“Shōjo Minds in the Gutter: Reading the *Genji Manga*”

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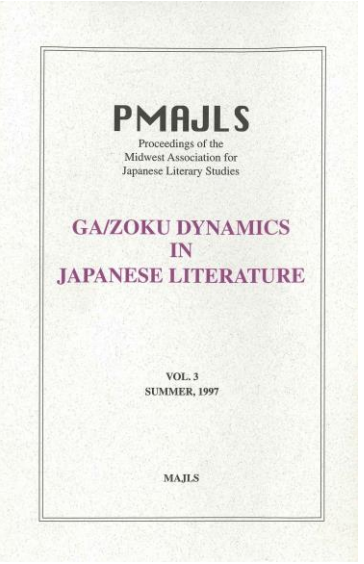

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Shōjo Minds in the Gutter: Reading the Genji Manga

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In 1991 NHK, the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation, presented a series of animated specials based on classics from Japanese literature and published a series of manga (comics) based on the animated films which included a Genji manga by Toba Shōko. Using this rendering of The Tale of Genji as a basis, I will attempt in the following to outline how late-twentieth-century Japanese comics treats of this text. I will focus my analysis on how the structure of the medium, comics, and one stream within Japanese popular culture, shōjo culture, have shaped the telling of the tale.

Before examining the structural characteristics of the Genji manga, it will be helpful to introduce its narrative format. The Genji manga is made up of an introduction and five chapters and is 171 pages long. It includes only certain dramatic episodes from the first twelve chapters of the original work and ends with Genji's exile to Suma. The introduction is composed of non-sequential panels and a third-person narrative in which Genji's lineage, childhood, and life-long love for Fujitsubo are briefly described. The five chapters are entitled "Yūgao," "Rokujō Miyasudokoro," "Murasaki no Ue," "Suetsumuhana," and "Oborozukiyo," with each presenting the story of a different woman in Genji's romantic history. The chapters about Yūgao, Rokujō, Murasaki, and Oborozukiyo are first-person narratives told from the perspective of the main character and make much use of inner thought as a narrative technique. The Suetsumuhana chapter has as its main character not the painfully shy and unattractive woman in the chapter's title but the vivacious,

match-making Myōbu who, perhaps being disinclined towards introspection, offers little inner thought.

The five characters' stories are greatly simplified and sentimentalized. Yūgao is a Cinderella figure rescued from obscurity by the Shining Prince and tormented by the jealous Rokujō. Rokujō's story is presented as the tragic love of an older woman for a younger man. Murasaki is the child bride plucked from the cradle. The Suetsumuhana chapter is a comic tale of Genji's attempts to woo the young woman hidden in the inner room and his shock upon seeing her for the first time. The Oborozukiyo chapter is a Heian Romeo and Juliet, a tale of forbidden love.

The abridgement of the story and the sentimentalization and caricature of the characters represent, however, rather superficial differences from the original narrative. More important are the structural characteristics of comics, which result in a narrative style that is radically different from that of traditional forms which rely either on written text or pictorial representation. In Roland Barthes' analysis in Image-Music-Text comics are comprised of two structures: the iconic structure, the image, and the graphic structure, the text. The image is a combination of lines, shadings, the shape and number of panels, the shape of word balloons, and the orthography of the text. The text is a combination of narration, inner thoughts, dialogue, mimetic words, and other linguistic elements. These two structures are substantively and functionally different, but they operate cooperatively and contiguously to carry the narrative (Barthes 16). While image and text cannot be said to merge into one unit in comics, their degree of amalgamation is much greater than that in other modes of illustrated texts, such as picture books or press photographs. In picture books, the image is physically separate from the text and plays a subsidiary role to the text, which carries the narrative. In press photographs the text (the caption) is physically closer to the image than in picture books and "loads" the image by

putting it in context and weighting it with cultural and moral meaning (Barthes 26).

The contiguous, cooperative relationship between image and text in comics is best seen in how the passage of time is conveyed. Image and text have very different temporal characteristics. The image within a panel is like a snapshot; it usually describes a one-time, visual occurrence. Although motion lines are sometimes added to express movement, image exists, for the most part, outside of time. Linguistic expression, on the other hand, occurs in time, so when text is added to a panel in the form of dialogue, inner speech, or mimetic words, the temporal dimension of the scene is transformed, creating the perception that time passes within the panel. The passage of time can also be represented through the sequencing of panels, although in this case, it is the space between the panels, called the "gutter," rather than the images contained in the panels themselves, which creates the illusion of time.

