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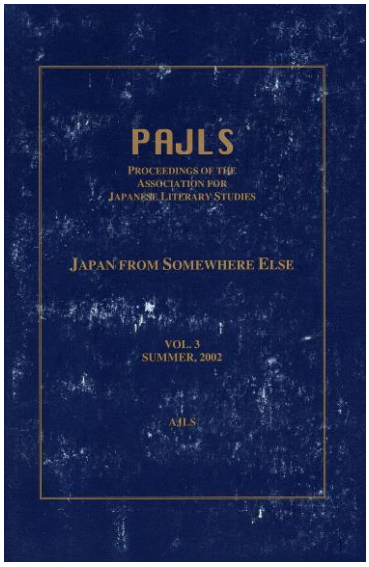

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"READING" THE FEMALE READER IN LIZA DALBY AND HER *TALE OF MURASAKI*

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> And I cannot imagine a writer who is not a reader.[1]

> Dalby is more than just an author and historian . . . she was also the first Western woman to train and become a geisha, *so her novel rings true on many levels* [emphasis added].[2]

The media-generated Dalby/Geisha image as the authoritative icon of "everything Japanese" is an important American cultural phenomenon that requires a separate study.[3] This paper focuses on an entirely different image of Liza Dalby, an image less sensational and exotic than that of "the sole Western geisha." What concerns me here is the rather bookish image of Dalby as an avid reader of Heian literature and Western scholarship on Murasaki Shikibu. A careful study of this image will provide a key to elucidating the significance of Dalby's innovative literary undertaking, *The Tale of Murasaki* (2000).[4] More specifically, I will analyze how Dalby imaginatively deploys the paradigmatic figure of the Heian female reader as the main trope not only for her overall narrative conceit of *The Tale of Murasaki* but also for the construction of her authorial position as a chronicler of this preeminent Heian author's life.

READING THE FEMALE READER IN HEIAN JAPAN

To assess Dalby's deployment of the female reader in her novel, I will briefly examine this figure, both fictional and historical, that pervades Heian literature and the modern imagination of Heian culture. In *Genji monogatari* (early 11th c.), for instance, Murasaki Shikibu renders heroines such as Tamakazura and Ukifune all the more unforgettable by portraying them as

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[1] Mia Yun, "A Penguin Readers Guide to *House of The Winds*," in *House of the Winds* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 7.
[2] "Author Profile: Liza Dalby," *Bookreporter*. June 9, 2002 http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-dalby-liza.asp.
[3] For a brief discussion of the relationship between the recent geisha boom in the U.S. and Dalby's novel, see my article, "Nantonaku Heian kagirinaku murasaki: Raiza Darubii cho *Murasaki Shikibu monogatari* o megutte," *Genji kenkyū* 7 (April 2002): 155-164.
[4] Liza Dalby, *The Tale of Murasaki* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

engaged readers of *monogatari* amidst their turbulent and dramatic lives.[5] Two celebrated Heian writing women, known as Michitsuna's Mother and Sugawara Takasue's Daughter, paint their literary self-portraits ultimately as disillusioned and skeptical readers of *monogatari* in their respective diaries, *Kagerō nikki* (late 10th c.) and *Sarashina nikki* (late 11th c.). Deciphering multi-layered signification of these authors' disillusionment and skepticism has been the focus of recent groundbreaking critical endeavors.[6] For the present study, I am particularly interested in the figure of the female reader as a hermeneutic tool with which to elucidate the significance of Dalby's fiction.

Sarashina nikki, in fact, offers the earliest textual glimpses of a vivacious, young Heian female reader of *monogatari*:

> I came home with all this bounty, deliriously happy [*ureshisa zo imijiki*]. The *Genji*, of which I had seen only parts before and always in a rush so that I despaired of understanding it all—now as I took out the books one by one, I could read it at my leisure from the very start, lying behind my curtains, avoiding others' company. Before this bliss, what was the rank of an Empress to me?[7]
>
> What did finally hold my mind was this: that a splendid man of the highest rank, someone like the Shining Genji of the tale in looks and manners, would come even once a year to visit me. I would be like the Lady Ukifune, secretly installed in a mountain village [*yamazato ni kakushisuerarete*], gazing at the flowers and the

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[5] For Tamakazura, see the Hotaru chapter. For Ukifune, refer to the Azumaya chapter. For the English translations of the relevant passages, see *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 460-462, 994. In the Hotaru chapter, Murasaki no ue also is portrayed as an avid reader of *monogatari*.

[6] Rebecca Copeland and Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, eds., *The Father-Daughter Plot* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001). See in particular, Ramirez-Christensen's "Introduction" (1-24) and "Self-Representation and the Patriarchy in Heian Female Memoirs" (49-88); Sonja Arntzen's "Of Love and Bondage in the *Kagerō Diary*: Michitsuna's Mother and Her Father" (25-48). See also Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Memoirs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[7] Ramirez-Christensen, 77. All the English translations cited in this paper are Ramirez-Christensen's as they appear in *The Father-Daughter Plot*. For the complete English translation of *Sarashina nikki*, see Ivan Morris, trans. *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1975). For the Japanese text, refer to *Sarashina nikki*, ed. Akiyama Ken, Nihon koten shūsei 39 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1980).

