About half of the story is devoted to descriptions of how the suitors fail in their missions. The first three men try to palm off counterfeit objects—a begging bowl that fails to shine like a true holy relic, a fire-rat robe that burns when thrown into the flames, and the jeweled branch described in the second section below. The other two make fools of themselves by trying unsuccessfully to obtain the genuine articles.

Next, the Emperor woos Kaguyahime, only to see her turn temporarily into a shadow when he tries to take her to his palace. The two correspond for three years, and then the time comes for Kaguyahime to return to the moon. The bamboo cutter and the Emperor's soldiers try to resist the moon beings who come to fetch her, but their efforts are futile (third section below).

The tale is based on versions of two universal folkloristic themes: the supernatural wife—the maiden who comes to earth, is discovered and captured by a mortal man, marries the man, and eventually returns home—and the suitors who are set impossible tasks. It also shows other evidences of oral influence, such as the repetition of the number three, the folk etymologies accompanying several of the sections, and the conventional storyteller's phrase with which it ends, "Such is the story that has been handed down" (*to zo iitsutaetaru*). At the same time, it exhibits, if in embryonic form, two basic traits of the romance ([*tsukuri*] *monogatari*): detailed, realistic description, particularly of the suitors' quests; and a concern with the thoughts and emotions of the principal characters, particularly Kaguyahime and the Emperor, who are exemplars of courtly sensibility. It is this last quality that probably inspired Murasaki Shikibu to call *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* the "ancestor of all romances."

The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter

[1]

Once upon a time, there was an old bamboo cutter who went into the mountains and fields, cut bamboo, and put the stalks to all kinds of uses. His name was Sakaki no Miyakko[maro]. Now it happened that one stalk of bamboo shone at the base. Puzzled, the old man went up to

it and found that the light was coming from its interior. When he examined it, he saw a dainty little girl, just three inches tall, sitting inside.

"Because she is here in this bamboo I cut every morning and evening, I can tell that she is destined to be my child," the old man said. He put her in his hand, took her home, and gave her to his wife to rear. She was the cutest thing in the world. The wife kept her in a basket because she was so tiny.

When the old man went to cut bamboo after having discovered that child, he kept finding stalks with gold between the joints, and he gradually grew wealthy.

The child shot up swiftly while they cared for her. By the time she was three months old, she was as big as an adult, so they put up her hair and dressed her in a train. They looked after her with great solicitude, making sure that she never emerged from behind her curtains. The incomparable beauty of her face and figure filled the house with radiance. Even if the old man felt ill or upset, a single look at her was enough to end his distress or soothe his anger.

After having cut bamboo for a long time, the old man became a person of consequence. He summoned a diviner, Inbe no Akita of Mimurodo, to confer a name on his daughter, who was quite grown up by then, and Akita named her Nayotake no Kaguyahime, Radiant Maiden of the Pliant Bamboo. The occasion was marked by a three-day celebration, with music and all kinds of other pastimes. Men of every status were invited, and the entertainment was very splendid.

[2]

Prince Kuramochi was an artful man. To the court, he submitted a request for a leave of absence so that he might visit the curative baths of Tsukushi; to Kaguyahime's house, he sent word that he was going to fetch the jeweled branch. Then he departed from the capital. All of his usual attendants accompanied him as far as Naniwa, but there he announced that he intended to set out with only a handful of people. It was to be a very private journey, he said. He embarked with just a few close attendants, and everyone else returned to the capital after seeing him off.

Three days after his pretended departure, the Prince came back again in the boat. He had already called in the six best metalsmiths of the day, and had built a house in an inaccessible spot and set up furnaces

inside three sets of walls. Now he brought the smiths to stay in the house, joined them there, and supervised the fabrication of a jeweled branch, using all the resources of his storehouses and sixteen estates. He had them make the branch exactly according to Kaguyahime's specifications. Then, having managed the whole affair with the utmost resourcefulness, he sneaked into Naniwa.

The Prince sent word of his return to his mansion and sat around looking exhausted. A throng of people came to greet him. They put the jeweled branch in a chest, covered it, and bore it toward the capital. It is impossible to tell how the word spread, but everyone began to say, "Prince Kuramochi has come to the capital with a spray of *udonge* blossoms!"[1]

Kaguyahime was dismayed when she heard the news. "I'm going to be defeated by that Prince," she thought.

Presently, there came a knocking at the gate. "Prince Kuramochi has arrived," a voice announced. "He's still wearing his traveling clothes."

