

FROM CREATION MYTHS TO MARRIAGE ALLIANCES

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Murasaki's Akashi Chapter

BY FAY BEAUCHAMP



Miranda by John W. Waterhouse, 1916. Oil on Canvas, 18 x 23.5 inches. Christie's, London.

In suggesting ways that teachers might use cross-cultural comparisons between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) and Murasaki's Akashi chapter from *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1000), I am influenced by Wendy Doniger's lively analyses of how Shakespeare diverts and inverts motifs found in narratives of ancient India. She is wonderfully dismissive of the attempts of Freud, Jung and Levi-Strauss to explain similarity by positing universal structures of mind, body and society. Instead, parallel plots are enticing because they can reveal why, in a particular place and time, writers use characters and images for specific purposes, and why and how motifs are shaped, transformed and created. *The Tempest* and this single chapter from *The Tale of Genji* have a solid basis for comparison. Prospero can be compared to the Old Monk, Miranda to the Akashi Lady and Prince Ferdinand to Genji. Both plots involve an exiled father who causes a supernatural storm at sea to bring a prince to a daughter, thus achieving political reintegration through a marriage alliance. Juxtaposing the two stories might reveal to students how their initial assumptions are ethnocentric, but then the comparison moves students to analyze more carefully the complexity of texts and cultures.

Doniger believes that "tracing the genealogy of a story is a mug's game."¹ Yet there seems to be a flow of ideas, including the concept of romantic love, that moved from India through Persia to Renaissance England and long preceded the modern Westernization which has led the Japanese to admire Shakespeare.² An introductory world literature course or interdisciplinary humanities course, such as the ones I have been teaching at Community College of Philadelphia, can include versions of *Sita and Rama*³ and the *Bamboo Cutter's Tale*,⁴ as well as other analogs which moved both east and west. Folklorists chart the movement and permutations of such stories. Once suggesting that Shakespeare and Murasaki may be linked by very ancient mutual sources from India, rather than any influence from Heian Japan to Renaissance England, one can move on to other issues.

One snare involves coincidental details that become exaggerated through translation. In Arthur Waley's and Edward G. Seidensticker's translations, the repeated use of such words as "tempest," "tale," and even "prince" exaggerate the resemblance of symbol, genre, and social structure. Yet it is possible for nonspecialists who don't read Japanese to use different translations and works of literary criticism to learn more about the Japanese original. For example, the old man of Akashi is called a lay priest by Waley⁵ and H. Richard Okada⁶ and the Akashi Priest by Norma Field⁷ and Haruo Shirane⁸; Seidensticker calls him "the old monk."⁹ After consulting these five authorities whose works are essential for an English-speaking teacher of *The Tale of Genji*, I have made an informed, if somewhat arbitrary, decision. I call this character the "Old Monk" to give him a name with the connotations of a religious recluse. He is quite comparable to Prospero, who, in similar withdrawal, devotes himself to the occult.

Another example, vital to this paper, involves the term "prince." At the beginning of the Akashi chapter, Waley has Genji refer to himself as a "prince"¹⁰; the more literal Seidensticker does not. In terms of the overall plot of *The Tale of Genji*, it is important that Genji was designated a commoner by his father, the Emperor. Genji is a Cinderella figure contending against more powerful step-siblings. Yet Waley's term "prince," often used by critics such as Ivan Morris who famously called Genji the "Shining Prince,"¹¹ captures his high aristocratic status, his cultivation, and his personal appeal. His status is quite comparable to that of Prince Ferdinand.

With all these caveats in place, I want to outline two strategies that move American students away from automatically preferring the familiar Western canon. First, an exploration of each culture's mythic structures can lead to a greater understanding of the complexity of both texts. Secondly, a close analysis of contrasting images, in this case a chess board and a *koto*, can lead students to a greater appreciation of East Asian aesthetic expressions of the possibilities of love within the certainties of political power.

NOTING STUDENTS' INITIAL REACTIONS

Despite the stories' similarities, in journal writing my students have demonstrated quite different reactions. American students approve at first of the morality in *The Tempest*; they initially read it as a familiar fairy tale about ideal love. There is a powerful father, Prospero, whose daughter Miranda has just reached marriageable age. With help from Ariel and Neptune, Prospero causes a magical storm that catapults a soaked and terrified Prince Ferdinand onto the shore. Daughter and prince fall in love at first sight. Heavy magical chaperoning then ensues although Prince Ferdinand is a non-threatening handsome cipher, obligingly free of entanglements. The story ends as Americans expect—with promises of eternal wedded bliss.