> crimson leaves, the moon and the snow, looking vulnerably lonely,
> and once in a while reading his long-awaited, wonderful letters.
> Such was my persistent desire, my fantasy of the future.[8]

The first passage recaptures the young girl's absolute delight in her reading of *Genji monogatari*, while the second one revives this twelve-year-old's dreamy anticipation of her own romantic possibilities illuminated by the enticing aura of *monogatari*. In these two separate textual instances, the older and consciously self-reflective narrator "I" momentarily withdraws her presence and lets the younger "I" speak for herself, with great enthusiasm. In other words, even though *Sarashina nikki* as a whole reassesses the author's life as a female reader uncomfortably and unwillingly situated between the two contesting ideological forces represented by *monogatari* and Buddhist discourse, the older narrator "I"'s backward glance at her younger self in these briefly-sustained textual moments reveals nothing but the excitement and fascination of her youth, as if she were experiencing them for the very first time.

Put differently, in the author/narrator's retrospection, her earlier, intense engagement with *monogatari* is reconstituted as the most vital and privileged moments of her life. Perhaps because of the author's overwrought awareness of her life as a failure, she seems to desire all the more to recapture her delight with *monogatari* as something that cannot be diminished or erased by her hindsight of its moral and religious implications. Her self-absorbing engagement with *monogatari* is then simply what it is: an irreducible experience of genuine pleasure.

The readerly delight of the young Takasue's Daughter appears as an instance of "the feminine jouissance," when Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen views it through a multi-faceted Freudian/Lacanian/ Kristevan prism. This gendering of Takasue's Daughter's experience specifically as "the feminine jouissance" is further substantiated by Ramirez-Christensen's trenchant analyses of the thematized opposition of *monogatari* vs. the *Lotus Sutra* in *Sarashina nikki* and of this opposition's relevance to explorations of the tensions between feminine desire vs. paternal prohibition, and the matrilineal text of the Imaginary vs. the patrilineal Symbolic, that are inscribed within the text. Ultimately for Ramirez-Christensen, *monogatari*, and the *Genji* in particular, represents "the feminine discourse of the Imaginary." The matrilineal nature of Heian female-authored texts from the tenth to the eleventh century is thus what shapes these writing women's

[8] Ramirez-Christensen, 75.

discursive relationships to the patriarchal Heian society.[9] As a memoir, *Sarashina nikki* is then a self-inscription of the female author's complex negotiations (and her failures) vis-à-vis the paternal figure, both biological and cultural.[10]

Ramirez-Christensen's view of Takasue's Daughter as a participant in matrilineal discourse as epitomized by the *Genji* is highly relevant to my study of the Heian female reader and its relation to Dalby's novel. Ramirez-Christensen's position seems to imply that gender is a determining factor for one's readerly pleasure precisely because of culturally constructed, gender-specific, social expectations in tenth and eleventh-century Heian Japan. This in turn opens up a new critical vista of how to theorize the configuration of gender, pleasure, and text within the long reception history of the *Genji* as a single work and of *monogatari* as a genre. According to the limited materials available, the male reader's engagement with the *Genji* indeed seems to differ greatly from that of the female reader. The regent Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027), Emperor Ichijō (980-1011), and the scholar-poet Fujiwara Kintō (966-1041) are portrayed in Murasaki Shikibu's own diary as appreciative Heian male readers of the *Genji*, but the extent of their engagement with this work remains speculative. By contrast, the preeminent Kamakura scholar-poet Fujiwara Shunzei's famous comment, on the occasion of *Roppyakuban uta awase* in the late twelfth century, that any aspiring poet should read *Genji monogatari*, is a telling illustration of how the *Genji* is not read as *monogatari* per se (i.e., how Takasue's Daughter reads it) but as a source book for poetic inspiration and allusion (*honkadori*). That is to say, male cultural arbiters of the subsequent era appropriated the Heian woman's literary heritage for their own poetic enterprises and reconstituted it under the rubric of Kamakura poetics.

On the other hand, Ramirez-Christensen's postulation of Heian female-authored texts as matrilineal discourse seems to extend even to *Mumyōzōshi* (ca. 1200), the earliest extant work of literary criticism in Japanese cultural history.[11] Its authorship is traditionally attributed to a woman, Shunzei's Daughter being the most likely candidate. Significantly, this text features three or four aristocratic women engaged in an impassioned literary discussion, focusing on Heian female-authored texts. What emerges clearly

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[9] Richard Okada also discusses briefly "Matters Matrilineal" in Heian Japan. Richard Okada, *Figures of Resistance: Language, Poetry, and Narrating in the Tale of Genji and Other Mid-Heian Texts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 163-164.

[10] Ramirez-Christensen, 74-82.

[11] *Mumyōzōhi*, ed. Kuwabara Hiroshi, Nihon koten shūsei 7 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1976).

from these women's late-night discussion is their intellectual and emotional solidarity, which is based on their profound interest in Heian literary heritage, their shared knowledge of women's cultural history originating from the Heian rear court, and their keen awareness of the disadvantageous position of women within a male-centered society.[12]

The question that still remains is this: What then is the nature of the female reader's pleasure in the pre-*Genji* era when *monogatari* is assumed to be written by men?[13] In fact, the relatively modern view of the *Genji* as a work written "by a woman for women about women"[14] gains its significance against the conventional understanding that *monogatari* is initially written by men. In orthodox scholarship, it is still a common practice to attribute male authorship to early Heian *monogatari* such as *Taketori monogatari*, *Utsuho monogatari*, and *Ochikubo monogatari* (late 10th c.). The archetypal female reader of *monogatari* is accordingly a consumer of male-authored texts.

