



THE HEART OF HISTORY

# The Tale of Genji

By Sonja Arntzen

The defensible claims that *The Tale of Genji* is history's first novel and the first major literary work written by a woman have won it international recognition and accordingly inclusion in many survey courses of world literature. Within Japan today, *The Tale of Genji* commands a space in the canon of the national literature roughly equivalent to all the works of Shakespeare in the English canon, while in popular culture, the tale continues to provide infinite inspiration for animated and print cartoon artists, filmmakers, and illustrators. That a work written a thousand years ago for a tiny in-group audience consisting mainly of royal consorts, princesses, and the women who served them should have such an enduring ability to communicate across time and culture is nothing short of extraordinary. Its success in this respect owes much to the way it can draw the reader of any time and background into a world of convincing reality, peopled by characters with believable and intriguing emotions. The work's capacity to deliver this experience makes it an exceptionally clear window into many aspects of Japanese history and culture, as well as providing material for cross-cultural comparison on such varied themes as courtship, marriage, roles of women, communication modes, and aesthetic perception.

**General note on the Genji monogatari emaki:**

Produced around 1180, *The Tale of Genji Scroll* is the oldest example of an illustrated manuscript of *The Tale of Genji*. Extant in a fragmentary condition, the surviving illustrations are exclusively from the latter chapters.

**Left:** Detail from the *Genji monogatari emaki* (c. 1180) showing the mature Genji cradling Kaoru, the son borne by Genji's wife but fathered by Genji's best friend's son. The woman figure at the bottom is a lady-in-waiting, the role played by Murasaki Shikibu herself in Empress Shūshi's court. Illustration from Zuhan *Genji monogatari*, Nihon no koten, v. 7, ed. Akiyama Ken, Shūeisha, 1978. Original copyright: Tokugawa Museum.



Detail from the *Genji monogatari emaki* (c. 1180) showing women engaged in reading an illustrated tale. The woman in the lower right is a lady-in-waiting who reads the written text aloud from a booklet while the woman in the upper part of the frame looks at the tale illustrations. The woman in the lower left is having her hair dried and combed while she listens. Illustration from Zuhān *Genji monogatari*, *Nihon no koten*, v. 7, ed. Akiyama Ken, Shūeisha, 1978. Original copyright: Tokugawa Museum.

First, a brief description of the author, her time, and the tale itself is in order. Murasaki Shikibu (?973–?1014) served as a lady-in-waiting roughly between the years of 1006 to 1010 in the court of Empress Shōshi (988–1074). The name by which we know the author is a combination of that of one of the main female characters in *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki, and an office title, Shikibu (Bureau of Rites), because her father held a post at one time in that bureau. Thus, one might paraphrase her name as “the one nicknamed Murasaki whose father worked in the Bureau of Rites.” Even though we do not know her personal name, we have remarkable access to Murasaki Shikibu’s character and personal history due to the survival of a diary she kept during the years 1008–1010.<sup>1</sup> (Imagine the sensation were Shakespeare’s diary to be discovered!) Her diary indicates that she was writing the tale during her period of employment and it was being circulated to the court in a serial fashion. In fact, her invitation to enter the service of Empress Shōshi likely came about because word had spread that she was writing an amusing piece of fiction.

Murasaki Shikibu lived in the mid-Heian period, 900 to 1100, often called the Fujiwara period due to the political domination

exerted by that family. Politics at the time was inextricably tied to marriage. The goal for ambitious men was not to become emperor, but to marry one’s daughter to the emperor, thereby becoming the emperor’s father-in-law, and grandfather to the next emperor-to-be. Marrying “up” by means of the women in one’s family was a pattern of advancement repeated all the way down the social hierarchy. Women were therefore crucial to the game of politics, and although they may be regarded as pawns, they could exert great influence. For example, the most powerful of all the Fujiwara regents, Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1028), who as father to Empress Shōshi was Murasaki Shikibu’s employer, owed his ascendancy to the influence of his sister, Senshi (962–1002), a former empress herself. A nearly contemporary history records Senshi badgering her emperor son until he finally agreed to give Michinaga the key appointment of Minister of the Right, which paved Michinaga’s path to the top of the hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