The old man received the Prince. "Please show this to Kaguyahime," the Prince said. "Tell her I've brought the jeweled branch for which I risked my life." The old man took the branch inside. There was a message attached:

itazura ni
mi wa nashitsu tomo
tama no eda o
taorade tada ni
kaerazaramashi

Never would I
have returned empty-handed
without plucking
the branch adorned with jewels—
not though it cost me my life.

Kaguyahime did not seem impressed.

The old man dashed inside the curtains. "The Prince has brought a jeweled branch from Penglai, exactly like the one you asked for. What reason can we give for putting him off? He's come in his travel robes without even stopping by his own house. You'll have to meet him right away," he said. Kaguyahime rested her cheek on her hand in silence, looking very sad and gloomy.

"Now that it's come to this, there's nothing left to discuss," said the Prince. He scrambled onto the veranda.

The old man considered his behavior reasonable. "There's no branch like that anywhere else in the country," he said as he sat in front of Kaguyahime. "How can we refuse this time? Besides, he's a good-looking man."

1. The *udonge* was a legendary Indian tree that blossomed once in 3,000 years.

Kaguyahime was astonished and upset by the Prince's arrival with the branch. "I asked for something hard to get because I didn't want to be stubborn about refusing you," she said to the bamboo cutter. But the old man arranged for the bedroom to be decked out.

"What kind of place was that tree growing in? What a rare, beautiful object!" the old man said to the Prince.

"It was around the Tenth of the Second Month, two years before last, that I set out to sea from Naniwa," the Prince answered. "I realized that I didn't even know which way to head, but I felt that there would be no point in living if I failed in my quest, so I simply went with the uncertain winds. 'If I die, I die,' I thought. 'I'll go on like this as long as I live, and perhaps I'll stumble across Mount Penglai.' At times, I almost sank beneath stormy seas as I drifted on the waves far from Japan. At times, I was driven by the wind to strange shores, where demonic apparitions tried to kill me. At times, I was completely lost at sea, unable to tell where I had been or where I was going. At times, my provisions exhausted, I consumed the roots of island plants. At times, indescribably horrible creatures appeared and tried to eat me. At times, I clung to life by gathering shellfish. I contracted all sorts of ailments in those places where there was nobody to help a traveler, and I had no idea where to go.

"I drifted over the waves, content to let the boat take me wherever it pleased. And then, just at the Hour of the Dragon [7:00 A.M.–9:00 A.M.] on the five hundredth day, I saw the faint outline of a mountain in the middle of the ocean. Everyone in the boat was transfixed. It floated on the water, a great peak, high and beautiful. I thought it must be the one I was looking for, but somehow I couldn't help feeling afraid. I gave orders for the boat to circle it.

"I kept the mountain under observation for two or three days. Then a woman dressed like a heavenly being emerged from its depths and began to dip water with a silver bowl. I disembarked and asked the mountain's name.

"'This is Mount Penglai,' she said. At the same instant, she disappeared into the interior.

"There seemed to be no way of climbing the mountain. While I was

circling it, I saw flowering trees of a kind unknown in this world. A stream with waters of gold, silver, and blue flowed from the mountain. It was spanned by a bridge of many-colored jewels, and there were shining, glittering trees growing nearby. The tree from which I broke this flowering branch was a sadly inferior one, but I chose it because I thought there might be trouble if I didn't follow the lady's instructions to the letter.

"The delights of the mountain were inexhaustible. Nothing in the world could compare with it. But I couldn't wait to leave after I picked the branch. I got back on board the boat and returned in a little more than four hundred days, assisted by favorable winds. Yesterday, I reached the capital from Naniwa, thanks, it may be, to Amida's vow to help sentient beings. And now I've come here, without even changing my brine-soaked robes."

With a sigh, the old man recited a poem:

kuretake no
yoyo no taketori
noyama ni mo
sa ya wa wabishiki
fushi o nomi mishi

Not in fields or in hills
has he experienced hardships
to compare with yours—
this old bamboo cutter
who has lived so many years.

"Today marks the final end of the suffering I have endured so long," the Prince said. This was his reply to the poem:

wa ga tamoto
kyō kawakereba
wabishisa no
chigusa no kazu mo
wasurarenubeshi

Now that my sleeves
are dry again today,
all of my trials
will surely be forgotten,
innumerable though they were.

Just then, six men filed into the courtyard. One of them held a letter on a stick. "I am Ayabe no Uchimaro, a smith from the Office of Palace Works," he said. "I fasted and labored with all my might for more than a thousand days in order to make the jeweled branch, but I still haven't received any recompense. Reward me so I can reward my helpers." He held up the letter.