A collection of Buddhist stories, *The Three Jewels* (*Sanbōe*, late 10th c.) written by Minamoto Tanenori, for instance, offers a glimpse into the reified figure of the female reader:

> Then there are the so-called *monogatari*, which have such an effect upon ladies' hearts. They flourish in numbers greater than the grasses of Ōaraki Forest, more countless than the sands on the Arisomi beaches. They attribute speech to trees and plants,

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[12] When commenting on *Genji monogatari*, these female characters employ the poetic concepts and terms—including *aware*, *en*, and *okashi*—that were developed and valorized by the male elite poets of the time. A notable difference, however, is that the women in *Mumyōzōshi* approach *Genji monogatari* basically as *monogatari*, even as they note the centrality of *waka* in the *Genji*. At the same time, these female readers emphasize the importance of appreciating *waka* in the *Genji* not as a separate entity that can be lifted out of context for *honkadori* (poetic allusions), but as an integral element of the entire tale. Takahashi Tōru, "A Women's Tale of 'Feminine' Culture: The Case of *Mumyōzōshi*." Paper presented at the 2nd International Convention of Asia Scholars. Berlin, August 2001.

[13] In fact, the authorship of *Genji monogatari* is yet to be ascertained, even though Ramirez-Christensen's interpretation is predicated on Murasaki Shikibu's authorship of this masterpiece.

[14] Komashaku Kimi presents in her book, *Murasaki Shikibu no messeeji*, Asahi sensho 422 (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun Sha, 1991), a compelling argument that Murasaki's intended audience is women and that her message is clearly meant to expose the stark reality of Heian heterosexual marriage. Less Komashaku's feminist agenda, the psychoanalyst Kawai Hayao, too, views *Genji monogatari* mainly as *josei no monogatari* in his recent publication, *Murasaki mandara: Genji monogatari no kōzu* (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 2000).

> mountains and rivers, birds and beasts, fish and insects that cannot speak; they invest unfeeling objects with human feelings and ramble on and on with meaningless phrases like so much flotsam in the sea, with no two words together that have more solid basis than does swamp grass growing by a river back. *The Sorceress of Iga*, *The Tosa Lord*, *The Fashionable Captain*, *The Nagai Chamberlain*, and all the rest depict relations between men and women just as if they were so many flowers or butterflies, but do not let your heart get caught up even briefly in these tangled roots of evil, these forests of words.[15]

In this passage, in which the author ostensibly details the ills of *monogatari*, he gives away the fact that he himself is a well-informed reader of *monogatari*. His hyperbolic speech, including all the exciting things that happen in the realm of *monogatari* (birds and mountains speak; man and woman become amorous with one another), sounds more like a tempting invitation to *monogatari* rather than an injunction, which is given in the very last sentence, almost as an afterthought.[16] Moreover, the infinite pleasure to be had in *monogatari* seems guaranteed by the countless number of them. In fact, it is important to note that the male author's prohibition, given to the intended female reader Princess Sonshi, against reading *monogatari* is not necessarily the rejection of this particular genre per se. Rather, it is a warning against the female reader's peculiar proclivity towards romantic tales.[17] To the patriarchal authority such as Minamoto Tanenori, the young female reader's mind should be constantly guarded, not unlike his own, from any possible encounters with *monogatari*, precisely because of her female naiveté—that is to say, a woman's inability to maintain the distinction between truth and fabrication.

The figure of the female reader of *monogatari* implicit in *The Three Jewels* can be understood more productively as a contested site in which the forces of masculine dominance over feminine subjectivity and the latter's

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[15] Edward Kamens, trans. *The Three Jewels: A Study and Translation of Minamoto Tamenori's Sanbōe* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1988), 93.

[16] Minamoto Tamenori's preceding admonitions against such diversions as *go* and *koto* are remarkably brief by comparison. Kamens, 93.

[17] Although it is never explictly articulated, male-authored *monogatari* seem to include both didactic texts and romantic tales, without a clear distinction between the two. Concerning the didactic function of the Japanese Cinderella tale *Ochikubo monogatari*, see Joshua S. Mostow, "On Becoming Ukifune: Autobiographical Heroines in Heian and Kamakura Literature," in *Crossing the Bridge*, eds. Barbara Stevenson and Cynthia Ho (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 45-46.

resistance to the former come into play. Since the female reader's mind is assumed to mirror what she reads, it becomes critically important to regulate the texts to which she is most often exposed. The battle is then fought over the possession of the young girl's mind unaffected by *monogatari* so as to ensure that proper patriarchal regulations are inscribed upon it. In other words, a girl (not unlike a boy) must enter the realm of the symbolic, even though she may be initiated into the semiotic only through its mutated form—namely, *hiragana*, a linguistic equivalent of the dimly-lit backdoor entrance to society.[18] A woman's acquisition of language is hence allowed so far as it enables her to learn the Law of the Father and to function properly in the symbolic as a female. This reading, in fact, illuminates the gender ideology behind the long-established notion that *monogatari* were initially written by men in *hiragana* (*onnade*, "the female hand") specifically for women. Seen in this light, the imaginary male author of early Heian *monogatari* resembles "the imaginary Father figure" in Ramirez-Christensen's formulation, whose function it is to facilitate the young girl's entry to the symbolic.

