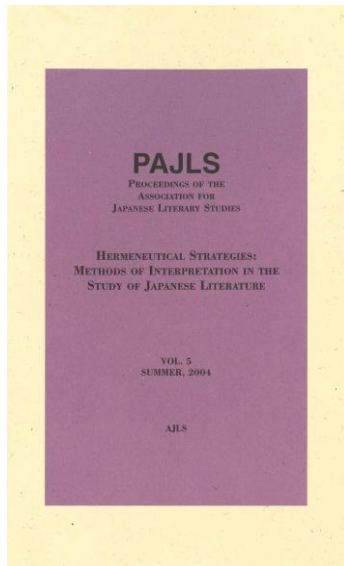


“Lifting the Curse: Genji Tributes as Fictional Criticism”

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LIFTING THE CURSE: GENJI TRIBUTES AS FICTIONAL CRITICISM¹

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Japanese literature after the *Tale of Genji* (ca. 1000), if not life itself, is sometimes judged something of a disappointment. At least in the case of late Heian era (795-1185) tales—the *Genji*'s direct descendants—scholars routinely close minds and syllabi alike to the heresy not of paraphrase but of comparison, as if reading these texts beside their forbear at best wastes our time and at worse poisons literary taste. Late Heian tales, after all, are generally labeled derivative of the *Genji*, in the least favorable sense: they slavishly “re-steep” (*nibansenji*) plots and characters (Suzuki 1965, 38) and lift entire lines of exposition. Late tale specialists, cultivating a sense of humor about this predicament, privately term it the “*Genji* curse.”

In a sense, of course, this view reflects Murasaki Shikibu's brilliance; as Harold Bloom deftly puts it, the *Genji* author is our tutor in love and longing “even before we come to her” (Bloom 2002, 97) one of those rare writers to attain universal relevance. No one who has had the pleasure of teaching the *Genji*, in full, to modern American undergraduates can contest the point. Shikibu is also, however, a Heian writer, and as such she challenges the definition of hermeneutics as formal (literary) interpretation—and thus, the parameters of this conference. Heian authors, including Shikibu herself, frequently borrow from their precursors, reflecting both the cultural prestige of the canonical and the expectations of their well-read audience. Particularly talented Heian authors, meanwhile, do still more. Like the wise servant of the parable, they loan the debts out at interest, returning us—the readers—more than what we started with: both an innovative new story and an expanded understanding of the “model” itself. As Mitani Kuniaki has noted, Shikibu, a master of this fictional version of Japanese poetry's *honka dori* or “allusive variation,” uses her tale to teach us more about Po Chü-i's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*;² she does the same for *Tales of Ise* and any number of other texts. Yet no one dismisses her stories, much less her talent, as “twice-steeped.”

¹ The author wishes to thank Atsuko Sakaki and Richard Okada for their comments at the conference. This revised paper attempts to address, in brief, some of their points.

² Mitani argues that Shikibu uses the poem on an emperor's obsessive desire for his lover as a key “pretext” for her opening chapter, forcing the reader to weigh each text alongside the other (Mitani 1997, pp. 53-54).

Instead, Shikibu is generally considered an expert reader of both the human heart and her literary inheritance—even though she never, as far as we know, penned a formal exegesis.

The lack of conventional commentaries on the tale genre, at least by women like Shikibu, is itself an interesting question, one whose answer likely involves the initially humble status of the genre and the relatively belated (medieval) advent of literary commentary. It seems as fascinating, however—and more urgent, given the unfavorable consensus described earlier—to consider the quasi-exegetical techniques of late Heian fiction vis-a-vis the masterpiece itself. What follows is perhaps best understood as a rough grammar of the *Genji*'s earliest criticism, the techniques late Heian writers used both to appropriate and comment on certain aspects of Shikibu's work. The presence of these techniques clearly suggests a more thoughtful relationship to the *Genji* than scholars have typically granted the late tales, and as such should encourage further research into the latter's merits. The main point of this paper, however, is to expand the discussion of Heian hermeneutics to include what might be termed fictional exegesis, as illustrated in two exemplary post-*Genji* works.