Many of my students, however, at first disapprove of the morality in the Akashi chapter. Again there is an aged father who has a single daughter; they live exiled from the capital in a place of great natural beauty near a shore. The storm that motivates Genji to leave Suma has supernatural overtones. Its severity leads Genji and his men to pray to the sea-god Sumiyoshi whom they evidently hold responsible, and they wonder if the tempest has been caused by "sins in some other life, [or] . . . crimes in this one."¹² When Genji leaves, "That strange wind came up again and they were at Akashi as if they had flown . . . the workings of the wind were strange and marvelous."¹³ Since the Old Monk is a devotee of Sumiyoshi and invites Genji to come to Akashi, the implication is that the Old Monk, like Prospero, has used an intermediary sea-god to deliver a "prince" to his doorstep.

Upon delivery, the Old Monk has the same problem as Prospero in that princes do not necessarily promise marriage to the first pretty girl they find in the woods. The Old Monk passes the time hinting at his daughter's virtues, such as playing the *koto*. Some aspects that distress my students are related to genre; this episode is embedded in a longer tale; a chapter is not an isolated play. While Ferdinand is innocently on board a ship waiting to be shipwrecked, Genji is the most entangled, over-committed man possible. In earlier chapters, there is evidence that the jealous spirit of one discarded mistress, Lady Rokujo, has caused the deaths of Genji's wife, Aoi, and his hesitant lover, Yugao. Even readers of the Akashi chapter alone can sense Genji's deep relationship with the character Murasaki



In this Akashi chapter illustration, a beaked spirit drums above shafts of rain and flame; Genji stands below right. In act I, scene 2 of *The Tempest*, Ariel's flame and thunder-claps make Ferdinand leap into the sea; in act III, scene 3, Ariel appears as a winged harpy, an amalgam similar to the half-bird, half-human in this Japanese woodcut.

From Murasaki Shikabu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. by Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 257. Courtesy of Edward G. Seidensticker.

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through the letters they send. Oblivious to Genji's past, the Old Monk transports Genji to Akashi, whets Genji's appetite with praise for his daughter, and arranges for Genji to visit the daughter on a dark night. Genji walks up thinking miscellaneous thoughts about Murasaki along the way, enters the unchaperoned house, and with some hint of force seduces the Akashi daughter during that first visit.¹⁴ My students do not like that. No monogamous bliss can come of it, and indeed the chapter ends with the Akashi Lady pregnant and in deep sorrow when Genji leaves to return to the capital. Like life, *The Tale of Genji* has no neat ending; Genji's daughter is adopted by Murasaki and grows up to be Empress, but these circumstances do not console Genji, the Akashi Lady, the character Murasaki, nor my students.

Let me pause and comment on the problems of this superficial comparison that overlooks the ironies in each work. Students have a tendency to think both "princes" are presented as ideals and even without thinking about it explain their preference in terms of Judeo-Christian morality. This morality, as they see it, is based on monogamy and marriage rites that are supposed to precede sexual intimacy. But closer analysis might reveal that Ferdinand has the potential to be as flawed as Genji and that both Shakespeare and Murasaki are satirists intentionally masking their criticisms of their culture's mores in the guise of a tale with fabulous elements.

ANALYZING CREATION MYTHS

To understand each story on a deeper level, one should ask how each treats the basic myths of its culture. Such narratives answer questions as, "Why are things the way they are?" "What expectations can we have of life, of love?" Both Shakespeare and Murasaki seem to be retelling a creation myth. The symbol of the tempest, the supernatural storm at the beginning of English play and Japanese chapter, marks a movement from the everyday world to the mythic; this transition is accompanied with constant images of illusion and dream. To me, despite explicit references to Neptune and Juno, *The Tempest* is an inverted telling of Genesis. The God-like father Prospero, like Lucifer, has been tossed down into exile; Miranda, the miracle child, is the new Eve on an island Eden. This time, however, Miranda/Eve and Ferdinand/Adam are kept from sinning, and the couple depart in peace; exile ends with integration back into society.