On the other hand, the seemingly baffling phenomenon—the female reader's unrestrained indulgence in forbidden pleasure, in the realm of *monogatari*, against the severe injunction of the Father—may be viewed as her unconscious insistence on dwelling in the imaginary, from which she never truly breaks away, even in her adult life. Instead, she reads romantic texts, allowing her desultory mind to follow its own desire, making up stories along the way. In other words, the female reader's pleasure, "the feminine jouissance," is not limited to female-authored texts such as G*enji monogatari*. Rather, her pleasure stems from her seemingly inborn capacity to (mis)read male-authored texts against the Law of the Father. A young Heian woman as the reader of *monogatari* is then already a resisting figure, though passive and mild—a delinquent daughter, defying the paternal authority, unwittingly. The familiar story of the Heian woman as a gullible reader thus ultimately reveals both the frustrated patriarchal desire to penetrate fully the mind of a young girl, and the patriarchy's consequent loss of control over that erratic mind.

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[18] I concur with Ramirez-Christensen when she states, "Women had access to literary, and the feminine milieu was the locus of the cultural production, dissemination, and consumption of the matrilineal discourse, including the Genji (Ramirez-Christensen, 77)." My position, however, is that the archetypal female reader as the consumer of male-authored texts brings out even more clearly the female reader/author's resistance to the patriarchal authority.

The resisting figure of the female reader, however, becomes "tamed" in the patriarchal discourse that has shaped the modern reconstruction of Heian gender ideology and its literary history. The unrelenting power of the female reader's ignorance and naiveté, in fact, buttresses the arc of the conventional trajectory of the Heian woman's existence. A young female reader of *monogatari*, once married, finds herself reading *monogatari* to while away time. As she passively awaits her husband's rare visits, she is less likely to be seduced by the empty promises of *monogatari* but is intensely alive to the gap that separates her life from her "would-have-been" world of *monogatari*. Now as a middle-aged woman, with no viable option for romance, she picks up her brush and writes her own life-story, filled with disappointment, despair, sorrow, and resignation.[19] The narrative of the Heian woman's life as such, however, is more than a cautionary tale that a young female reader's unsanctioned venture into the world of *monogatari* is dangerous and ultimately responsible for the final outcome of her own life—a tragic drama. With her life-long proximity to *monogatari* physically, emotionally, and linguistically, she has become well suited, better than a man, to be a writer of fiction. That is why, we are repeatedly told, Heian authors of any distinction are largely female, Murasaki Shikibu being no exception. Such is the rich narrative potential embedded within the reified figure of the Heian female reader.

THE FEMALE READER IN THE TALE OF *MURASAKI*

Liza Dalby, on the other hand, weaves into her novel a new tale of the Heian female reader. Many female readers, indeed, make appearance in *The Tale of Murasaki*. For instance, court ladies, whom Katako, the only daughter of Murasaki, suspects to be ardent *Genji* readers, attend her mother's funeral; even Murasaki herself appears as the reader of her own diary and of her "Auntie"'s *Gossamer Diary, Kagerō nikki*; Murasaki's women friends read her *Genji* manuscripts throughout the novel. Of all the female readers in the novel, the single figure of Katako is the one on which Dalby's narrative conceit pivots entirely. After her mother's funeral, Katako first discovers Murasaki's memoirs and transmits them to posterity. It is then the initial reader of Murasaki's texts, Katako, to whom I now turn to examine Dalby's imaginative construction of the new figure of the Heian female reader.

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[19] Here I am referring specifically to the enduring uniformity found in the modern hegemonic critical discourse on Heian female authors and their literary products. See in particular Ikeda Kikan, *Kyūtei joryū nikki bungaku* (Tokyo: Chibundo, 1927); Akiyama Ken, *Ōchō joryū bungaku no keisei* (Tokyo: Kōshobō, 1967).

Katako's only appearance in the novel occurs in the preface, written as a letter she addresses to her unnamed daughter. The letter explains briefly Murasaki's life as the author of the celebrated *Genji* tale and the significance of her posthumously discovered memoirs that Katako now bequeaths to her daughter:

> Now that you are grown, you should read your grandmother's memoir in order to understand what you are by virtue of what you have come from. I suggest you keep it to yourself until you give it to your own literary descendant someday. In the future, if the *Tale of Genji* is still being read, sensitive people may find Murasaki's private thoughts of interest, and the gossip will be too old to do any harm.[20]

Upon reading this passage near the end of the letter, the actual reader of the novel is to maintain a tacit understanding that Murasaki's private memoirs are now being publicly circulated because Katako's daughter has read, as her mother hoped, her grandmother's writing. In other words, the very existence and dissemination of *The Tale of Murasaki*—an unpublished female-authored text—is predicated on the unbroken chain of the initial, committed female readers, Katako and her daughter. Moreover, by reading Murasaki's memoirs in the form of Dalby's novel, the actual reader too becomes a literary descendant of Murasaki, thereby continuing the matrilineal/textual genealogy that Katako has initially constructed.