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prince because he has no substantial backing from his mother's side. He is given a surname, Minamoto, which was reserved in Heian society for surplus offspring of the imperial family. As such, Minamoto men had considerable prestige but were consistently pushed out of the first circle of power by the Fujiwara. Genji's final success in the tale, marriage of his daughter to a crown prince, and assumption of a rank equal to that of a retired emperor, would not have been possible for a Minamoto man within the political reality of the time. One might even be tempted to consider Genji a wish-fulfilling surrogate for the frustrated ambitions of non-Fujiwara families. That would be, however, to go too far, for Genji can also be considered a fictionalized portrait of Michinaga himself. Such ambiguity in the possible message signifies that *The Tale of Genji* is not fundamentally a political novel; it is first and foremost a story about human feelings and relationships. An awareness of the political and historical backdrop serves mainly to help understand the circumstances shaping some of the characters and events in the story.

The work itself is long, over 1,100 pages in the most recent English translation, and covers three generations of characters. The story is divided into fifty-four chapters. The first forty focus on the love-life of Genji. After Genji dies, the narrative shifts to the intertwined love affairs of two of Genji's descendants, Prince Niou, Genji's grandson, and Kaoru, (officially Genji's son but actually the offspring of a young princess Genji married late in his life and the son of Genji's best friend). The reader may think upon reading this briefest of synopses that the novel sounds like a soap opera; and indeed its endlessly entangled and often scandalous love relationships do share something with that modern popular genre. Something else it shares with that genre is the prevalence of women in the story. There are more female characters than male in the tale, and their memorable personalities—such as the proud, passionate and tortured Rokujō, the sensuous and yielding Yūgao, the good and vivacious Murasaki, the reserved and intelligent Akashi Lady, or the pathetic but humorous Safflower Princess—can stand as archetypes for certain ways of being a woman. Not that these women (or men for that matter) are drawn as types. Their individuality is striking, and centuries of readers in Japan have discussed the merits and demerits of the novel's characters as though they were real people. Contemporary students in North America find themselves doing the same thing.

These vivid characters are set in a natural environment that is as animated as they. Mood and setting are far more central to this work than one expects in the traditional western novel (unless one thinks of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.) Moreover, natural images are constantly intertwined with dialogue through the exchange of poetry. The poems are focal points in most dialogue and create pauses in the momentum of the story line that allow the reader to identify deeply with the characters' feelings. For more than five hundred years during the medieval period, *The Tale of Genji* was read almost exclusively for its poetry, functioning as a sort of composition handbook.

Examples from the text are the best way to communicate the characteristics of the novel. The excerpts that follow are taken from the fourth chapter, entitled Yūgao, the name of a flower that has been translated alternatively as "Evening Faces" or "Twilight Beauty."<sup>3</sup> Since this flower comes to stand for the woman Genji meets and with whom he has a love affair, she is also known by this epithet. None of the female characters in *The Tale of Genji* is identified by a personal given name, but readers from Murasaki Shikibu's own time began the practice that continues to this day of referring to the heroines of the tale by this kind of nickname.