Barthes uses the notion of "relay text" to describe the relationship between image and text. He assigns two functions to the linguistic message with regard to the image: anchorage and relay. Anchorage text is commonly found in advertisements and press photographs and simply "anchors" the meaning by telling what the image represents. In relay text, which is mostly found in comics, text and image have a complementary and cooperative relationship and together deliver a unified message (Barthes 41). A common example of relay text in comics is dialogue which not only clarifies what is happening but also advances the action by supplying information not found in the image itself.

An example of relay text can be seen in Figure 1 in which Genji and Rokujō spend their last night together. The image supplies the information that it is dawn (by showing the sky), that they are reclining (by showing a view of the ceiling), and that Rokujō is grieving (by showing her tears). Also, through the use of bold type and word balloons, the image indicates dialogue and, through the use

of plain text within a less substantial circle of space, inner speech. The text in the word balloons complements the image of the dawn with "It will be dawn soon" and supplies Rokujō's parting words, "Please leave now." The text within the circle of dots provides Rokujō's thoughts, "It's all over." Working together, relay text and image not only supply information necessary to the progression of the story, such as who did what and where, but also provide a sense of movement, of time, and of mood.

Figure 1. Genji and Rokujō's last night together. Toba Shōko, Genji monogatari, 84.

This amalgamation of linear text and two-dimensional image makes the reading of comics quite different cognitively from the reading of traditional narratives. Information supplied by an image is less costly, time-wise, to a reader than information supplied by linguistic expression which requires a conversion from image (orthography) to language to information. By entrusting the descriptive message to the image, the comics reader is spared reading a time-consuming verbal description (Barthes 41). The image absorbs the descriptive charge, leaving to the text dialogue, inner thought, and what narration is needed to advance the story.

Because the bulk of the descriptive burden is carried by the image, most comics contains very little textual narration. Narration is usually limited to introducing characters and explaining significant events which would require too lengthy a treatment in image form. The Genji manga contains more narration than most comics, a consequence, in part, of the fact that it is based on an established literary work (Kai 37). There also tends to be more narration in shōjo manga (teenage girls' comics) in which narration often takes the form of inner thoughts not enclosed in word balloons that are addressed directly to the reader (Treat 380). This narrative technique was developed in the 1970s in shōjo manga and serves to "establish a direct line of communication between shōjo character and reader in spaces outside the conventional graphic perimeters of the cartoon drawings" (Treat 380-81). This technique intimately engages the reader and is used throughout the Genji manga, although the degree to which it is used varies bycharacter.

Like all narratives, the comics narrative contains many incomplete or indeterminate elements which require the creative participation of the reader to fill in. In comics these information gaps are made visible in the "gutter" (McCloud 66). The gutter is the blank space between panels, and it is in the gutter that the reader unconsciously gives play to her/his fantasies and expectations,

creating a meaningful unity where actually there is none. This phenomenon of observing parts but recognizing a whole, called "closure" (McCloud 63), allows the reader to connect separate moments and images and construct a story of continuous motion.

An example of closure can be seen in Figure 2 which shows a scene from the Oborozukiyo chapter in which Fujitsubo takes the tonsure. No cutting is shown, but through closure the reader completes the sequence in her/his imagination. In effect, the reader cuts Fujitsubo's hair. Comics relies on this sort of reader involvement to propel the narrative, and a great deal of the action in comics takes place in the gutter.

Figure 2. Fujitsubo taking the tonsure. Toba, 157-58.

The amount of closure required to connect images depends on the type of transition used from panel to panel, and the type of transition sets the pace of the narrative. For example, transitions such as the one in Figure 3, from the Rokujō chapter, require very little closure. In this scene Rokujō realizes that her angry spirit caused Genji's wife Aoi's illness. The two panels show a single subject involved in a subtle action which spans a brief period of time. This type of progression emphasizes the interiority of the subject and is often used to depict emotional reaction.

Figure 3. Rokujō realizing her guilt. Toba, 71.