Dalby dramatizes the centrality of Katako's role as female reader by presenting this character as a conduit between Murasaki and her granddaughter in this way:

> Over the following months I divided my time between milk and paper—your greedy little plum-bud mouth and my voracious eyes. You sucked sustenance from me and I from those texts [Murasaki's memoirs], so I am truly surprised at your lack of interest in literature now, since you must have absorbed so much of its savor in infancy.[21]

The image of Katako emerging from this scene is striking when viewed against the modern understanding of the Heian cultural landscape. First of all, the description, no matter how brief, of a lactating mother is a rarity in

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[20] Dalby, 6.
[21] Dalby, 5.

Heian literature.[22] Moreover, the intimate physical connection between Katako and her baby implicit in this scene underscores the mother-daughter relationship, which is also largely elided in the modern reconstruction of Heian women. As if to emphasize further the primacy of this particular relationship, the mother-daughter dyad is again underlined in Katako's very act of reading her mother's texts. Dalby has, in other words, combined the image of the maternal with the figure of the female reader, collapsing them in the person of Katako who, like the baby she is nursing, experiences maternal comfort and solace by literally consuming her "maternal words."

It is no accident that Katako appears as mother in this particular scene, which focuses on the interconnectedness of three generations of women—Murasaki Shikibu, Katako, and Murasaki's granddaughter—who are bound to each other by a chain of mother-daughter links. In fact, Murasaki's own mother, too, is present in this scene as a "textual memory" inscribed in the memoirs that Katako is reading. As the reader will soon learn in the beginning of the novel, Dalby has transformed Murasaki's shadowy relationship with her mother into a vital one. It is none other than the event of her mother's cremation that led Murasaki to keep a journal.[23] In other words, her mother's death is the very origin of Murasaki's development as a writing woman. Significantly, Katako is pregnant with her child when Murasaki dies. Thus, the quiet scene of a mother reading and feeding her baby daughter is a powerful evocation of the matrilineal/textual genealogy itself, in which the figure of Mother embodies the point of origin and reference for Murasaki's descendants, both biological and literary.

Dalby makes more explicit the author-reader relation as the most vital aspect of the maternal genealogy of Murasaki, Katako, and Murasaki's granddaughter. Murasaki, the progenitor of this matrilineal lineage, has reproduced biologically and textually. While Katako is Murasaki's only biological daughter, the *Genji* tale is her putative, textual son, whom Katako

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[22] The Usugumo chapter of *Genji monogatari* features a scene in which the major heroine, Murasaki no ue, is trying to breast feed, in jest, her adopted daughter Akashi Princess. The Yokobue chapter also includes a scene in which Kumoinokari, Yūgiri's wife, offers her dry breast to soothe her sick baby boy. For the English translation of the relevant passages, see Tyler, 352 and 702.

[23] Murasaki wished the smoke on the plain at her mother's funeral to stay and it did:

> I did, however, resolve to begin keeping a journal, for I saw that I had the power to affect things—if only a wisp of smoke. Yet, even so, this was something to keep track of. I had awakened, suddenly clear-eyed, from a disturbing dream with the ability to concentrate my will and influence something of the world. It became desperately important to me to keep this awareness, and I sensed words would be the key (Dalby, 10).

regards as her "elder brother." Moreover, Murasaki reproduces herself in the form of a diary, which becomes nourishment for future generations. In other words, in Dalby's novel, a woman's biological reproduction, the means of perpetuating the patriarchal lineage, is reconstituted as the vehicle for generating the matrilineal/textual kinship. Like the blood-based genealogy, the author-reader lineage cannot skip a generation, if it is to be maintained. The image of Katako's act of simultaneously nursing her daughter and reading her maternal texts is then symbolic of a matrilineal/textual lineage that will perpetuate itself.

Dalby's imaginary vision of the matrilineal/textual genealogy originating from Murasaki Shikibu strikingly resembles Ramirez-Chirstensen's theoretical articulation of the matrilineal nature of Heian female-authored texts, epitomized by *Genji monogatari*. This coincidence may be attributed to the fact that they are in their own ways re-reading Heian women's literary productions against the patriarchal dominance that must have shaped the political, social, and psychological unconscious of these authors' texts. Ramirez-Christensen as a critic must undertake complex theoretical operations upon the limited extant Heian female-authored writings to generate and legitimize her particular reading of their literary productions. Dalby, on the other hand, can easily create, as a writer of fiction, a new narrative to materialize her vision of the maternal/literary genealogy in Heian Japan. Dalby's construction of Katako as female reader thus differs greatly from the classic figure of the female reader. Whereas the latter remains marginal to society due to her failure to master the required male-authored text, the former wields cultural authority due to her proximity to her mother's texts.[24] In other words, Dalby's construction of Katako as the figure of the Heian female reader is a privileged one—a woman, born into the seat of cultural power, who knows how to guard and disseminate it.

Significantly, there is no room for any patriarchal authority to intervene in the matrilineal genealogy. As we saw, no time is lost in initiating Katako's daughter into the matrilineal discourse. What is strikingly absent in Dalby's figure of the female reader is the sense of doom, despair, and disappointment that is projected onto the archetypal figure of the Heian female reader. Instead, a feeling of joy, pleasure, and pride livens the image of Katako. Moreover, positioned between Murasaki and her daughter, Katako commands a particular vantage point from which she can see

[24] Katako states in the letter, "Publicly I was the conservator of the true version of the *Tale of Genji*, my copy being the standard. Privately I became the guardian of my mother's reminiscences (Dalby, 5)."

beyond her own life—the past, present, and future of women. By raising her daughter as the next-generation female reader to guard and disseminate her grandmother's memoirs, Katako embraces and celebrates the maternal as the source of self-knowledge, self-identity, and self-empowerment. Katako's daughter is, moreover, symbolic of the future female reader who will master the "maternal tongue" and gain her rightful place in society because of that mastery. Dalby's novel is thus ultimately a tale of the imaginary feminine discursive utopia situated in the post-Murasaki Shikibu era.

