“Genji, at Least, Was Not a Rapist: The Nature of Love and the Parameters of Sexual Coercion in the Literature of the Heian Court”

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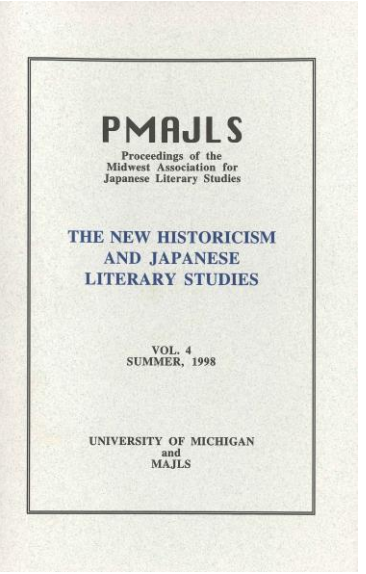

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Genji, At Least, Was Not a Rapist: The Nature of Love and The Parameters of Sexual Coercion in the Literature of the Heian Court.

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I will argue in this paper that the nature of romantic love as seen in pre-modern Japanese literature was a little different than it typically is for us here and now. Perhaps this should go without saying, but I think most of us tend to consider emotions to be essentially universal. While we readily agree that when reading classical Japanese narratives it is useful to learn about socio-cultural differences in areas such as marriage practices and religious beliefs, we do not usually stop to consider that our assumptions about something like the meaning of love may seriously interfere with our understanding of a text. The difference I see, simply put, is that most of us tend to expect that love is associated with positive attributes, that one falls in love with a person one admires for their beauty, brains, wealth, wit, or what-have-you. We do find this in pre-modern Japanese literature, but we also find that characters tend to fall most deeply in love with other characters who arouse their pity. Ochikubo monogatari provides an excellent example. The man who rescues Ochikubo from her wicked step-mother does so in part because she is beautiful and kind hearted, but primarily because he finds her plight so pitiable.[1] To reiterate my main point, it is of course essential that to be lovable a character had to be attractive and

[1] Wilfrid Whitehouse and Eizo Yanagisawa, trans., Ochikubo monogatari: The Tale of the Lady Ochikubo (London: Peter Owen, 1965). See especially pages 5 and 8 for his first impressions of her as pitiable and therefore desirable.

refined, but often what is most alluring in a character in pre-modern Japanese literature is vulnerability. This is really very obvious, so obvious we have tended to overlook it. But recognizing this simple idea makes some other, more recalcitrant issues in this literature comprehensible. It makes sense of the fact, for example, that people are perceived as most beautiful when they are tired, ill, or grieving. More importantly, appreciating the value of vulnerability is key to understanding the dynamics of the sexually aggressive behavior of men.

There are two major points I want to make in this regard. First, although many readers of The Tale of Genji (especially readers of Edward Seidensticker's translation) perceive Genji as a rapist, I would argue that he is guilty of limited aggression, but never rape. I will try to show that his aggression functions to emphasize a woman's vulnerability, and thus to give him an opportunity to take a consoling, nurturing role, a role that is conducive to persuading women to indulge him sexually. Secondly, I will propose that women's strategies for resisting sexual coercion are conditioned by the attractiveness of vulnerability. Specifically, I will show that there were only two effective strategies of resistance to unwanted sexual contact: One was to refuse a man's attentions completely and unrelentingly and the other was to behave with an extreme passivity that suggested cold-hearted invulnerability. Furthermore, it appears that, as a consequence of the attractiveness of vulnerability, a woman who reacted to sexual aggression by displaying distress only increased the likelihood of being raped. Additionally, a man who responded to such vulnerability by taking advantage of it seems not to have thought of himself as having forced himself on a woman. Finally, I think it is important to note that there seems, in fact, to have been a notion that it was wrong for a man to force himself on a woman,

at least in the case of a woman of similar status. (Lower ranking women, however, were categorized as fair game, as is clearly revealed in Yowa no nezame.)

Before I get into the heart of my paper, there is one more point to make about why this question is important. A rush to the judgment that Genji resorted to rape is usually accompanied by lamentations about the abuse and subjugation of women. I will not argue that there is no truth to these complaints, but they imply that women lacked altogether the capacity to refuse unwanted sexual attention. This is an over-generalization and underestimates the status, abilities, and resources of women. Certainly, there were situations in which women used, or had little choice but to use, sex as a resource to be bartered for material security. There are, moreover, clear cases of non-consensual sex in this literature, by men other than Genji. But there are also women who sometimes were able to use their wits and wiles to fend off unwanted sexual experiences. There is, after all, evidence that men at least sometimes respected a woman's wishes with regard to sexual activity. I think it is important to keep a balanced picture of these things.