In addition to representing time sequences, transitions also may serve to establish a sense of place or a mood (McCloud 72). This is illustrated in the view of the sky in Figure 4, from the Rokujō chapter, which shows again the last night she and Genji spend

together. This view of the sky serves to orient the reader in time as well as to convey a mood. When the reader turns the page (Fig. 1), the sky lightens, indicating the passage of time from night to dawn.

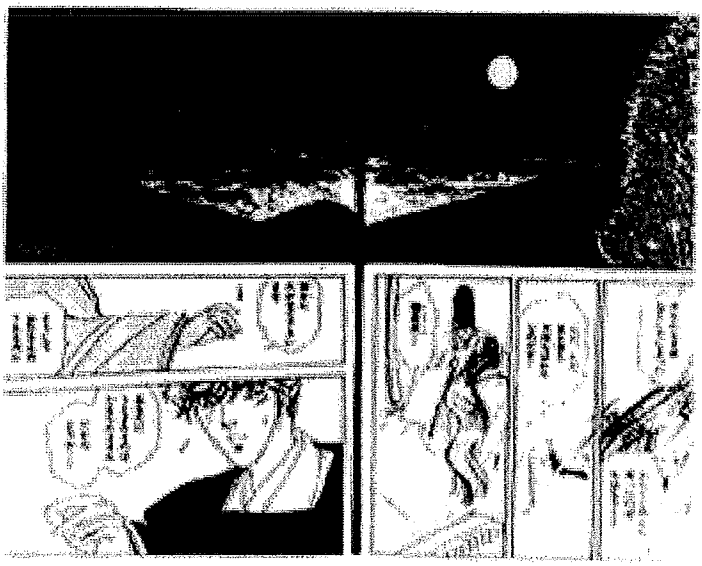

Figure 4. Genji and Rokujō's last night together. Toba, 82-83.

The effectiveness of using an image of nature to suggest the passing of time depends, of course, on the reader's ability to recognize such signs. In analyzing photographic images, Barthes writes of the image's "code of connotation" which must be read along with its objective, denoted message. This code of connotation is culture-bound: "It depends on the reader's knowledge just as though it were a matter of a real language [langue], intelligible only if one has learned the signs" (28). This is also true of comics which has accumulated a great number of expressionistic elements recognizable only to those within the culture. Because the development of manga took place in relative isolation for many years, it acquired a distinct set of signs, many of which have since been adopted by Western comics artists

(McCloud 131). For example, flowers drifting across the page with no apparent relation to the story can connote romance, femininity, or the transience of life. Flashes of light are a sign of a character's emotional state such as shock, anger, or fear, and beads of sweat, often shooting off from the face, express anxiety (Fig. 5). Readers have also come to recognize certain sets of lines as representing invisible phenomena, such as emotion or odor, as well as visible phenomena, such as movement (Fig. 5). Use of these and other abstract signs is so widespread now that readers are able to interpret them at a glance.

Figure 5. Genji waiting for his first view of Suetsumuhana. Toba, 127.

Another iconic element which requires the reader's knowledge of signs is the use of background patterns. The backgrounds in a panel usually indicate the emotional state of the subject and are widely used as a characterization technique in the Genji manga. Yūgao, for example, who is characterizedas a gentle, meek victim of Rokujō's jealousy, appears in Figure 6 with a sort of halo about her head. In Figure 7 Rokujō feels humiliated by the treatment she received from Aoi's footmen, and the abstract background pattern effectively expresses her deteriorating mental state. In the Suetsumuhana chapter Myōbu, the court lady who introduces Genji to Suetsumuhana, is characterizedas a bright, outgoing woman popular with the men of the court for her wit and cheerfulness. The backgrounds used with Myōbu have bold, geometrical patterns, such as in Figure 8, and throughout the chapter the backgrounds contribute to the contemporary mood set by the style of illustration, the language of the dialogue, and the personalities of the characters themselves. Regarding backgrounds, McCloud writes that certain patterns foster reader involvement in the story because the patterns produce a psychological effect on the reader which the reader then ascribes to the characters (132). This increases the reader's feeling of identity with the characters.