DALBY AS THE READER OF *GENJI MONOGATARI*

Considering to what extent Dalby expands and subverts the classic figure of the Heian female reader in the Katako character, it is surprising to see how faithfully she follows, in her self-portrait, the conventional Heian female reader-author trajectory. When narrating the genesis of *The Tale of Murasaki*, Dalby invariably revisits her adolescence in this way:

> I first read Arthur Waley's classic translation of the romantic novel centering on the figure of the Shining Prince Genji when I was sixteen. I read it slowly over the course of a summer, and each time I opened the book I was transported from a humid backyard gazebo in Indiana to the Japanese imperial court of a thousand years ago, a world refined and shaped by poetic sensibilities. I was swept away by the powerful ability of this fiction to create a compelling world utterly removed from the reality of my 20th-century, midwestern, teenage life. Since then, I have re-read the *Tale of Genji* numerous times, in each English translation, as well as in modern Japanese.[25]

The Dalby emerging from this passage is a young, avid reader of *Genji monogatari*, not unlike the young girl in *Sarashina nikki*, expressing her fascination and delight with the *Genji*. Yet, whereas Takasue's Daughter's foremost desire is to read the *Tale of Genji* in its entirety, Dalby's is to experience the aesthetic sensibilities captured in the tale, as suggested by her re-reading of each English translation of the tale and later by her reading of the tale in modern Japanese. The implication here seems to be that Dalby, as a Westerner, has taken her reading of *Genji monogatari* as far as her linguistic skills enabled her.

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[25] "Author's Note," Dalby, 421.

In fact, it is important to note how the gender, language, and geographical location of the two devoted *Genji* readers, Dalby and Takasue's Daughter, have shaped differently their reading experiences. The young Heian girl's desire for *monogatari* is initially whetted by hearsay about *monogatari* from other women. It is also through a chain of female acquaintances that she is able to acquire copies of various *monogatari*. To Takasue's Daughter, reading the entire *Genji monogatari* soon after her family's return to the capital from the Kazusa province signifies more than the long-awaited answer for her fervent prayer—"Grant that we may leave for the capital soon. They say there are many tales there—please let me read all of them."[26] That is to say, the very lack of *monogatari* in the distant province has ignited the girl's infatuation with *monogatari*—hence, her insatiable desire to read "all" *monogatari*. Her delight with the *Genji* and other tales thus cannot be separated from the fact that she is now finally back in the "capital"—the home turf of *monogatari*. She has, in a sense, physically entered the romantic realm, which in turn heightens her reading experience of *monogatari*, almost as that of "the real."

To a sixteen-year old Midwestern American girl, on the other hand, encountering Waley's English rendition of *Genji monogatari* is, in Dalby's own words, her "first taste of Japanese culture"—the taste that is made all the more exotic by the great temporal and spatial divides that separate her world of the Midwest in the 20th-century U. S. and the aesthetic realm of 11th-century Heian Japan. Consequently, Dalby's profound interest in the *Genji* does not reflect her desire for *monogatari* per se but her fascination with a foreign culture, the world of Heian court itself. Linguistically, Dalby is also more than twice removed from the original *Genji monogatari*, as she reads the Heian female-authored tale, rewritten in English by a modern Western male translator.[27]

It is no surprise then that Takasue's Daughter and Dalby respond to *Genji monogatari* in different ways. The Heian girl is enamored specifically with the romance plot represented by the tale. In fact, for her, the life of the fictional heroine is not entirely out of the realm of possibility. After all, she reads, speaks, and understands the language of her fictional heroes and heroines. And, she may indeed grow to be as beautiful as Ukifune and meet someone like the Shining Prince Genji. But as for Dalby, it is Murasaki Shikibu, the creator of *Genji monogatari*, who takes hold of her

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[26] Ramirez-Christensen, 63.

[27] For an in-depth analysis of Waley's position as a reader of *Genji monogatari*, refer to Marian Ury, "The Imaginary Kingdom and the Translator's Art: Notes on Re-reading Waley's *Genji*." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 2:2 (Summer 1976): 267-294.

imagination.[28] It would seem that Dalby's quest for Murasaki is motivated by her desire to cross over the linguistic, gender, temporal, and geographical divides that have initially separated her from the mind of the original author. Yet, not unlike Takasue's Daughter's life-long obsession with *monogatari* that led her to the textual production of *Sarashina nikki* as the record of her own life as a female reader, Dalby's life-long imaginary relationship with Murasaki has compelled her to author in English *The Tale of Murasaki* as the record of how she has imagined Murasaki's life to be. In this way, Dalby's self-transformation from reader to author mirrors the conventional transfiguration of the young Heian female reader-of-*monogatari* turned female author.