The bamboo cutter cocked his head in bewilderment. "What can that smith be talking about?" he said. The Prince was dumbfounded, flabbergasted.

"Take the man's letter," said Kaguyahime, who had heard everything. The letter read, "His Highness the Prince hid with us humble artisans for a thousand days while we made him a fine jeweled branch. He promised us official posts. After thinking the matter over, we have decided to ask for our reward here, because we have heard people say, 'The branch must be something needed by Kaguyahime, the lady the Prince is to wed.'"

Kaguyahime had been growing more and more distraught as nighttime approached, but the smith's demands for payment made her laugh with joy. She called the old man inside. "I thought it must be a genuine jeweled branch. Now that we know it's only a shabby counterfeit, please return it at once," she said. The old man nodded in agreement. "We have learned that it was undoubtedly made by human hands, so it will be very easy to return it," he answered.

In high spirits, Kaguyahime composed a reply to the Prince's original poem:

makoto ka to
kikite mitsureba
koto no ha o
kazareru tama no
eda ni zo arikeru

I thought it genuine,
as I thought your words sincere,
but the jeweled branch,
like the leaves of your words,
stems from a tree of deceit.

The jeweled branch was returned with the poem.

Now that he knew the Prince's story was nothing but a lie, the old bamboo cutter pretended to doze off. The Prince sat there until darkness fell, embarrassed to go and embarrassed to stay. Then he slipped away.

Kaguyahime called in the petitioners, seated them, and gave them many presents. "You are delightful men!" she said.

The smiths were overjoyed. "Things turned out just as we hoped," they said. But Prince Kuramochi waylaid them on their return, beat them until the blood ran, and scattered their presents to the winds. They ran away, none the better for Kaguyahime's generosity.

"This has been the humiliation of a lifetime," the Prince said. "Not only did I fail to win the girl, but everybody in the country will be thinking embarrassing things about me." He went far into the mountains, all by himself. His stewards and attendants divided into search parties to look for him, but he was nowhere to be found. They wondered if he might be dead.

The Prince was not seen for many years after he had apparently tried

to hide from his attendants. That is how people began to use the expression *tamasaka naru* to mean "infrequent."[2]

[3]

[*Kaguyahime has told the old couple that messengers from the moon will come for her on the Fifteenth of the Eighth Month. The bamboo cutter has asked the Emperor for help.*]

On the Fifteenth, the court dispatched 2,000 men from the six guards headquarters to the bamboo cutter's house, with Lesser Captain Takano no Ōkuni as their commander. When the 2,000 arrived, they mounted guard over every inch of the premises. There were 1,000 of them on top of the earthen wall and another 1,000 on the building, in addition to all the people from the bamboo cutter's household. The guards were armed with bows and arrows. Inside the main apartment, the women took turns standing watch. The old woman sat inside the strongroom with Kaguyahime in her arms, and the old man posted himself at the entrance to the locked strongroom door.[3]

"Not even heavenly beings can win out against a place guarded like this," the old man said. To the men on top of the building, he said, "If you see anything at all flying in the sky, shoot to kill immediately."

The answer was reassuring. "With this kind of a guard, we'll certainly shoot down or drive away anything at all, even a mosquito."

Kaguyahime heard them. "Even though you may lock me up and prepare a defense, you can't fight the people from the moon. You can't shoot them with bows and arrows. Even though I'm locked inside like this, everything will fly open when the people from the moon arrive; even though you try to fight, no man will be brave when the people from the moon arrive."

"I'll gouge out their leader's eyeballs with my long fingernails and smash them. I'll grab his hair and pull it down. I'll expose his butt and humiliate him in front of all those court officials," the old man stormed.

"Please don't talk in such a loud voice," Kaguyahime said. "They'll hear you on top of the roof. It's not the right way to act. I hate to go away

2. A conjectural translation of a possibly corrupt passage. The phrase may be a pun meaning also "infamous conduct with respect to jewels" or "taking leave of one's jewels / soul / senses."

3. The strongroom was partitioned off from the main apartment.

as though I didn't appreciate all your kindness. Ah! It must be because our karma-affinity was short that I have to leave so soon. It won't be easy to go without doing anything for my parents. These days, I have kept going out to the veranda to beg for permission to stay just this year, but my appeals have been rejected. That's why I've been so sad. I can't bear to go away knowing I've been nothing but a bother to you. People who live in the moon palace are blessed with beauty, eternal youth, and freedom from care, but it doesn't make me happy to be going there. I want to be here when you get old and feeble."

