo, who despite finding a form of love at the end of her story and choosing to remain human, does not necessarily lose her more 'untamed' traits. However, in comparison to San, Ponyo is rarely theorized as feral; even within the context of a Wikipedia page listing fictional feral children, the former makes an appearance while the latter does not. On the contrary, I would argue that although San was raised by animals in the wilderness, her post-pubescent age in the film renders her a different archetype from the feral child, her romance with Ashitaka throughout the narrative reinforcing her maturation. In contrast, Ponyo is a girl who appears to be pre-school age, currently experiencing the world through a child's eyes rather than reckoning with the world from a feral perspective as an adult. Additionally, while San is certainly not 'domesticated' by her romance, this is still a plot element that serves to gender her to a greater extent, while Ponyo is able to defy such stereotypes through being a feral child who is incidentally female. In doing so, Miyazaki presents a character more in the mode of Pippi Longstocking (Lindgren 1945) than Anne of Green Gables (Montgomery 1908),^[1] one whose gender is a footnote rather than a character element that greatly informs the progression and challenges of her narrative. Indeed, her red hair and Miyazaki's historic interest in a *Pippi Longstocking* (Lindgren 1945) adaptation (Greenberg 2012: 97) suggest that Ponyo may be a **reinterpretation** of the character via 'The Little Mermaid', with the feral child archetype engaged as a part of this synthesis.

Ponyo as a feral girl

In contrast to the underwater kingdom created by Andersen and solidified in popular culture by Musker and Clements in their 1989 adaptation *The Little Mermaid*, Ponyo's world is one that aligns more closely with the wilderness inhabited by feral children throughout history. Although she has a caregiver in the form of Fujimoto, Miyazaki's **reinterpretation** of the Sea King, the life she leads is that of an animal; she is kept in a tank with her sisters, and has no contact with any kind of conventional civilization. This metaphorical wilderness in which Ponyo resides is also delineated visually as separate from the contemporary Japanese civilization that Sosuke has been raised within. Aside from the utilization of the land/sea dichotomy that separates the characters on a physical level, the entrance into Ponyo's realm of wilderness is signalled in the scene where they first meet, when Sosuke moves through a gap in a fence to reach the coast where she has washed up.

The first and most evident element of Ponyo's characterization as a feral child is her design, particularly in contrast with other depictions of Andersen's Little Mermaid character. To start with, the character has been **aged** down significantly from both the original story and other adaptations – instead of a young woman on the brink of adulthood, she is a 5-year-old child, lacking the developed sexual features that form a core part of Ariel's Disney design. Indeed, Ponyo's design, broadly speaking, is not intended to convey conventional beauty – her hair is unstyled and messy, her figure is realistically squat and her face is typically rendered with a wide mouth that resembles a frog. Returning to Scally's theorizations of Miyazaki's female protagonists, she states the following about Ponyo's role in the narrative, particularly in relation to Sosuke:

Ponyo and Sosuke are small children, not just proto-sexual, but pre-sexual. Mermaids are often depicted as sex objects; in classical mythology, their counterparts, the Sirens, in fact, draw men to their doom with their irresistible singing voices. Ponyo does not really resemble a mermaid as much as she does a pet fish. In fact, when Sosuke finds her, he calls her *kingyo*, Japanese for goldfish.

Here Scally emphasizes how her animalistic qualities are more evident than any kind of femininity, a far cry from the elegant fish tails and clamshell bras of western depictions of mermaids. These features all contribute to the idea of Ponyo as a feral child, with even her clothing – a red, flouncy dress that resembles her fins in fish form – being simply an adaptation of an animalistic feature. This is especially emphasized in her half-human, half-fish form, where she gains bird-like legs, a visual non-sequitur that draws on surrealist imagery to convey her unboundedness. Some of the most famous images of Ponyo in the film also show her in a state of dynamic, frenetic motion; her running atop the waves of her created tsunami and her sprint and leap towards Sosuke when she reaches dry land are two of the most prominent examples.

Another contributor to Ponyo's design appears to be the major aesthetic influence not of the conventional western style mermaids utilized in anime adaptations like *Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Mermaid* ([Katsumata 1975](#)), but of the *ningyo*. Combining the kanji characters for human and fish, this phrase appears in Japanese folklore, describing creatures that, like western mermaids, are part fish and part person. However, the resulting chimera is entirely different – typically, *ningyo* are much more bestial, resembling creatures more than human beings and varying significantly in artistic depictions. Although Ponyo does not strictly resemble a particular *ningyo* depiction, her fish form, in which she primarily resembles a goldfish, and her half-human form both align more with the bestial *ningyo* than the feminine, often sexualized mermaid of the film's source text. This is reinforced further by her narrative separation from conventional society and subsequent feral status arguably aligns her more with this iteration of a fish-human creature.