I begin with my readings of scenes in The Tale of Genji that begin with violence but do not, I will argue, end in rape. The first of these is Genji's attempted seduction of Utsusemi. I would suggest that what we see here is the strategic use of limited aggression, employed early in a process of seduction. Genji abducts Utsusemi and finds her fear and vulnerability touching. Once he has brought her to a secluded room and set her down, it does not appear that he again resorts to force. Instead, Genji is consistently portrayed as trying, with all his considerable charm, to persuade Utsusemi to surrender to his desires. Distraught as

she is, Utsusemi never wavers in rejecting Genji's proposal that they embark upon an affair. Most scholars see sexual intercourse occurring between the lines, but there is nothing definitive to support that reading. On the contrary, a metaphor describing her as "young bamboo that might be bent but not broken"[2] and Genji's later comment that he felt she had "defeated"[3] him imply, to my mind, that Genji did not accomplish his goal of seducing her. This first instance is a good point at which to give an example of Seidensticker's tendency to encourage readings of rape: In Seidensticker's rendition what Genji says when he first appears at Utsusemi's bedside sounds like a threat, albeit one he immediately tries to soften: "You are perfectly correct if you think me unable to control myself. But I wish you to know that I have been thinking of you for a very long time."[4] I understand this passage as one in which Genji is not trying to intimidate Utsusemi, but to win her trust by empathizing with her and this leads into a flattering remark: "You might naturally assume this abrupt visit is the result of a sudden impulse, but I have long wanted to tell you of my feelings for you."[5]

Genji's first encounter with Oborozukiyo has a similar structure but a different outcome. Genji is aggressive and Oborozukiyo is frightened, but only briefly. She is immediately

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[2] Nayotake no kokochi shite sasugani oru beku mo arazu. Genji monogatari in Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū (Shōgakkan) I:178. Edward Seidensticker, trans., The Tale of Genji (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 43.

[3] Seidensticker, 52.

[4] Seidensticker, 42.

[5] Uchitsukeni, fukakaranu kokoro no hodo to mitamauran, kotowari naredo, toshigoro omoiwataru kokoro no uchi mo kikoeshirasemu tote nan. Genji monogatari, I:175.

reassured when she recognizes his voice. Although her fears are relieved, she is still upset, probably at the suddenness of this encounter. That she is not overly distraught by the situation is suggested by the fact that her thoughts turn to his opinion of her: "She did not want to appear cold-hearted or ill-mannered."[6] We may find this an unfamiliar motive for indulging in sexual relations, but it does imply that she was making a choice. A key passage reflects ambivalence on her part. Seidensticker's translation, however, unambiguously portrays Oborozukiyo as an involuntary partner: ". . .she, young and irresolute, did not know how to send him on his way."[7] Seidensticker implies Oborozukiyo has sexual relations with Genji, at best, by default, because she was too naïve or immature to resist effectively. My reading of the original finds Oborozukiyo not unable to refuse Genji's advances, but unwilling to refuse him. I would propose this translation: "Being young and soft-hearted, she could not summon the resolve to rebuff him firmly."[8] The juxtaposition of young and soft-hearted suggests not helplessness, but short-sightedness. That is, she is a bit rash: A liaison with Genji is, after all, politically unwise for both of them. As I see it, the implication is that she would and could have firmly rebuffed him if she had cared to.

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[6] . . .nasake naku kowagowashū wa mieji, to omoeri. Genji monogatari, I:427. Seidensticker, 153.

[7] Seidensticker, 153.

[8] . . .onna mo wakō taoyagite, tsuyoki kokoro mo shiranu narubeshi. Genji monogatari, I:427. The headnote for this passage (#24) suggests that Oborozukiyo does not resist in part because she finds Genji attractive, and also because it is not in her character. It is crucial to realize that "shiranu" here means not that she did not know how to resist him, but that she did not have the heart to resist him.

The two scenes in which Genji spends a night with Fujitsubo suggest both Genji's fundamental respect for her bodily integrity and also that women found vulnerability attractive in men as well as vice versa. Although Genji steals into Fujitsubo's room against her expressed wishes, it does not appear that he ever touches her in an aggressive way. It must be acknowledged that Genji's persistence in courting Fujitsubo despite her explicit and firm rejections of him would constitute sexual harassment in this day and age. However, a close reading of the text suggests that the one time they engage in sexual intercourse is the one time when Fujitsubo's resolve to fend off Genji's advances is weakened by her pity for him. She has been graciously but resolutely rejecting his attentions for some time, apparently, when Genji says, poetically, that his unrequited love for her makes him want to die.[9] She is described as moved by this to pity him[10] and in response she recites a poem that echoes his suicidal thought.[11] Then there is a gap in the narrative; the next thing tersely described is their parting that morning. It is clear that they have had sexual relations, since Fujitsubo is soon revealed to be pregnant with Genji's child.