This interpretation is reinforced by the subplot where Cain is represented by Caliban, the devil's kin, and Abel by Ariel, the protective angel. In terms of asking why myths are being retold as they are at a particular time, the key date may be 1611, the year *The Tempest* was performed and the King James Bible published. Writing the play in the decade when translators of the Bible were literally creating God with words, Shakespeare suggests that the human playwright, not the supernatural God, creates the world: "These our actors . . . were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air; / And like the baseless fabric of this vision, / The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself, / Yea all which it inherit shall dissolve / And like this insubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff / As dreams are made on . . ." (act 4, scene 1).¹⁵ Trading with both the West and East Indies, Renaissance England was open to alternatives to the Judeo-Christian explanation of the world, including its supernatural creation and morality based on the original sin of Adam and Eve. *The Tempest* can be interpreted in myriad ways; students need to consider how and why serious questions about Judeo-Christian assumptions might be buried under layers of fantasy.

How does such speculation about *The Tempest* assist with a better understanding of the Akashi chapter? Comparisons bring into relief what is obscure. Rewriting a creation myth seems an obvious motif in *The Tempest*. But through comparison, it becomes clear that Murasaki is also rewriting her country's creation myth. At the end of the Akashi chapter, Genji writes a poem, "Cast out upon the sea, I passed the years / As useless as the leech child of the gods."¹⁶ The leech child, the first child of Izanagi and Izanami, co-creators of the world according to Shinto belief, is rejected as defective, unable to stand at the age of three and therefore not quite human. Field points out that the leech child is cast away in a boat, and Genji arrives at the Akashi shore in a small boat.¹⁷ It is not just Western readers who see Genji as impure; the episode in Akashi may be one of ritual

purification of one who is faulty. Where Shakespeare separates the demonic and angelic into Caliban and Ariel, Cain and Abel, Genji starts with the defects represented by the leech child more clearly within himself. He is drawn by portent, storm, and a dream of his father, the Emperor. He undergoes loneliness, grief and repentance, and then is bidden to father a child with the daughter of the place. Since the baby born of the alliance becomes an empress and a mother of emperors, it is possible to interpret the story of the baby's conception as part of the myth of imperial descent from Ameratsu, the sun goddess, also a child of Izanagi and Izanami.

The sorrow of the story stems from its point of view. Murasaki the character is not the mother of Genji's significant child. Murasaki the character adopts the child, but she also mourns this alliance of Genji and, for many reasons, dies with pain in her heart. Unlike Shakespeare, Murasaki the author does not undo the creation myth of her culture, but she can as a woman comment on the cruelties of separation and loss. Murasaki has an ironic tone when she talks of Shinto and Buddhist practices; for example, in the storm Genji's men pray "in loud voices to this or that favored deity, Buddhist and Shinto."¹⁸ The Old Monk dedicates his daughter to the shrine of the sea-god Sumiyoshi, and while the story may have truly supernatural actions, on another level we see a father using religious beliefs to reinforce his authority over his daughter. The Old Monk has worldly, very un-Buddhist ambitions, and he uses myth to his advantage.

There is a value to students in exploring how each author works within his or her cultural context; stories not only convey cultural values but also can critique them through parody or inversion of plot elements. Students are less likely to judge one society by the other's value system; instead they become aware of the origins of such judgments. At the same time students can see that as Shakespeare can be interpreted as critiquing his culture's creation myth, Murasaki also questions the behaviors sanctioned by her society. Genji may be enacting a ritual as a mythic hero, or he may be seducing a woman as the social customs of a polygamous society allow. Either way, it is not only a Western reader who perceives the resulting sorrow of Genji, the Akashi Lady and the character Murasaki. The sorrow is not just created by the Western interpretive act. It lies at the heart of the Japanese text. Cultural values are not just transmitted and followed; each culture contains within itself a lively questioning of its values and norms.

CONTRASTING SYMBOLIC IMAGES

Now I want to move from the macro-level, the mythic, to other aspects of Renaissance and Heian culture. When there is a basis of comparison between two texts, what is dissimilar attracts attention. Contrast can draw students to more subtle distinctions of metaphor and symbol. This second stage examines a textual detail to understand the characters' complexity. A famous image of Ferdinand and Miranda occurs at the end of *The Tempest* when they are found playing chess. I used to think this showed a positive calm control, but chess is a symbol rich in connotation. The board game can be seen as a talisman traded between east and west, an analogy to the exchange of folktales. According to chess historian Richard Eales, there is agreement that chess began in India with permutations in both east and west.¹⁹ Eales also reports that Joseph Needham tried to establish that Chinese versions of chess were earlier and that the black-white checkerboard is related to yin-yang symbolism and to divination boards in general. I find this symbolism both convincing and disturbing, as chess is usually perceived as a game preparing military strategists to anticipate moves, to use subterfuge, retreat, and cutting of losses to achieve a single-minded goal. It is not necessarily a pleasant metaphor for male-female relationships, since it puts two people in antagonistic if equal positions. Someone's winning is only achieved by an opponent's losing. In any case, courtship as chess emphasizes long-term planning and manipulation.