One obvious, if underestimated, technique for fictional criticism is direct reference to characters or situations described in an earlier text. The *Tale of Sagoromo* (ca. 1060), written fifty years after the *Genji* and often referred to as the "second *Genji*" both for its excellence and extensive debts to Shikibu,³ provides a useful example. The text opens with its hero, as yet nameless, staring out onto his garden, moping over a frustrated love affair with his foster-sister, Princess Genji. The tableau lends itself to an allegorical reading of the author's influence anxiety (Sagoromo knows he can never attain the princess, just as Senji perhaps fears losing to the text), but the exegetical interest lies in what follows. As the hero notices the wisteria blooming on the small island in the garden pond, he suddenly thinks to himself, "When the Shining Genji said 'I should hurl my body in, too,' was it like this?" (*Hikaru Genji no mi mo nagetsubekito notamaikenmo kakuyato hitori mitamau*) (NKBT 79, 29).⁴ The literary debt here is fairly straightforward, as most annotators point out. The hero quotes Shikibu's first *Wakana* (Spring Shoots) chapter, in which Genji sends former lover Oborozukiyo some wisteria with this verse: "Not that I forget the disgrace I have suffered then, but I have not learned and feel

³ Both points convinced medieval critics to credit the tale to Shikibu's daughter, Daini no sanmi (999-ca.1078). The attribution was later discarded in favor of provincial governor Minamoto no Yorikuni's daughter Senji (ca.1022-92), nurse to a former Kamo priestess.

⁴ Mitani Ei'ichi and Sekine Yoshiko, eds. *Sagoromo monogatari*. Nihon koten bungaku taikei, vol. 79 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965).

poised to cast myself into your blossoms' abyss" (Tyler 2001, 599; SNKZ 23,⁵ 84). (There are other *Genji* references to casting oneself into love's abyss, but this is generally considered to be the active link.) The hero, like the young Genji, wants a woman destined for a crown prince, even as he acknowledges such a liaison's social repercussions. In fact, he worries so much about it that, unlike Genji, he never forces the affair to fruition. The reference thus lends thematic depth and a sense of urgency to *Sagoromo*'s introduction; one continues reading in part to find out if the hero, like Genji, takes the plunge.

The line also, however, has a second effect: it makes the reader stop to reflect on the Shining Prince himself. What *was* the situation in which Genji recited that line? How does it fit into the complex *Wakana* chapters? How should the reader judge Genji's relationship with Oborozukiyo, singled out by later writers (including the author of the *Mumyōzōshi*, the earliest extant piece of tale criticism) as one of Shikibu's most compelling heroines? One may wonder whether the hero quotes Genji as a person or a literary character—that is, to what extent Genji and his world have become "real" in the tale landscape—but the exegetical point remains the same. At the start of her narrative, the *Sagoromo* writer invites the reader to remember Shikibu's text and one of its more complex subplots. In the process, the reader begins to analyze both tales and their differences—even before Senji introduces her hero, the genre's conventional beginning. Tamagami Takuya's famed "reading aloud" theory of tale reception makes such critical activity seem almost inevitable, since listeners could easily interrupt the speaker to start their own debate on the texts' merits—exactly as the *Mumyōzōshi*'s fictionalized portrait describes.

Another common fictional critique of the *Genji* occurs on a broader scale, in the evocation and substantive revision of key subplots. Once again, *Sagoromo* offers a useful—but by no means unique—example. Despite the hero's fixation on Princess Genji, he quickly becomes embroiled in a love affair with someone else: Asukai, a "middle ranks" woman very much in the mold of Shikibu's Yugao and Ukifune. Senji repeatedly alludes to both *Genji* heroines in her depiction of the character, from Asukai's squalid home to her apparent end in a watery suicide. Having drawn attention to her model, however, the *Sagoromo* writer takes a shocking detour. While Asukai, like Yugao and Ukifune, falls for her noble suitor, her shabby entourage is much less impressed, and, unlike in the *Genji*, very vocal about it. "These young nobles," the nurse grumbles, trying to break them up, "will abandon a girl if her parents can't provide

⁵ Akio Abe et al, eds. *Genji monogatari*, vol. 4. Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū, vol. 23 (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 1996).