When one has space in one's curriculum for only one chapter from *The Tale of Genji*, then chapter four is likely the best choice. As tightly structured as a short story, here a romance is begun, reaches a tragic climax, and ends with a sad coda. The affair is Genji's first deep romantic attachment (aside from the secret love for his stepmother which is not fully revealed by this point in the tale). Both lovers are young, Genji only seventeen and Yūgao about nineteen. Younger readers easily identify with the subject matter. Neither Genji nor Yūgao are inexperienced lovers. Genji has an official wife, daughter of the Minister of the Left, to whom he was married some five years earlier. She is the one woman who remains aloof to his charms. He has been involved in various secret affairs and knows enough about love to realize that Yūgao too has experience. It is hinted and then finally revealed that Yūgao is a lover of Genji's best friend, Tō no Chūjō, "Secretary Captain," the court title he held at his first appearance in the story. In chapter two, Tō no Chūjō tearfully tells of losing this lover and the child they had together because his official wife had sent the woman threatening notes. Yūgao had appeared so easy-going that Tō no Chūjō, by his own admission, took her for granted and often neglected her. His inconstancy coupled with threats from his wife caused Yūgao to disappear without warning. Genji encounters her in a poor section of town in a shabby house overrun with flowers whose name he does not know. When he asks, he is informed, "My lord, they call that white flower 'twilight beauty.' The name makes it sound like a lord or lady, but here it is blooming on this pitiful fence!"<sup>4</sup> When he orders a servant to pick some of the flowers, a girl servant from the house proffers a perfumed fan upon which to place the blossoms.<sup>5</sup> Later, Genji reads the poem written on the fan,

*At a guess I see that you may indeed be he: the light silver dew brings to clothe in loveliness a twilight beauty flower.*<sup>6</sup>

It is a provocative poem; Yūgao herself makes the first move in this romance.<sup>7</sup> The narration notes that the "writing was disguised, but its grace and distinction pleasantly surprised him." A little later, he replies "in a hand unlike his own,"

*Let me then draw near and see whether you are she, whom glimmering dusk gave me faintly to discern in twilight beauty flowers.*



Detail from the *Genji monogatari emaki* (c. 1180) showing Niou, Genji's grandson, attempting to comfort with music his pregnant wife who has recently heard that Niou will soon be marrying again for political reasons. Heian domestic architecture, with its open structure, many layers of blinds, and easy exterior access, is well depicted here. Illustration from Zuhān *Genji monogatari*, *Nihon no koten*, v. 7, ed. Akiyama Ken, Shūeisha, 1978. Original copyright: Tokugawa Museum.

Thus begins an affair in which both lovers are frank about their attraction to each other yet keep their true identities hidden. She strongly suspects that he is the Prince Genji everyone talks about, but cannot be sure. He comes to think that she may be the woman his best friend regretted losing, but it is as though he does not want to be certain about her identity because he would then feel guilt about pursuing the affair rather than revealing her whereabouts to Tō no Chūjō. So each lover accuses the other of lack of trust by refusing to disclose who they are, but neither wants to be the first to yield that information. Moreover, their first meetings are completely in the dark. They sleep together several times without seeing one another. Here is how the situation is described in the text:

He made a show of dressing modestly in a hunting cloak, of changing his costume, and of giving her no look at his face, and he never came to her until everyone in the house was asleep. He was so like a shape-changing creature of old that he caused her acute anguish, although his manner with her, and her own sense of touch, made her wonder how great a lord he might be.<sup>8</sup>

They first see one another in the light of the autumn full moon and at that moment Genji impulsively decides to whisk her away to a deserted mansion where they can enjoy the rare luxury of a whole day and night together. Even then, Genji attempts to hide his face.

She was thoroughly offended that he still had his face covered, and he agreed that this was unnatural by now.

*The flower you see disclosing now its secrets in the evening dew glimmered first before your eyes in a letter long ago.*

He said, "Does the gleam of the dew please you?"