In summary, then, the structural characteristics of comics result in a narrative style that is quite different from that of traditional narratives which rely only on text. The primary constraint of the comics medium, the necessity of developing a story in a limited number of frames, is offset by the reader's involvement in the story. The interplay of text and image pulls the reader into the narrative, making her/him an active, imaginative participant in the creation of meaning. This is accomplished through the use of first-person narrative, the process of closure, and the use of abstract iconic elements which depend on the reader's knowledge of their connoted meaning. Through the use of these techniques, the comics reader contributes to

the construction of the plot, characters, and emotional tone of the narrative.

Figure 6. Yūgao. Toba, 23.

Figure 7. Rokujō's humiliation at the Kamo Festival. Toba, 67.

Figure 8. Myōbu. Toba, 114.

In addition to the influences of the comics medium, the manga representation of Genji also shows the influence of a stream within Japanese popular culture known as shōjo (teenage girl) culture. Like other forms of shōjo literature, such as novels and poetry, shōjo manga are often sentimental in tone and focus on characters and

emotions rather than plot and action. Some of the shōjo elements of the Genji manga are due to certain similarities between courtly life in medieval Japan and the shōjo world as depicted in shōjo literature. One such element is the decidedly "girls only" feel of the characters' world. Yoshimoto Banana, herself heavily influenced by shōjo manga, has commented that "these manga contain the tacit understanding between both those writing them and those reading them that it's best if only girls understand what is going on" (translated by Treat [381] from Yoshimoto 1990: 186). Shōjo fiction describes a largely female world. The central characters are usually teenage girls, often from families with absent fathers (Treat 371), and their boyfriends are shōjo-like, that is, effeminate and sensitive (Treat 375). Like shōjo characters, the Heian noblewoman also lived in a largely female world. She was surrounded by female court attendants and rarely showed herself to any man but her husband and her father (Morris 211). In the Genji manga each of the main female characters interacts only with her female court attendants, with Genji, who is as slender and as sensitive in features as the women, and, in one instance, with her father.

Another element characteristic of shōjo fiction that can be found in both the original work and the manga concerns the characters' family ties. In shōjo manga many characters are orphans, come from broken homes, or are otherwise alienated from their biological families (Treat 369). In the Genji manga, of the five female characters for whom the chapters are titled, two, Yūgao and Suetsumuhana, are orphans, one, Murasaki, is motherless and has been abandoned by her father, and another, Rokujō, is a young widow. The relationships these four characters form with Genji satisfies their security needs--economic and otherwise--and is a replacement, in some respects, for their lost families.

In addition to these similarities in the characters' backgrounds, the Genji manga and shōjo manga are strikingly similar in their iconographic styles as well. Physically and emotionally, males in

shōjo manga resemble their female counterparts. In shōjo manga the comics illustration style of giving characters simplified rather than realistically detailed features results in a face so stylized that "male" and "female" lack identifying qualities. As Frederik Schodt has pointed out, often the only distinguishing feature among characters is their hairstyle (90). The Genji manga follows this convention of desexualized characters, as can be seen in Figure 9 which compares Yūgao's and Genji's faces side by side and then superimposed.

Figure 9. Yūgao and Genji. Toba, 37, 83.

Interestingly, this sort of unrealistic and abstract depiction of characters' features resembles one of the main pictorial techniques used in the Genji scrolls from the twelfth century. These scrolls are

composed of paintings of scenes from the story alternating with passages from the original text inscribed in calligraphy. Virtually everychar acter's face in the scroll is drawn with the same features, the so-called hikime kagihana (line-for-an-eye, hook-for-a-nose) (Tokugawa 10), with hair being the only distinction between the sexes. As in the manga, this lack of realism in facial features contrasts sharply with the detailed illustrations of hairstyles and interiors. In his introduction to Ivan Morris's The Tale of Genji Scroll, Tokugawa Yoshinobu proposes that this pictorial technique was used to avoid conflict between the artist's images and the viewer's mental images of these characters of great nobility and beauty. He writes, "By avoiding physical detail and individuality of feature, the artist provided greater scope for the viewer's imagination and allowed him to superimpose over the formalized portrait his own private image of the fictitious character in question" (13). Similarly, the simplicity of manga characters' features allows the reader to fill in more detail in her/his imagination.