When one asks who is doing this planning in *The Tempest*, the answer is that Prospero, the father, has plotted to bring Ferdinand to the shore. The long-term results are that Prospero himself leaves exile and returns to Italy and that his grandchild will become the equivalent of an emperor—king of two united kingdoms. This is a version of arranged marriage, manipulated courtship to further political ends. Even more disturbing in terms of



Genji watching two women play go, an image similar to Prospero watching Miranda and Ferdinand play chess. This scene occurs in chapter 3, Shell of the Locust. From Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. by Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1996), 51. Courtesy of Edward G. Seidensticker.

About the woodcuts

The woodcut illustrations used in this article were first published in 1650 in Japan. The artist Yamamoto Shunsho, who lived from 1610 to 1682, also worked in lacquer (Seidensticker, vi); lacquer scenes from Japan were imported into England on cabinets and screens, etc., but almost certainly not before the writing of *The Tempest* which occurred no later than its first recorded production in 1611.

Miranda's future, at the end of *The Tempest*, Ferdinand is cheating at chess. Miranda says, "My lord, you play me false" (act 5, scene 1). The more Shakespeare's last play is studied, the more its vision seems that of illusion, deceit, and sorrow.

In the Akashi chapter, it is not Genji who initiates the relationship with the Akashi Lady any more than Ferdinand begins with matrimonial/political aspirations. Either the human Old Monk or the Sumiyoshi god is in control. This time, if one looks at politics and not myth, one notices, with the help of the critics Okada and Shirane, that in the long term, after the Akashi chapter is over, it is the Old Monk whose old slights and disappointments are washed away when his grandchild is born.²⁰ The Old Monk is clearly scheming a crucial marriage alliance. Like Prospero, the Old Monk is a member of aristocracy and is wealthy, but marriage of his daughter both reinstates and elevates the family's prestige.

Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* resonates with images of go contests. Thomas LaMarre has lectured about this motif as a symbol of Genji's political games; LaMarre compared Kyoto to a game board that Genji fills with households of women who bring him political power.²¹ Janet Goff published a Noh play, "Go," based on *The Tale of Genji* that describes moves at go symbolically as Genji "captures" women; game, military, courtship and Buddhist metaphors overlap.²² Because of the use of this motif elsewhere in *The Tale of Genji*, one would expect go to be played in the Akashi chapter. Almost surprisingly it is not. Here *The Tempest*/Akashi comparison highlights difference rather than similarity. In the Akashi chapter, there is no game board but a musical instrument, the *koto*, which lies between man and woman. When Genji leaves the Akashi Lady, she plays for him, and her last words are "In the sound of it the sound of my weeping, forever." Genji replies, "Do not change the middle string of this *koto* / Unchanging I shall be till we meet again."²³ This motif of the musical instrument comes directly from a poem, "The Song of the Lute" by Po Chu-i, alluded to by the Old Monk. In that Chinese poem, love between a man and a woman is not seen as exploitative or determined by an outside force. The "Song of the Lute" evokes how a man and a woman can form a bond by chance, without regard to family or fortune. The music unites mind, spirit, heart, creates memory and longing, embodies true emotion. By using allusion and having the musical instrument and not a game board between man and woman, in this instance Murasaki is more positive than Shakespeare in suggesting the possibility of genuine love, not manipulation, underlying sexual relations. Both works, however, say life is a dream, and dream and reality are difficult to distinguish.

The comparison of key symbolic images, therefore, leads students to the interpretation that both Shakespeare and Murasaki challenge easy acceptance of romantic ideals. We worry about imposing our own values onto texts, but this time I think the author of *Romeo and Juliet* has formed our modern opposition to arranged marriage; Shakespeare has helped to create the modern mind that perceives the skepticism in his plays. It is difficult for me to suspend skepticism even when reading Murasaki's poetry evoking the beauty of erotic longing. Ultimately, we need to ask students, after study and reflection, which author seems to portray better ideal qualities in emotion and romance. Comparison of the symbolic images in both stories might make students reassess their easy assumption that all is well between Miranda and Ferdinand and all is exploitative between Genji and the Akashi Lady.



Genji and the Old Monk with the koto between them. From chapter 13, Akashi, Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. by Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 257. Courtesy of Edward G. Seidensticker.

