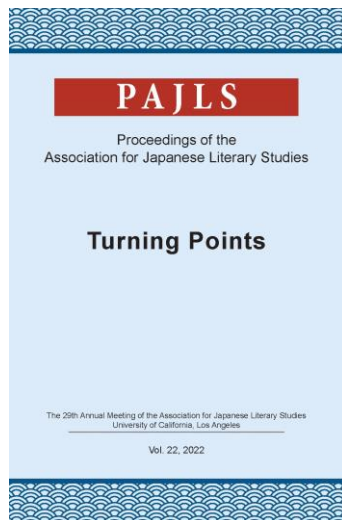


“Past Uncertain: What Medieval Commentaries
Right”

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PAST UNCERTAIN: WHAT MEDIEVAL COMMENTARIES RIGHT

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FOREWORD: THE KAWANA MODE: ITS PASTS AND FUTURES

The University of California Los Angeles campus is home to the haunts (or hauntings) and modes of irreplaceable voices in Japanese Studies: the William LaFleur mode and the Michele, later Michael, as he chose to rename himself, Marra mode.² To revisit UCLA is to recall how a particular inflection and a tireless drive underline the work of very different but equally game-changing scholars. I hope I may have passed some of their decentered approaches on to Sari Kawana when she was studying with us at the University of Pennsylvania, but it is more likely that she came by her own refulgent and distinctive mode honestly. That unusual constellation of methods was visible, after all, from Sari's earliest papers at Penn. It reached a high point with her delightful essay on Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko de aru*, which she sent off only after consulting to see that her readers did not think it too extreme a departure from the more sober run-of-the-mill article.³ The Kawana mode was above all playful, inverting orthodoxies first and as a matter of course. Although we gather here at UCLA in memoriam, marking the changes she wrought is not as important as spreading their generative power going forward.

Sari had asked me (after a memorable Association of Teachers of Japanese meeting panel in 2004 that also featured Julie Nelson Davis, who has herself emerged as a singular pacesetter in art history) about writing a history of Japanese books with her, and I was looking forward, in my own very slow way, to doing that someday. Sari, on the other hand, published important chunks of that history, including her 2018 monograph *The Uses of Literature in Modern Japan: Histories and Cultures of the Book*.⁴ It pains me now to admit that I can neither do that project with her, nor do

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² LaFleur added the medical/ethical mode to the literary with his *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1992) during his tenure at UCLA. His onetime student Marra wrote numerous monographs and edited volumes with pointed arguments in aesthetics and hermeneutics before his untimely passing in 2011.

³ See "A Narrative Game of Cat and Mouse: Parody, Deception, and Fictional Whodunit in Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko de aru*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 1–20.

⁴ London: Bloomsbury Academic.

my part of it in a way that would be worthy of her. Such is the fate of transmission: there is not only survival and achievement in the work of organizing literature's legacy; there is the unexpected and unwelcome loss, the turning that is actually, or could be, were it not for the efforts of a few, a breaking point. This essay centers on a juncture of this kind, when war threatened the survival of courtly written heritage in the middle of the fifteenth century.

**FUTURE UNCERTAIN VERSUS PAST UNCERTAIN:
COMMENTARIES AS TURNING POINTS**

Turning points have been described (in the very call for papers of AJLS 2022) as moments in which “the future appears uncertain.”⁵ Such a time allows for a shift in how things are done with words: some new kind of expression is likely to emerge. The future, however, is always uncertain (never more so, we tend to think, than at the present moment). Of equal concern for lettered elites of the premodern era are those moments during which the past appears uncertain. When access to the past is in danger, through whatever cataclysm, rethinking of existing texts becomes a priority. Interpretation and preservation stoke the agenda. Although the commentaries that come out of this backward regard may be objects of later gratitude and bemusement more than acclaim,⁶ their significance for literary history is arguably on a par with that of the works they parse. It is the commentaries, after all, that tell us how to make sense of the masterpieces—after commentators tell us which are indeed the masterpieces—as well as preserve various forms of information about transmission. Far from being inert observations on texts, commentaries themselves articulate social identities, both of the commentators and of the audiences that they imagine and strive to create. A better understanding of commentaries' role in the literary enterprise more broadly emerges when we pay attention to the context beyond their (occasionally dulling) content. (Dulling only because they tend to repeat each other.)