"Don't say such terrible things. I won't be defeated by any messengers from the moon; I don't care how beautiful they are," the old man said in a defiant voice.

Meanwhile, the night wore on. Just at the Hour of the Rat [11:00 P.M.–1:00 A.M.], the air around the house began to shine with a light brighter than midday, a radiance like ten full moons combined. Even the pores on people's skins were visible. A group of men came down from the sky, riding on a cloud, and aligned themselves about five feet off the ground. For those inside and outside the house, it was exactly like seeing ghosts. They lost the will to fight. If they did pluck up the courage to grasp their bows and arrows, the strength drained from their arms, and they collapsed against whatever supports they could find. A few bold fellows brought themselves to shoot, but their arrows went astray, and they were left staring in stupefaction, unable to fight a real battle.

The people from the moon wore costumes of incomparable beauty. They had brought along a flying carriage topped by a silk parasol. One of them, who looked like a King, spoke with his face toward the house. "Miyakkomaro! Come out!" The formerly brave Miyakkomaro fell flat on his face, feeling just as he did when he drank too much wine.

"As a reward for a trifling meritorious deed on your part, we sent down a young person to help you," the King continued. "We meant to have her stay only a short time, but you have received much gold over many years and have come to be quite a different person. Kaguyahime had to spend some time in your humble dwelling because she committed a sin. Now that the sin has been expiated, we've come to fetch her. You can't stop us by weeping and wailing. Send her out right now."

"We have taken care of Kaguyahime for more than twenty years," the old man answered. "It's odd that you should talk about a short time. There must be somebody else called Kaguyahime in some other place."

He continued, "The Kaguyahime who lives here is desperately ill. She can't come out."

The King brought the carriage to the roof without bothering to answer. "Kaguyahime! Why do you linger in that unclean place?" he said. The locked strongroom door flew open in a twinkling; the wooden shutters opened of their own accord. Kaguyahime left the old woman's arms and went outside. Unable to detain her, the old woman wept with upturned face.

Kaguyahime went to the place where the distraught bamboo cutter lay weeping. "I'm unhappy, too, because I have to go. Won't you at least watch me leave?" she said.

"Why should I watch when I'm so miserable? What am I supposed to do when you desert me and fly off into the sky? Take me with you!" he said.

It distressed Kaguyahime to see him lying there in tears. "I'll leave a letter for you. Take it out to read whenever you miss me," she said. This is what she wrote, weeping: "If only I had been born on this earth, I would have stayed with you until no act of mine could have caused you grief. To leave before that hour is the last thing I would ever have wanted to do. Consider the robe I remove a keepsake, and look up on nights when the moon shines. I will be longing to come down from the skies for which I leave you now."

The heavenly beings had brought along a box, which one of them carried. It contained a heavenly feathered robe. There was also another box containing an elixir of immortality. One of the heavenly beings brought the elixir to Kaguyahime. "Drink the elixir in this jar. You must be feeling sick after having eaten food in an unclean place," he said. Kaguyahime took a tiny sip. She started to wrap the jar in the robe she had removed, with the thought of leaving it as a small keepsake, but the heavenly being stopped her. Someone took out the feathered robe and started to dress her in it.

"Wait a minute," Kaguyahime said then. "I've heard that once a person is dressed in a robe like that, she no longer possesses a human heart. There's something I need to say." She began to write on a piece of paper.

"It's getting late," one of the heavenly beings complained.

"Please don't talk as though you lacked sensitivity," Kaguyahime said. Very calmly, she wrote a letter for the Emperor. She did not seem to

be in any hurry. "Although you were so kind as to send all those people to keep me here, the messengers who have come for me won't let me stay. Much as I regret it, they are going to take me away. It was because I was not an ordinary mortal that I couldn't serve you. You must have found my behavior hard to understand, and it grieves me to realize that my stubbornness must have seemed very rude." [Her poem:]

ima wa tote	With sad emotion,
ama no hagoromo	I think of His Majesty
kiru ori zo	as now I put on
kimi o aware to	the heavenly feathered robe,
omoiidekeru	saying, "The time has come."

She attached the jar of elixir to the paper, summoned the Head Chamberlain–Middle Captain, and gave instructions for the poem to be transmitted. It was a heavenly being who transmitted it. The moment the Middle Captain received it, someone dressed Kaguyahime in the heavenly feathered robe. No longer did the maiden consider the old man pitiful or pathetic, for one who dons such a robe is emancipated from sorrow. She entered the carriage and soared into the heavens, escorted by 100 heavenly beings.