With a sidelong glance she murmured,

*The light I saw fill the dewdrops adorning then a twilight beauty.*

*Was nothing more than a trick of the day's last fading gleam!*

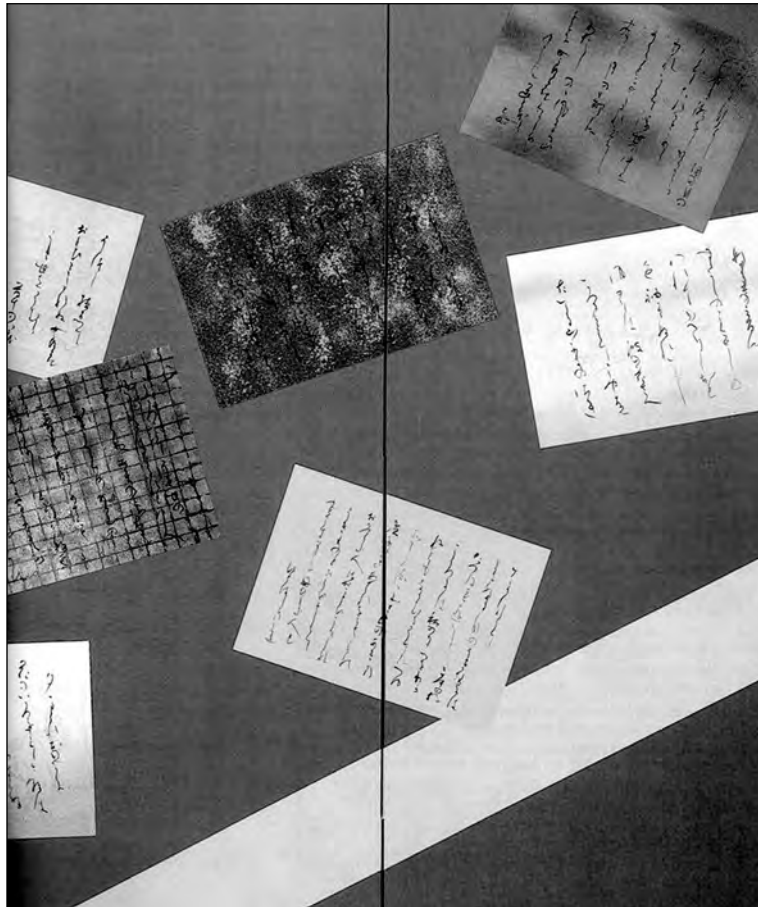
He was delighted.<sup>9</sup>

This brief exchange captures brilliantly both his playfulness, which is supported by confidence in his own charm and invulnerability, and her desire for him, which is undercut by melancholy because he is not likely to prove more constant than her other lover.

They spend a day of pleasure together during which he was “now reproving her, now whispering sweet nothings in her ear,” but that night, Yūgao dies, apparently from the fright inspired by spirit possession, and Genji finds out that he is not so invulnerable after all. His grief over her loss nearly claims his own life.

The brief excerpts and paraphrase above are intended to demonstrate the captivating quality of the storytelling in *The Tale of Genji* and provide some sense of its social context. One might think up to this point that it is primarily a text for the literature classroom, but its potential use for courses in world history and cultures is great. *The Tale of Genji* provides an opportunity for time travel into the domestic environment and private side of Heian life. In some ways, that society is as strange as something out of science fiction. For example, the fact that courtship begins with an exchange of handwritten poetry (the hand often disguised at first to prevent easy assessment of personality), proceeds to tactile intimacy, and only after that to visual intimacy, seems bizarre in terms of North American courtship rituals (although the recent phenomenon of meeting first through text in online dating provides a curious parallel in our own age). Experiencing this phenomenon through the story both widens our experience of possible social worlds and allows us to reflect on how our own courtship rituals might seem just as strange from the outside. The novel’s descriptions also enable us to imagine a detail of Heian everyday life, nights so completely without illumination that lovers could meet without actually seeing each other.

Conversation through brief, impromptu poems, so much a feature of dialogue in *The Tale of Genji* (and all other Heian works), seem an exotic aspect of the culture. Does this characteristic have any connection with modern Japan? Looked at broadly, it is a mode of communication in which suggestion rather than bald statement carries the message, still a feature of both writing and conversation in Japan. Once when I gave a lecture on the general characteristics of Japanese literature at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, a contract lawyer in the audience remarked afterwards that she had received insight into frustration she experienced in preparing contracts for Japanese businessmen. They were always asking if there were a way to make the language less direct. Moreover, I would venture to assert that poetry as a genre is still more popularly practiced and appreciated in Japan than any other country in the developed world. In the



Example of a modern work of Japanese calligraphic art inspired by the poetry of *The Tale of Genji*. This detail of a four-fold screen presents a selection of poems from *The Tale of Genji* in the calligraphic style of the Heian period inscribed on hand-made papers that are reproductions of Heian-period paper. Reproduced by permission from the artist, Shiko Kataoka.