Established opinion holds that there was a turning point in commentaries on one such masterpiece, the early eleventh century *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (*Tale of Genji*), during the medieval period.⁷

⁵ “AJLS Newsletter,” no. 54 (Autumn 2021); <https://www.ajls2022ucla.org/call-for-papers>.

⁶ Literary histories may celebrate a commentary as a monument, and the individual user may be amazed at the labor the commentator managed, without putting it on the list of major works of an era.

⁷ In the words of Maeda Masayuki, “Medieval commentaries on *Tale of Genji* were not literary in the narrow sense; they were acts intended to reproduce the classical

Commentaries produced around the time of the Ōnin Wars 応仁の乱 of 1467 to 1477 went further than their predecessors, it is said, as they succeeded in revealing the literary value of the *Tale* through analyses of language, diction, and structure. This was in contrast to the earlier and earliest commentaries, which seem to embody an individual's confrontation with the text (albeit in the light of prior poetics that bring other writers to the scene). The origin of *Tale of Genji* commentaries, according to Thomas Harper, can be found in marginalia and interlinear notations.⁸ It is at the juncture when reading becomes writing, and becomes tangible. Harper tells a story of an enthusiastic keeper of notes, Fujiwara no Koreyuki 藤原伊行 (d. 1175), who then chooses to collect said notes in a separate volume that becomes the first recognized commentary, *Genji shaku* 源氏釈 (before 1175). Or take Yotsutsuji Yoshinari's 四辻善成 (1326–1402) celebrated *Kakaishō* 河海抄 (1362–67), which concentrated on identifying *Genji* author Murasaki Shikibu's 紫式部 (c. 973–c. 1014) sources and resources. Such matters of fact were the first concern of readers, who could hardly steer through the work without help keeping track of allusions to poems or invocations of historical eras that set the framework of the *Tale*. Erin Brightwell's recent work on *Kakaishō* chastens anyone who would see too radical a change in the later era; she shows that Yoshinari was already performing interpretive interventions through “mere” lexical glosses with his use of Chinese sources, in particular the *You xian ku* 遊仙窟 (J. *Yūsenkutsu*), a Tang story that helped the commentator draw attention to the erotic aspects of the Third Princess arc in the *Genji monogatari*.⁹

A work such as *Kachō yosei* 花鳥余情 (Evocation of birds and flowers, 1474) by Ichijō Kaneyoshi 一条兼良 (1402–1481) exemplifies the Ōnin-period furthering of literary criticism with its attention to language in the *Tale*.¹⁰ Maeda Masayuki has gone so far as to credit Kaneyoshi with

Öffentlichkeit...” (公共圏, public sphere, in the Habermasian sense). “Wago o wago de kaishaku suru koto—Ichijō Kaneyoshi ni okeru chūshaku no kaishin to kotenteki kōkyōken.” *Bungaku* vol. 9, no. 3 (May 2008), 118.

⁸ “Medieval Commentary,” chapter six of *Reading The Tale of Genji: Sources from the First Millennium*, ed. Thomas Harper and Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press), 340–41. H.J. Jackson refers to annotating books as “the common practices of readers since the Middle Ages” in *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 5.

⁹ Erin L. Brightwell, “Making Meaning: Lexical Glosses as Interpretive Interventions in the *Kakaishō*,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* vol. 47, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 91–122.