The desexualization of characters in manga is also evident in the depiction of their bodies. In shōjo manga both male and female characters have slender, androgynous bodies. Because the Genji manga retains the traditional Heian style of dress which shrouded the body in heavy layers of robes, male and female characters have equally amorphous figures. This desexualization also extends to the treatment of sex. In the Genji manga image and text make only oblique references to the sex act. The one exception is the rape of Murasaki which is illustrated in a single, darkly shaded panel which shows Genji leaning over Murasaki whose mouth is open in a scream.

Another iconographic similarity between the Genji manga and shōjo manga is its showcasing of hair. As in Heian Japan, where long hair was an important attribute of feminine beauty, the female characters in the Genji manga have long, flowing hair, albeit styled in modern coiffures. Because hair plays a significant role, not only in

helping to distinguish characters but also in providing an occasion for injecting an element of contemporary style into the world of kimono-clad characters, a great deal of space is devoted to it.

In addition to these recurring shōjo images, one chapter in particular, the chapter on Murasaki, incorporates several shōjo themes and can be considered a mini-shōjo manga within the larger work. The chapter opens when the motherless Murasaki is about ten and is living with her aunt. Genji, who is charmed by her childishness and her beauty, secrets her away from her guardian and takes her to his mansion. He tells her that he is her new father and applies himself to her education with the aim of molding her into a paragon of femininity.

Murasaki's characterization in the manga has much in common with that of shōjo characters. To use anthropologist Jennifer Robertson's definition of shōjo, she is a cute "not-quite-female female" in limbo between puberty and marriage (56). She plays with dolls long past the age at which it is considered appropriate and resists growing up. Although she is desired by Genji, she is not yet aware of her sexuality and considers him a father or a brother. This coincides with Treat's description of the shōjo as "lack[ing] libidinal agency of her own. While others may sexually desire the shōjo, . . . the shōjo's own sexual energy [is] directed . . . toward stuffed animals, pink notebooks, strawberry crepes, and Hello Kitty novelties . . . " (363).

The scene in which Murasaki loses her virginity is depicted as a rape, after which she grieves the loss of her girlhood. She cries, "How could my brother have done such a thing to me?" (Toba 103). She feels he has violated their sibling-like bond and forced her into the adult role of wife for which she is not psychologically ready. Such yearnings to avoid the entanglements of the adult world are the impulse behind what Treat calls the "pseudo-sibling" love relationships with shōnen (teenage boys) which are a common theme in shōjo manga. Shōnen characters are usually sibling-like and

effeminate and do not threaten the shōjo world the way adult heterosexual male sexuality would (Treat 372). In the manga Murasaki considers Genji a brotherly playmate which is precisely why she feels so violated by his sexual advances.

Another shōjo-like characteristic of the Murasaki chapter is its sentimental tone. Shōjo manga are considered sentimental because they focus on relationships and emotions rather than on action, and in the Genji manga emotion propels the narrative, with much attention given to love, loneliness, and grief. Shōjo manga are also often sentimental in a way particular to their genre, being suffused with nostalgia for the shōjojidai (girlhood) and its innocence (Treat 386). In the Murasaki chapter the overriding tone is one of nostalgia for lost girlhood. The chapter opens with the ten-year-old Murasaki in tears after her pet sparrow escapes from its cage and flies away. It closes with Murasaki looking back over her life after having crossed the line into womanhood. She wonders where the little girl has gone who once cried for her pet sparrow. She mourns, "All that remains of that girl I once was is a woman wise to the ways of love who can only remember with fondness how I was in my innocent shōjo years" (Toba 112). These inner thoughts are framed in a montage that includes an overhead view of the young Murasaki peering up into the sky as her sparrow flies off (Fig. 10).

In summary, although Murasaki is a character from a world very different from late twentieth-century Japan, the way in which her story is presented makes her seem familiar to readers of shōjo manga. Indeed, throughout the Genji manga the cultural influences of shōjo and the structural forces of the comics medium contrive to pull the reader into the story, increasing reader identification with the characters and involvement in the narrative. It is the strength of this appeal to the reader that makes the Genji manga unique among representations of The Tale of Genji. All representations of The Tale of Genji have enjoyed some freedom in interpreting the narrative while working within the bounds of their media. As did earlier

representations, the Genji manga offers its own interpretation, reflecting the aesthetic conventions and cultural values of its time.

Figure 10. Murasaki looking back on her girlhood. Toba, 112.

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