When Genji next gains access to Fujitsubo's room for two nights and a day (five years later), she does not waver in her rejection of him. The first night she is described as remote and unresponsive[12] and then she suffers chest pains and fainting spells

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[9] "So few and scattered the nights, so few the dreams./Would that the dream tonight might take me with it." Seidensticker, 98.

[10] . . .sasuga ni imijikereba. . . . Genji monogatari, I:306.

[11] "Were I to disappear in the last of dreams/Would yet my name live on in infamy?" Seidensticker, 98.

[12] Miya ito koyonaku motehanare kikoetamaite. . . . Genji monogatari, II:100.

that bring her attendants to her side. Genji is forced to hide in a closet for a whole day. The second night he pleads his case yet again and she deflects his passion as graciously as before. When he fails to evoke her pity the night ends without physical intimacy. The text is explicit here about Genji's attitude of deference to Fujitsubo: "Forcefully contravening her wishes was unthinkable."[13] At this point Genji does resort to verbal aggression. He announces that he believes he will die of his unrequited love and complains that this unshakable attachment will prevent his attaining salvation. He places the blame for his lifetimes of future torment squarely on Fujitsubo's refusal to requite his love. She, however, is not fazed by this accusation. She gently refuses to accept any responsibility, telling him it is his own fault. Genji finally leaves. Interestingly, he soon reconsiders his strategy and reverts to trying to arouse her to pity instead of guilt. This he imagines he might accomplish by pouting: "He wouldn't even write to her, so that she would realize how wretched he was."[14]

There are a number of other incidents that need explaining to exonerate Genji fully, but due to current constraints of time and space, I will have to argue the rest of the case in another venue.

I would like to turn now to the question of how valuing vulnerability affected the strategies women used to resist unwanted sexual encounters. We have already seen what I count

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[13] Semete shitagaikikoezaramu mo katajikenaku. Genji monogatari, II:103. I have no quibble with Seidensticker here: "He could not force himself upon her." Seidensticker, 197.

[14] . . . itohoshi to oboshishiru bakari, to oboshite, onfumi mo kikoetamawazu. Genji monogatari, II:1-5. "She must be made to feel sorry for him. He would not even write to her." Seidensticker, 198.

as two successfully thwarted seductions; Utsusemi and Fujitsubo rebuffing Genji. Even more intriguing are some scenes in which a woman's strategy of resistance consists of extreme passivity. She becomes mute and motionless, she simply turns a very cold shoulder. This is not a strategy that would be effective against a man completely without scruples, a man who considered sexual access to women his prerogative, who considered rape a viable option. It is a tactic that will only work with someone who is seeking your willing participation, someone who does not intend to use force, someone with a degree of respect for your integrity. Indeed, passivity does not always work, precisely because some men were, on occasion, not loathe to rape a woman. What is significant is that occasionally passivity did work, because there was, after all, a convention that rape was wrong, or, at least, crude and unkind.

The first example of the employment of extreme passivity to rebuff an ardent suitor is found in Torikaebaya monogatari (The Changelings), when Saishōμ intrudes on Naishi no Kami intent upon expressing his love for her in a sexual encounter. This example may seem problematic at first because it is imperative to the plot that Saishō be thwarted in his attempt to seduce Naishi no Kami. The situation is that Naishi no Kami is actually a male posing as a woman and this secret is never to be revealed to Saishō. On second thought, however, we may presume, I think, that the author would choose to depict Naishi no Kami's resistance in a way that readers would have accepted as plausible. So, how does she manage to fend off this fellow? When Naishi no Kami finds that Saishō has sneaked into her bedroom, she is startled but not distraught: ". . .being a prudent and restrained sort, she seemed to stay absolutely still." Saishō was the one who

"wept and was distressed." [15] He spends two nights and the day in between with her, and seeks to win her compliance with his desires by alternating between reproaching her and weeping, but she never yields. Not until dawn on the second morning does she finally speak to him. Instead of responding to anything he has said, she simply remarks that she expects her father and her brother to arrive soon and reminds him there will be trouble if they find him in her quarters. Then, in the most prosaic of poems, she flatly announces she has no intention of ever having anything to do with him. At this point Saishō finally gives up with the thought that "There was nothing more [he] could say without being unkind." [16] My main point here is that the text depicts Naishi no Kami as successfully defending herself by simply not reacting to this man. She seems to have remained impassive and virtually motionless the whole time. Although she does speak to Saishō at the last minute, she is completely calm and absolutely aloof when she does so. Although none of the characters Saishō amorously pursues reciprocates his feelings, Naishi no Kami is the only one who escapes his embrace.