FROM TEXT TO CONTEXT

Barring the incredibly slight possibility that a plot summary of the Akashi chapter floated to England while contact existed in 1600, what can we learn about why cultures produce similar stories, in this case six hundred years and half a world apart? Let me end by suggesting some similarities of two cultures for students to explore. Both Shakespeare and Murasaki were aware of royal patrons at court. Both were in societies where aristocratic women were given attention, privilege, and education for the sake of marriage alliances. Their two island countries lay off the coasts of fragmenting empires, with imperial Rome comparable to Tang Dynasty China; perhaps for reasons of similar geography and history, Japan and England did, and do today, place unusually high importance on the lineage of the ruling family. When lineage is given divine status, stories of creation myths, power manipulation, and marriage alliances converge. And with our modern sensibility, we canonize and choose to teach works that handle such stories with complexity, skepticism, and even, rue. ■

NOTES

1. Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 140.
2. Thomas Rimer discusses the "complex set of relationships between Japanese theater and the theater of the European world" including Ninagawa's production of *The Tempest* in *Japanese Theater in the World*, Samuel Leiter, ed. (New York: Japan Foundation, 1997), 25–31. Shakespeare's plays have struck many critics as Buddhist; for example, see James Howe, *A Buddhist's Shakespeare: Affirming Self-Deconstructions* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994). Filmmakers such as Kurosawa are drawn to Shakespearean themes and images that have Japanese parallels. I thank James Brandon for his telephone interview in January 2000 regarding the lack of any evidence that Renaissance England was aware of Noh plays. I also thank Thomas Rimer and Norma Field for coming to Community College of Philadelphia through a U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant.
3. Sita's supernatural birth has similarities to both Miranda and the Akashi Lady who are symbolically, if not literally, motherless. Rama's wooing of Sita through performing tasks has similarities to Ferdinand's tasks in *The Tempest*. The combination of birth story, wooing and ritual exile may also come from the Ramayana rather than being a "universal" motif.
4. H. Richard Okada discusses the influence of *The Bamboo Cutter's Tale* on *The Tale of Genji* and its Tibetan/Chinese source in *Figures of Resistance: Language, Poetry and Narrating in the Tale of Genji and Other Mid-Heian Texts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 50–2.
5. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, Arthur Waley, trans. (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 301.
6. Okada, 253.
7. Norma Field, *The Splendor of Longing in The Tale of Genji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 64–5.
8. Haruo Shirane, *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 74. Shirane gives the Japanese word "nyūdo."
9. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, Edward G. Seidensticker, trans. (New York: Knopf, 1996), 252. The Akashi old man holds both Shinto and Buddhist beliefs; in retirement, he desires to dedicate his life to religious practice in both traditions. Neither English word, monk or priest, can be accurate because these Western terms present a false choice reflecting Western exclusionary religions. When a nonspecialist writes about *The Tale of Genji*, Waley's translation is invaluable for giving an insightful interpretation of the text; Seidensticker is regarded as the more literal translator and reliable guide to the Japanese original, and in general I quote him.
10. Waley, 296.
11. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Knopf, 1975).
12. Seidensticker, 249.
13. Seidensticker, 251. Shirane calls the storm a "natural disturbance [that] reflects the response of the heavens," and quotes Fukasawa Micho who says the "tempest expresses the anger of the gods" (Shirane, 14–5). Characters in the story and critics interpret this "deluge" (Waley, 297) to be supernatural because of its duration, violence and geographical range that includes both Suma and Kyoto.
14. For a discussion of this scene, see Margaret H. Childs, "The Value of Vulnerability: Sexual Coercion and the Nature of Love in Japanese Court Literature," *The Journal of Asian Studies* (November 1999), 1059–79.
15. For teaching purposes, *The Tempest* edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Pauline Werstine (New York: The New Folger Library, 1994) has combined excellent introductory material with clear footnotes and an inexpensive price. A recent publication of text and critical essays edited by Gerald Graff and James Phelan provides an overview of post-colonial theories centering on historical sources from the Caribbean in *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).
16. Seidensticker, 270.
17. Field, 66–8.
18. Seidensticker, 249.
19. Richard Eales, *Chess: History of a Game* (New York: Facts on File, 1985) 31–4.
20. Okada, 269–86. Shirane also believes that the Akashi father had "neither forsaken the capital nor the hope of returning to glory," 75.
21. Thomas LaMarre, Lecture at Community College of Philadelphia, May 1997.
22. Janet Goff, *Noh Drama and The Tale of Genji: The Art of Allusion in Fifteen Classical Plays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 96–101.
23. Seidensticker, 266.

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