for them” (NKBT 79, 100)—and Asukai, like her models, is an orphan. The nurse continues her rant throughout the subplot. One of Asukai’s other suitors (the hero’s unwitting retainer) repeatedly echoes her guardian’s points. “You may say that your lover is better than I am,” he insists to her, “but that’s nothing to be proud of; it’s just plain foolish. Do you really want to spend your days as the mistress of some minor captain or the other, wearing your heart out worrying about what people think? I may be low-ranked, but you should keep in mind that I will be absolutely devoted to you. These young nobles are nothing but trouble; they never settle down” (NKBT 79, 103-4). Again, the character repeats this opinion throughout the plot. In short, Senji repeatedly rewrites Shikibu’s star-crossed love affairs (which end badly enough in the original) to stress their social implausibility, giving the spotlight to non-noble characters in the process. This, too, is a kind of exegesis of the *Genji*, fleshing out Shikibu’s more subtle pragmatism to make sure the point strikes home (cf. D’Etcheverry forthcoming, *passim*). Senji works to similar ends in the story of Ima himegimi, another of the hero’s foster-sisters, who is adopted by a powerful aristocrat in order to compete with her rival’s daughter at court. The thread revises *Genji*’s comic Omi girl subplot to focus on the suffering such political schemes cause; it even indicts women’s role in period’s notorious marriage politics, a point again implicit in Shikibu but made more explicitly (and, given Ima himegimi’s torment, powerfully) in the later text (D’Etcheverry 2000, 82-106). Once again, readers are encouraged, albeit not directly, to compare the two tales, in the process, enriching their grasp of both.

A final quasi-exegetical technique used by late Heian writers is the inversion of key *Genji* plot motifs. This technique, more abstract than the first two, requires greater discussion than can be permitted here. For maximum effect, the example chosen is rather less representative than the first two, albeit even more entertaining. It comes from the *Tale of Hamamatsu*, roughly dated to the 1050s and rather less reliably linked to Sugawara no Takasue’s Daughter (b. 1008), the *Sarashina* diarist and *Genji* enthusiast.⁶ *Hamamatsu* recounts a young courtier’s trip to China to find his father, reincarnated as that country’s Third Prince. Once there, the hero becomes involved with the Prince’s mother, the Chinese Consort—in a sense, his grandmother—and by the end of the tale he’s awaiting her rebirth in the womb of her Japanese half-sister, whom he has also pursued and has even more or less adopted. Meiji critics such as Fujioka Sakutarō

⁶ While the attribution for this and the roughly coeval *Yoru no nezame* persists, most experts discredit it. Their skepticism reflects stylistic differences among the texts, but the contrast between the tales’ sophisticated use of the *Genji* and the diary’s raptures is equally telling.

decried *Hamamatsu's* "decadent" fantasies, but one can also read it as a parodic commentary on the ways in which desire perverts our relationships over time. This theme, a favorite of Shikibu's (and itself revised from Po Chü-i), finds particular expression in the *Genji* in the trope of the *yukari* or family link. Genji pursues Murasaki, and then the Third Princess, as blood surrogates for their aunt Fujitsubo; through them he hopes to recreate an impossible love affair. Of course, he is disappointed—at considerable cost to all involved. Neither Murasaki nor the Princess is Fujitsubo, just as Fujitsubo was not Genji's mother. Shikibu ironically underscores this point by making Murasaki in particular look very much like Fujitsubo, her inner differences notwithstanding. The *Hamamatsu* author uses the notion of reincarnation to make the complementary point, this time at the ridiculous extreme. The Chinese prince *is* the hero's father, no matter how little he resembles the man. Similarly, the various women whom the hero pursues as substitutes for the frightened Consort—none of whom, by definition, fully please him—are all in fact she, encountered in an unfamiliar context. If the hero's relationships with them are different—and the writer implies that they are—it is because the hero himself has changed, in part because of his own (mis)perceptions. This is likely to be especially the case with the Chinese consort's promised reincarnation, foretold at the end of the tale. By the time the girl reaches a suitable age to be the hero's lover, he will be so old as to be repulsive to her—no matter how many affinities their hearts share. The hero's own changed relationship with his reborn father, despite their best intentions, suggests as much. Yukari in the *Genji*, of course, is ultimately about misperceptions, too. The *Hamamatsu* author, however, *Sagoromo's* Senji, makes the point explicit—an exegesis in literature.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Murasaki Shikibu is herself the master of the fictional critique. Her variations on *Tales of Ise* and the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, like her manipulations of the *kishūryūritan* or noble-in-exile trope, foreshadow these and the many other late Heian examples relating to the *Genji* itself and in many cases outshine them. This alone suggests the need for a broader definition of hermeneutic activity in Heian culture and probably for classical Japanese literature at large. Such a definition would doubtless shed brighter light on the canon—and perhaps help restore the reputations of those works and writers unfairly left behind.

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