DALBY AS THE AUTHOR OF THE *TALE OF MURASAKI*

It is one thing for Dalby to maintain a life-long imaginary relationship with Murasaki Shikibu, but it is quite another for this Stanford-trained anthropologist to unearth an unprecedented "literary archeology" of the Heian author's life. Clearly, such an impressive literary achievement cannot be attained only through her fertile imagination or with her experience of being the "sole Western geisha." In this final section, I will thus analyze Dalby as a reader of Heian literature and its relation to her strategic textual production of her novel.[29]

Dalby's conscious self-positioning vis-à-vis the existing Murasaki narrative seems to have facilitated her textual production. Dalby emphasizes the fact that she is "neither a historian nor a specialist in classical Japanese literature."[30] She is then, by her own reckoning, an author of fiction. By calling her book, "a novel," Dalby carves out her own discursive space, uncluttered by the problematic distinction between "hard facts" and "fiction." This creates an intriguing twist especially because her novel deals with an author of *monogatari*, a genre traditionally dismissed for blurring the line between fiction and facts. In other words, by situating herself outside "academic discourse," even as she readily acknowledges it and masterfully garners pertinent information from *Genji* scholarship both in Japan and the West, Dalby has been able to pursue her own flights of imagination, with an ease and pleasure rarely enjoyed by scholars and critics.

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[28] Dalby herself states, "Over the years I became increasingly fascinated by Murasaki Shikibu ("Author's Note," Dalby, 421)."

[29] For Dalby's own account of her textual production, refer to her website, http://www.taleofmurasaki.com

[30] "Author Profile: Liza Dalby," *Bookreporter*. June 9, 2002 http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-dalby-liza.asp.

A brief look at how Dalby has mended the old fabric of the Murasaki narrative with new threads of fiction is then in order. Dalby's fictionalized account of this Heian author's life is, indeed, an imaginative recycling of well-known materials found in *Murasaki Shikibu nikki, Murasaki Shikibu shū, Makura no sōshi, Kagerō nikki,* and *Eiga monogatari*. In fact, her novel includes, as Dalby acknowledges, "large chunks of Murasaki's historical diary and practically all of the *waka* from her poem collection."[31] Dalby's incorporation of Murasaki's poems into the novel is particularly original and refreshing. Dalby employs the first several poems in *Murasaki Shikibu shū* within the context of the friendship between Murasaki and Chifuru. Nicknamed "Oborozuki," Chifuru is Murasaki's childhood girlfriend, one year older than Murasaki, who is also nicknamed, "Kara no ko."[32] They are briefly reunited as young women and become lovers. Chifuru, however, must go off to a province, following her father. The very first *waka* in *Murasaki's Poetic Memoirs*, めぐりあひて見しやそれともわかぬまに雲がくれにしよはの月かげ, thus appears in the novel as Murasaki's farewell poem to her lover/friend.[33] In this way, the recipient of the first poetic exchange in *Murasaki Shikibu shû* is no longer just a certain childhood friend (はやうよりわらはともだちなりし人), but specifically "Chifuru."[34] This example illustrates how Dalby imbues Murasaki's *waka* with a new meaning by creating a plausible context for each poem. Put differently, as a writer of fiction, Dalby is able to take full advantage of Murasaki's existing *waka* for their intrinsic narrative potentials and use them to fill gaps in the historical materials concerning Murasaki's life.

Another primary source of Dalby's textual production is Murasaki Shikibu's diary. For instance, Dalby herself points out that "the first two paragraphs [of the Birth of A Prince chapter] come directly from the diary."[35] Her use of this particular passage has a historical precedent; namely, *Eiga monogatari* in which Murasaki's writing appears almost

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[31] "Acknowledgements," Dalby, 425.

[32] From their nicknames alone, the reader can already sense that these two young girls will become engaged with the production of *Genji monogatari*, and indeed they do. They share the Shining Prince as their romantic hero in their imagination.

[33] The English translation of the poem is included in the novel: Chancing to meet again, did I truly see you or, before I could tell, had you disappeared behind the clouds—face of the midnight moon? Dalby, 17.

[34] The last line, よはの月かげ, appears as よはの月かなin *Murasaki Shikibu nikki Murasaki Shikibu shū*, ed. Yamamoto Ritatsu, Nihon koten shūsei 35 (Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1980), 115.

[35] Liza Dalby, *Fact and Fiction in the Tale of Murasaki*. http://www.taleofmurasaki.com/factfictionpage.htm.

intact.[36] Dalby's English rendition of the passage under discussion is as follows:

> As autumn deepened, the Tsuchimikado could not have looked more beautiful. The trees down by the lake and the grasses by the stream took on intense colors in the late afternoon, each leaf and blade sharply defined in the slanting golden light. With the stirring of a cool breeze, a sonorous tide of prayer arose from all the buildings, mingling with the murmur of the stream.
>
> In the empress's chamber Her Majesty lay languidly listening to the impressive chanting mixed with the gossip of her ladies. She lay on her side, supported by cushions, and though she did not complain, I could see her discomfort, and my heart went out to her. I noticed that when I was in her presence, my usual disenchantment with the world melted away and I wondered how different my life would have been if I had come into Her Majesty's service earlier. Perhaps then I might have felt more at home in these surroundings.[37]

Compare Dalby's rendition with the existing English translation by Richard Bowring:

> As autumn deepens, the Tsuchimikado mansion looks indescribably beautiful. The trees by the lake and grasses by the stream take on their own individual colors which, intensifying in the evening light, make voices in ceaseless prayers sound all the more impressive. A cool breeze gently stirs, and throughout the night the endless murmur of the stream blends with the sonorous chanting.
>
> Her Imperial majesty too lies listening as her ladies-in-waiting engage in idle gossip. She must be in some distress but hides her feelings as if nothing were amiss, in a manner that really needs no comment; and yet I do find it extraordinary how she can cause such a change of heart in someone so disenchanted with life as

[36] For the line-by-line comparison of the passage in these two texts, see *Eiga monogatari Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, eds. Matsumura Hiroji and Abe Akio, Nihon koten bungaku 11 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1977), 89.
[37] Dalby, 310.