¹⁰ Harper, “Medieval,” 345. Maeda Masayuki, “Hidensho no jōhōgaku: *Gengo hiketsu* no shosha, denrai o tōshite,” *Nihon bungaku* vol. 57, no. 1 (2008), 23.

attaining a linguistic turn in *Genji* studies, not to mention focusing on the structure of the narrative.¹¹ Due in part to accounting for both facts and acts, the length of later commentaries burgeoned. Someone like Kaneyoshi absorbed all existing exegeses, and must have copied the *Tale* itself multiple times, generating new questions in need of answers, thus more volume.¹² In her writing on the functions of literature, Sari Kawana highlights its sometimes neglected “use value.”¹³ Kaneyoshi was closely keyed in to this aspect of the classics, through which he conveyed the glory of “the courtly ideal” manifested by his own Fujiwara lineage.¹⁴ Engaging with existing commentaries through copying was more than just an exercise for Kaneyoshi, who persevered through self-imposed exile during the war years. Copying brought home the extent to which the *Tale* was a project of courtliness, not simply a story with incidents and characters. It was deeply bound to the foundational texts of the courtly tradition, from poetry to precedents—certainly Kaneyoshi stressed these connections. Focus on those was another point of progress made in the fifteenth century. (And it should go without saying that Kaneyoshi’s orientation toward the endangered past in no way precluded the creation of new modes of engagement.)

Kaneyoshi’s interest in the cultural capital of *yūsoku kojitsu* 有職故実 (court customs and precedents) was thoroughgoing. He wrote his first work of any kind and also his representative work at twenty-one, *Kuji kongen* 公事根源 (The Origins of Court Ceremony, 1422?), although there is no definitive text and some have cast doubt on his authorship of this particular work. Even so, half of Kaneyoshi’s prodigious lifetime textual output was in court ceremonial. This also led him to create a work such as

¹¹ “Wago,” 112.

¹² Tamura Wataru points out that following in the footsteps of those who came before, copying their work and adding one’s own findings, was typical of premodern practice. He identifies *Genji monogatari teiyō* of Imagawa Norimasa as the base text for *Kachō yosei*; see *Ichijō Kaneyoshi no gakumon to Muromachi bunka* (Bensei shuppan, 2013), 103. On *Genji monogatari teiyō*, see Christopher J. Kern, “Digesting *Genji* in the Fifteenth Century: Imagawa Norimasa’s The Essentials of the *Tale of Genji*,” *Japanese Language and Literature*, vol. 52, no. 2 (Oct. 2018): 314–40.

¹³ *The Uses of Literature in Modern Japan*, especially “Introduction,” 3–5.

¹⁴ Steven D. Carter, *Regent Redux: A Life of the Statesman-Scholar Ichijō Kaneyoshi* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1996), 164. For how classics of literature constituted this ideal see Steven D. Carter, “Claiming the Past for the Present: Ichijō Kaneyoshi and *Tales of Ise*,” in *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan*, ed. David R. Knechtges and Eugene Vance (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 94–116.

Genji monogatari no uchi fushin jōjō 源氏物語之内不審条々 (Doubtful passages in the *Tale of Genji*) in 1473. He records seventy-three items about which someone asked him questions, to which his responses sometimes include calls to consult another of his commentaries.¹⁵ Now scholars find these kinds of texts difficult to appreciate, but for him it was all part of the outward turn of such work—no longer just one reader’s marginalia, but a canonical, heritable set of bits. It is important to note that Kaneyoshi was proud to make the *Tale* his source, and that he feminized the store of court custom by relying heavily on the *Genji* for information. As we know, he gave lectures on the *Tale* to Hino Tomiko 日野富子 (1440–1496), wife of shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa 足利義政 (1436–1490) and advised her to take the reins of power in his *Sayo no nezame* 小夜の寝覚め (Awake at night, 1473?).