1980s, a poetry collection by a young woman named Tawara Machi<sup>10</sup> became a runaway bestseller in Japan, an unparalleled phenomenon anywhere else in recent times.

However, the above points of perspective are still on the surface of connections and insights the novel can provide. The heart of the novel is the wonder and poignancy of human emotion, particularly as it is experienced in the infinitely varied forms of relationship between men and women. This focus of attention was apprehended by the eighteenth-century scholar Motoori Norinaga and labeled *mono no aware*, “the poignancy of human existence.”<sup>11</sup> In the Yūgao chapter, the relationship is between a man and woman of very unequal status and therefore fraught with difficulty. It is love driven by youthful passion. Is it not typical for the young anywhere, given the chance, to love recklessly with disregard for the society surrounding them? Is it not also a

universal in human emotional experience that we learn precisely the enormity of our love at the moment of loss? Such truths stated generally have little power to move us, but when we come to them, as though for the first time, through a story that captures our imagination, that which unites us as human beings comes in a flash of recognition. The underlying structure of snowflakes may be the same, but it is the particularity of each one that has the power to astonish us.

Moreover, something *The Tale of Genji* offers that is unavailable in Western literature until perhaps the works of Jane Austen is a complex picture of male-female relationships from a woman’s perspective. Note how the fact that poetry is exchanged between the lovers means that we hear a woman’s voice, and that moreover her desire is expressed equally with that of the man. Note also that Yūgao initiated the relationship, and the narrator in no respect condemns her for this. If nothing else, a simplistic notion of a complete and long-standing subjugation of women in Japanese society is challenged by the portrayal of women in *The Tale of Genji*, even as the novel also amply provides evidence of the undeniable restrictions under which they lived.

The contemporary Chinese novelist Yu Hua, in an interview article in this same journal, stated “. . . it is important to use literature to teach about the history of other cultures. Facts are not as important as what people feel during a particular period.”<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, Murasaki Shikibu’s own voice can be heard uttering a similar assertion to Yu Hua’s within the pages of her own novel. The idea that

fiction could serve a historical purpose was a radical idea in the context of her own time. Men's heavily Confucian education denigrated fiction, considering it mere amusement for gullible women. Murasaki Shikibu cleverly and ironically places her defense of fiction in the mouth of Genji himself. This passage occurs in chapter twenty-five, "Fireflies," when the hero is middle-aged and at the height of wealth and power. He speaks the lines to Tamakazura, Yūgao's lost daughter who has resurfaced as an adult and come under Genji's protection. Genji is advertising Tamakazura to the world as his own daughter and actively encouraging suitors for her. At the same time, he is attracted to her himself and sorely tempted to add her to his own collection of women. She, having no other resources and no way to announce herself to her real father Tō no Chūjō, is both grateful to Genji for his support and uneasy about his hints of sexual interest. She seeks help for managing her predicament in the examples of other women's lives that can be found in tales. Genji comes upon her absorbed in reading and copying out tales and chides her. He asserts that women are born to be deceived by the lies of fiction, but she counters that such a view would come naturally to one who is as used to lying as Genji, and goes on to declare that she sees truth in fiction. Having been dealt this witty and telling blow, because he is indeed lying about her parentage and the real nature of his feelings for her, Genji backs down and launches into the following monologue,

"I have been very rude to speak so ill to you of tales! They record what has gone on ever since the Age of the Gods. *The Chronicle of Japan* and so on give only a part of the story. It is tales that contain the truly rewarding particulars!" He laughed, "Not that tales accurately describe any particular [historical] person; rather, the telling begins when all those things the teller longs to have pass on to future generations—whatever there is about the way people live their lives, for better or worse, that is a sight to see or a wonder to hear—overflow the teller's heart."<sup>13</sup>

Murasaki Shikibu is expressing Yu Hua's assertion from the point of view of the need of the teller. When the teller feels an emotive resonance with the experience of others, she wants to pass it on, so that people of future generations may know that people lived this way and felt this way. The very particularity of living seems wondrous. The telling is not intended to serve a didactic purpose, to instruct how people should live; it is, rather, to inform us how people do live.