> myself, making me quite forget my troubles; if only I had sought solace for my unhappiness by taking service with Her majesty much earlier.[38]

Except for the tense, some syntactic variations, and a few different word choices, the general tenor of Dalby's passage appears so close to that of Bowring's that a question presents itself: Is Dalby's rendition a direct borrowing or a revision of Bowring's translation? Dalby does acknowledge his scholarship by referring to it as, "[A] scholarly and fascinating English translation and study of these works [Murasaki's diary and her poetic memoirs]."[39] One nevertheless wonders what the real difference is between a scholarly translation and Dalby's rendition when the final products are so similar. One might have put aside this question altogether, given an assurance that Murasaki's original writing is such that any attempt to translate it into English would likely yield similar results. But, William H. and Helen Craig McCullough's English translation of the same passage via *Eiga monogatari* is so markedly different that the possibility for such coincidental similarities may be safely rejected.[40] In the end, the reader is impressed with, and envious of, Dalby's exercise of her privileges as the author of fiction.[41]

Another way Dalby generates the narrative for her novel is by purely fictionalizing some aspect of Murasaki's biography. For instance, Dalby's imaginative re-creation of Murasaki's life in Echizen and her impassioned affair there with Ming-qwok, son of a distinguished Chinese envoy, are narrated over four chapters.[42] Dalby's description of Murasaki's rigorous

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[38] Bowring, 46.
[39] Dalby, 425.
[40] Here is the opening sentence of the William H. and Helen Craig McCullough's English translation: "With the coming of autumn, the beauty of the Tsuchimikado Mansion surpassed description. The trees bordering the lake and the massed shrubs beside the stream blazed in a myriad shades of red and yellow, and the beauty of the atmosphere lent a special poignancy to the voices that constantly chanted the sacred writings, their accents drifting on the cool breeze, and mingling all through the night with the perpetual murmur of the brook." *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes: Annals of Japanese Aristocratic Life in the Heian Period*, trans. By William H. and Helen Craig McCullough, Vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 57.
[41] Compare, for instance, Bowring's and Dalby's renditions of how Murasaki allowed an attending priest a glimpse of Shōshi. Dalby, 322; Bowring, 67.
[42] Dalby explains Murasaki's relationship with Ming-gwok in this way: "Perhaps the only scene that I invented knowing that nothing like it occurred was her love affair with the Chinese man Ming-gwok. I used that partially to symbolize Murasaki's love for Chinese literature." "Author Profile: Liza Dalby," *Bookreporter*. June 9, 2002

physical activities as she wanders about the snow-covered wintry landscape late at night with Ming-qwok is truly delightful in its novelty. She is wearing Chinese winter walking-boots, no less! Dalby's story of Murasaki here is significant in altering the enduring image of this Heian author as an old spinster who did not have any relationships with men, prior to her marriage to Nobutaka, her father's contemporary. It is also a relief to imagine Murasaki enjoying herself running around the hills in the remote Echizen, rather than always suffering in hell. At the same time, Dalby's portrayal of Murasaki greatly modifies the archetypal image of the Heian woman as an indoor beauty sequestered behind screens and blinds.

Finally, Dalby's novelistic enterprise would not have been possible in the first place, if the very notion of "female" author had not been problematic and complex within the Japanese cultural, in particular gender, ideology. Dalby's 420-page novel engages itself with an important critical issue—that is, the centuries-old question of how Murasaki, a mere woman, was able to write such a masterpiece as *Genji monogatari*. Throughout Japanese cultural history, the eleventh-century *Genji monogatari* has been regarded as a marvel, if not a miracle. However extraordinary and incomprehensible this literary achievement may seem to us now, as it must have been then to Murasaki's contemporaries, if it were written by a man, there would have been a ready-made explanation: a man of erudition wrote this tale in *hiragana* for diversion as a way of educating children and women.

Dalby's novel, in fact, subverts and expands the conventional understanding of Murasaki's authorship of *Genji monogatari*. In particular, Dalby's imaginative exploration of Murasaki's bisexuality has created a hitherto unimagined community of female friends and acquaintances. *The Tale of Murasaki* is in essence a vivid portrayal of how her female friends have not only enriched her life but also have served as the collaborators, commentators, and readers of her *Tale of Genji*. In other words, by providing a complete and concrete account of how Murasaki conceived, wrote, and circulated *Genji monogatari* specifically within the context of her life-long friendships with several women (i.e., Chifuru, Ruri, Kerria Rose, etc.), Dalby has created a new fiction of how this *monogatari* came about—new in that the significance of Murasaki's "female authorship," collectively and otherwise, is differently conceptualized and fully acknowledged. In so doing, Dalby, once a wide-eyed young female reader of *Genji monogatari*, masterfully chronicles Murasaki's life with unprecedented clarity, completeness, and focus.

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http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-dalby-liza.asp.

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