The second, less visible contribution to Ponyo's characterization as a feral child is her determination and lack of self-consciousness in achieving her aims, a quality that also grants

her a significant amount of agency when compared to other Little Mermaid depictions. As a result of her age and her feral upbringing, Ponyo speaks in stunted sentences that mostly consist of two or three words. Therefore, she tends to communicate her desires in superlatives and definitive statements, such as declaring 'Ponyo loves ham' after consuming the food for the first time. Her love of ham first eaten in a ramen dish that contains many ingredients also presents another, more subtle subversion of gender roles. As found in a 2013 study, meat was considered to be associated with the consolidation of masculine identity, while smaller portions of any food were deemed more feminine by qualitative research ([Turner et al. 2013](#): n.pag.). Contrasting with the relative shyness of Sosuke, she shows little patience or hesitation in announcing her intentions or enjoyment, a reversal of the gender roles typically enforced onto boys and girls even at this young age. A visual example of this is in the consumption of their ramen; while Sosuke eats his bowl cleanly, Ponyo's is messily consumed, a result of her being raised outside of society, but also a subversion of the wildness typically associated with boyhood. The excitement that she experiences in receiving this food is also expressed in a more physical way than Sosuke's – while he continues to sit, Ponyo leaps up and down, shaking the dinner table as she leans on it to balance her jumps.

The end of Ponyo's character arc sees her choosing to live her life as a human without the aid of magic, sealing this decision by kissing Sosuke, who has declared his love for her in any form. But this does not, as is the case with other feral girls, see her become domesticated, as confirmed by the manner in which she kisses him: by leaping into the air as a goldfish and transforming into a human, with her body floating in the air behind her. As well as reinforcing the idea that it is her decision to remain human, not Sosuke's, Ponyo's initiation of the kiss appears to be a reversal of the narrative often seen in Andersen-esque fairy tales where the female protagonist is rescued by a kiss given by a love interest in a position of power. For instance, rather than being brought back to life through a kiss from a prince as Snow White and

Little Briar Rose's Rosamund are in the Brothers Grimm tales (1812), Ponyo is able to fulfil her own destiny by instigating this act, once again asserting her autonomy even in the context of a relatively conventional fairy tale ending. One can certainly associate this behaviour with her feral qualities – as a young girl who has not been taught to allow boys and men to lead, she is able to follow her desires freely, and take control of her own fate.

To return to Julia Helena Wilde's discussion of the feral child, it is interesting to note that, like in the stories she analyses, Miyazaki demonstrates the importance of 'an unwillingness to erase the animality from one's identity' ([2024](#): 15). In contrast to the Little Mermaid of both Andersen's original tale and Disney's interpretation, Ponyo refuses to give up her agency or determined spirit, both tied to her animalistic qualities, even after she has decided to live as a human. It is also worth mention that at the end of the film, Ponyo is still 5 years old, with no time skip to reveal her personality as a teenager or adult, or indeed a mature relationship with Sosuke comparable to the Disney film. This diminishes the loss of 'virility and energy' discussed by Brodski in the first section of this article – not only does the viewer understand that Ponyo is still in the midst of her childhood, but there is also no indication of her exuberant spirit waning on the surface world.

Conclusion: Feral girlhood reimaged

Historically, feral children in fiction have been overwhelmingly male, reinforcing gendered notions of 'wildness' that persist in media today. Nonetheless, *Ponyo* and other contemporary texts have begun to diverge from this with depictions of female characters raised outside of society who exhibit a similar wildness, demonstrating this as a human trait rather than a male trait. For example, since *Ponyo* was released in 2008, we have seen films like Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers* ([Moore and Stewart 2020](#)) and the Disney release *Raya and the Last Dragon* depicting female characters raised outside of conventional society, leading to feral behaviours that also, invariably, code them as partially gender-nonconforming. This suggests, along with

other trends for a greater variety of gender representation, that depictions of feral children are following suit, refusing to fall into the gendered concept of feral boyhood that have been prevalent in fiction through the twentieth century. Ponyo as a character also simultaneously adheres to and inverts the notion of the *tabula rasa* – though her lack of understanding of contemporary society renders her a ‘blank slate’ of sorts, this knowledge does not transform her into a conventional member of society by the film’s close. Instead, this wildness informs her personality, particularly in the context of her existence as the uncommon feral girl character, and is a trait that allows her to stand out amongst those she befriends on the surface.

As a founding member of a studio that regularly produces adaptational works that radically reinterpret literary works, Hayao Miyazaki uses the framework of the feral child to entirely reform the fairy tale character of the Little Mermaid. In utilizing an archetype almost entirely associated with male characters throughout folklore and literary history, Miyazaki transforms the arguably patriarchal function of the original tale into a story that promotes agency and individuality for young girls in a period where the feral child held particular significance in Japanese culture. Through an adaptational reimagining of a fairy tale familiar to international audiences of all ages, Miyazaki employs the figure of the ‘feral child’ through a feminist lens, using this archetype to grant a female figure greater narrative autonomy. By encouraging rather than admonishing the rowdy, independent behaviours demonstrated by Ponyo, the director reframes the patriarchal tone of Andersen’s original story into a form that celebrates girls who take risks, question authority figures and reject social mores.

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Crombie, Zoe (2025), ‘From Little Mermaid to feral child: The rebellious trajectory of the wild girl in Hayao Miyazaki’s *Ponyo*’, *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, 23:1, pp. 00–00, Special Issue: ‘Female Trajectory in Film and Media’, <https://doi.org/10.1386/nl>.

Note

[1] Both of these characters were influential on Ghibli directors Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, with the latter being adapted by Takahata into a series for *World Masterpiece Theater*.

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