Kaneyoshi nowhere doubts that the *Genji* would endure, and that commentary about it would carry on, even though he must have sensed that the conflagrations eradicating so many collections of books made that precarious at best. And so he labored, securing the history and poetics of the court. Compiling all that he could about *Genji monogatari* only affirmed for Kaneyoshi that this was a profound work, as he tells us in the preface to *Kachō yosei*: “When the well is deep, even though you draw from it further, it never runs out; if you polish a pearl that is not cloudy, its brightness increases all the more. There is no greater treasure in our land than *Genji monogatari*.”¹⁶ But Kaneyoshi was also a teacher, who frequently lectured on the *Tale*. He realized that providing everything there is to know about the work was not the way to create new admirers of it. As Steven Carter conclusively established, Kaneyoshi above all sought “to make the text more accessible to readers.”¹⁷ Kaneyoshi was quite concerned with the mind of the beginning reader of the capacious *Genji monogatari*, as he indicates in *Genji wahishō* 源氏和秘抄 of 1449. There he writes:

One must not think of *Genji no monogatari* as just a book about the Way of eros. Beginning with the deep meanings of the scriptures and secular texts, to the behaviors of public life and the way of Yamato poetry, music of string and wind instruments, to matching of colors in costume, there is nothing among all the

¹⁵ Nakano Kōichi, ed., *Kachō yosei, Genji wahishō, Genji monogatari no uchi fushin jōjō, Gengo hiketsu, Kudenshō*, *Genji monogatari kochūshaku sōkan*, vol. 2 (Musashino Shoin, 1978), 425–41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ Carter, *Regent Redux*, 160.

things of the world that it does not include. If you read it well, you will learn a good deal about our country.

After invoking Fujiwara no Shunzei's position that no poet could ignore *Genji monogatari*, Kaneyoshi doubles down on the need to approach the text strategically.

The annotations called *Kakaishō*, *Suigen*, and *Shimei*, because they cover a broad range, are not easy for beginners to consult. Due to this I have noted down clearly the things that are difficult to get about particular phrases in this one volume, making this a companion for those who would enter the way. But you must not think that this is everything. Easy comprehension of the composition, readings, oral transmissions, material customs and so forth of the complete fifty-four chapters is unlikely without learning from a guide (*sendatsu*).¹⁸

In pursuit of this goal, Kaneyoshi provides glosses for about 850 items from the *Tale*, with heavier concentration on early chapters.¹⁹

The drive of the commentator is fundamentally to write more, to find out more. But in an odd way the commentator allows less, and not just when he is paring things down on purpose, as in *Genji wahishō*. With a commentary in hand, the reader is empowered to search for fragments, to read discontinuously. Kaneyoshi made it possible for us to make sense of the whole of the *Genji* in parts. With his commentaries in hand, there was not much you could not know about the text, and yet you could also cling just to little traces. Even so, there might always be items that escaped the master's attention, that might, were they noticed, have brought home to the writer the anxiety of preservation.

Case in point: more lauded perhaps even than Kaneyoshi's large project is a small commentary by his contemporary Iio Sōgi 飯尾宗祇 (1421–1502). *Amayo danshō* (雨夜談抄 Notes on the Rainy Night's Discussion, c. 1485), which treats the early part of a single one of the fifty-four chapters of the *Tale*, shows that it was possible to go into even more detail, not to mention to be more explicitly literary. Sōgi is first to use the term *sōshi no ji* (草子の地, later *sōshiji*) to indicate “the ground of the

¹⁸ *Suigen* and *Shimei* refer to the commentaries *Suigenshō* 水原抄 (mid. 13 c.) by Minamoto no Chikayuki 源親行 and *Shimeishō* (late 13 c.) 紫明抄 by Sojaku 素寂. Nakano, *Kachō yosei*, *Genji wahishō*, *Genji monogatari no uchi fushin jōjō*, *Gengo hiketsu*, *Kudenshō*, 423.