I have suggested above several ways in which aspects of *The Tale of Genji* may deepen our understanding of Japan during the Heian period as well as even contemporary Japan. The reception of *The Tale of Genji* by audiences in different eras down to the present day is itself a fascinating story for which there is no space here, but suffice it to say, at times that appreciation was based on principles quite foreign to contemporary Anglo-European readers. Nonetheless, I would assert that the reason *The Tale of Genji* has retained significance for so many centuries of Japanese readers is the same reason it has had the power to make the transition into world literature; the art of its telling embodies truths about human emotion that are culturally and historically specific, and capable at the same time of evoking empathy across time and culture. ■

### Bibliographical Note on English Translations of *The Tale of Genji*:

There are three complete translations of *The Tale of Genji* into English: Arthur Waley (George Allen and Unwin, 1935), Edward Seidensticker (Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), and most recently Royall Tyler (Viking 2002). All three are masterpieces in their own right and convey different views of the work. Although Waley's contains a number of errors and omissions, it captures the tone of the narrative voice well. Seidensticker's achieves a high standard of accuracy and has great clarity of expression; it is perhaps the easiest to follow. Tyler, however, meets and even surpasses the standard of accuracy set by Seidensticker as well as bringing more dimensions of the tale into view, such as the subtleties of social hierarchy evident in the changing appellations for characters, the sinuous quality of the text's syntax, and the lyrical complexity of the poetry. A useful exercise is to have students read and compare the same excerpt in all three translations.

Edward Seidensticker's translation has also been published in an abridged version containing twelve chapters (Vintage Books, 1985). Helen McCullough created an abridged translation in *Genji and Heike: Selections from The Tale of Genji and The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

### NOTES

1. This work is available in an English translation by Richard Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs* (Princeton University Press, 1982).
2. McCullough, Helen, trans., *Ōkagami, The Great Mirror: Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1027) and His Times* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 199.
3. "Evening Faces" is used in Edward Seidensticker's translation (Knopf, 1976) and "Twilight Beauty" in Royall Tyler's translation (Viking 2002). See note at end of article on English translations of *The Tale of Genji*. Tyler's translation is used throughout this article.
4. Tyler, 56.
5. An illustration from of this scene from an eighteenth-century scroll of *The Tale of Genji* held by the Hood Museum in Dartmouth may be viewed at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~arth17/index.html>.
6. Tyler, 57.
7. One anonymous reader for this article made the intriguing suggestion that Yūgao may have mistaken Genji for Tō no Chūjō, an interpretation that the ambiguity of the text would certainly allow.
8. Tyler, 62.
9. *Ibid.*, 66.
10. Tawara Machi, *Sarada no kinenbi* (Kawade shobo shinsha, 1987). Translation in English, Judith Winters Carpenter, *Salad Anniversary* (Kodansha International, 1989). The jacket cover on the Carpenter translation exclaims "3 million copies sold in Japan." The majority of Tawara Machi's verses are in the traditional *tanka* metre of thirty-one syllables, the same basic form of poetry used in *The Tale of Genji*, although the subject matter of poetry is, of course, thoroughly modern.
11. A sample of Motoori Norinaga's influential interpretations of *The Tale of Genji* is available in Ryusaku Tsunoda et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 27–30.
12. EAA Interview with Yu Hua, author of *To Live*, by Helen Finken, *Education About Asia* 8:3 (2003): 22.
13. Tyler, 461.

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