¹⁹ Nakano, *Ibid.*, “Kaidai,” 472.

book,” points at which one of Murasaki Shikibu’s narrators breaks in to make comments directly to the reader.²⁰ In the few pages of his commentary Sōgi also refers to Murasaki Shikibu’s literary strategy in contrasting a character from another work of fiction, the Katano lieutenant, with Genji in her own, as well as the use of ellipses to give the writing “subtlety.”²¹ Sōgi, as we learn in Lewis Cook’s welcome translation, attends to each line with care.

While sitting close to the lamp, reading texts, Tō no Chūjō could not restrain his curiosity and took out some multicolored papers from a cabinet nearby.

“Reading texts” refers to their study of [Chinese] textbooks. Writings on “multicolored papers” would be love letters.²²

Kachō yosei, for all its volume, overlooks this section.

A second example is also by Sōgi. His *Shugyoku henjishō* 種玉篇次抄 (1475) tackles problems late in the *Tale*, specifically chapter 42 “Niou miya” through chapter 46 “Shiigamoto,” caused by the way they treat parallel periods of time. Sōgi homes in on Kaoru, tracking his titles in order to understand how old the character is in different segments. A colophon by Sanjōnishi Sanetaka 三条西実隆 (1455–1537), himself founder of a house tradition of *Genji* commentaries, reveals that Sanetaka had heard Sōgi’s lecture on the *Genji* and found some parts difficult to follow, leading him to borrow the manuscript from Sōgi for clarification.²³ These two commentaries by Sōgi have an intensity of approach that does not lend itself to covering the whole *Genji monogatari*.

The anxiety of preservation, not of creating new expression but of protecting the old, the uncertain past, as it were, was paramount in Kaneyoshi’s mind, given the profound crisis of the destruction of the Ōnin battles. Reconstituting the legacy would have to come first, and Ichijō Kaneyoshi knew that leadership in the task of rebuilding would fall to him,

²⁰ Lewis Cook, trans., “Notes on the Rainy Night’s Discussion,” in *Reading The Tale of Genji*, ed. Harper and Shirane, 352–58. See especially 352 and 357. In Nakano Kōichi, ed., *Myōjōshō, Amayo danshō, Shugyoku henjishō*, *Genji monogatari kochūshaku sōkan*, vol. 4 (Musashino Shoin, 1980), 613–38, especially 619.

²¹ Cook, “Notes,” 354; 355.

²² Cook, “Notes,” 357.

²³ Also known as *Genji zatsuranshō* 源氏雑乱鈔. In Nakano, *Myōjōshō, Amayo danshō, Shugyoku henjishō*, 601–12.

since he had already served as regent 関白 (*kanpaku*) twice. The prospect led him to think deeply, no doubt, on the question of what he was reconstructing, what it had been, and what it could be. From this rumination came the singular opinions of the protector of tradition who was also the builder of a new foundation for it.

Commentaries from the mid-fifteenth century *write* many things—definitions of vocabulary, references to the philosophical depths of works, displays of learning in service of the greater good and for their own intrinsic value. But what they seek to *right* is the world itself. (This is my sole gesture at the Kawana mode, one tiny pun.) They seek to restore the prerogatives of the court, and to fix them in written transmission, precisely as they ought to be. There is no outward acknowledgment that this is the task at hand, of course. They do not announce themselves as part of a strategy of legitimation for works that had come to be associated with the court, although they are such, given the way that they document the achievements of courtly literature. About half have *shō* 抄 (gleanings) in the title, acknowledging their own incompleteness, or selectivity.²⁴ And yet they tell us that comprehensive comprehension is possible—Kaneyoshi breaks up his commentaries into the introductory and the full, suggesting that the student can mount a campaign of mastery. He or she does not have to fold in the face of this very long text, or in the face of war or exile. The world of the *Genji monogatari*, the world in which a Fujiwara minister brought a talented woman to court to weave her tale, can be recovered, and will be inherited. Commentaries make it so.

²⁴ In cases where the title was given by later copyists, they recognize the fragmentary nature of some works.