The same strategy of extreme passivity is employed by Lady Nijō at the very start of her relationship with Emperor GoFukakusa, as she tells us herself in her memoir Towazugatari. She is to be more or less a concubine and this relationship has been sanctioned by her father. Although no one has told her what to expect, she has been advised to be cooperative: Her father has cautioned her: "A lady-in-waiting should never be stubborn, but

[15] Rosette F. Willig, trans., The Changelings: A Classical Japanese Court Tale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 79.

[16] Ibid., 80.

should do exactly as she's told."[17] Clearly there is no need for the Emperor to go through the motions of courtship here, but he does. He declares his long-standing love for her. When her only response is to cry, she seems to have expected him to take advantage of her complete and utter powerlessness. She specifically comments that "He did not attempt to force me."[18] Instead he limited himself to trying to induce her to be responsive to his attentions, first with declarations of his love, and later by alternately "scolding and comforting"[19] her, but she simply refuses to speak a single word to him. The second night she reports that she again lay mute and "motionless."[20] The Emperor would not, however, tolerate a second night of refusal, and finally tore her clothes in what Lady Nijō experienced as rape. Her account clearly shows the limits of the effectiveness of this strategy, but perhaps it is therefore all the more remarkable that she chose complete passivity as a defensive tactic and that it served her well for one whole night.

If a woman's impassivity was a way to fend off unwelcome attentions, an emotional display seems only to have exacerbated a man's interest. I would like to discuss two scenes that bear this out. The first is when Saishō intrudes upon Yon no Kimi, the wife of Chūnagon. Chūnagon, Naishi no Kami's sister, is the mirror opposite of Naishi no Kami: Chūnagon is biologically female but living in society as a man. Yon no Kimi and

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[17] Karen Brazell, trans., The Confessions of Lady Nijo (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 4.

[18] Ibid., 5.

[19] Ibid., 6.

[20] Ibid., 8.

Chūnagon, as a married couple, enjoy a platonic relationship and Yon no Kimi is described as quite ignorant of the phenomenon of sexual intercourse. Saishō intrudes upon her so brazenly she first assumes he is her husband, but when she realizes he is not, she hides her face in her robes and then cries out in fright when he pulls her into a curtained off sleeping area. In contrast to Naishi no Kami's cool impassivity, Yon no Kimi panics. Saishō is immune to this manner of expressing rejection. He does not give Yon no Kimi much chance to regain her poise. He seems to assault her immediately.[21] He does not even speak to her, except for the poem he uttered as he barged in, until after he has raped her. Only then does he try to comfort her[22] and to rationalize his behavior by declaring their relationship a matter of fate.[23] With Genji we could observe clear stages of behavior that moved from limited aggression to efforts to calm a woman's fears, and only then to sexual intimacy.[24] Saishō, on the other hand, seems to have quickly forced himself upon a frightened and vulnerable woman and then expected her to make the best of it. His passion for Yon no Kimi first flared when he glimpsed her beauty, but

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[21] Torikaebaya monogatari in Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, Vol. 26 (Iwanami shoten, 1992), 135.

[22] Ika ni obosu to mo, ima wa kai aru beki koto to wa. . . .to koshiraetamau ni. . . . Suzuki Hiromichi, ed., Torikaebaya monogatari (Kasama Shoin), 35. "'Regardless of your feelings, there is nothing for it now,'" he said "comfortingly." Willig, 43.

[23] . . . nogarenu onchigiri wa, kakaru yo mo arikeru zo kashi. Suzuki, 35. . . .my enduring love for you and our destiny have brought this meeting about. Willig, 43.

[24] Even in the case of Utsusemi, where scholars assume a rape does occur, they locate it as coming after much effort by Genji to gain her willing participation, immediately after the narrator compares her to unbreakable bamboo. Genji monogatari, I:178.

now that she is pitiable as well as desirable, he falls deeply in love with her.

Some days later Saishō finally acknowledges Yon no Kimi's feelings in thinking back over their encounter as he ponders his next move. This is when he seems to consider and reject the idea of rape explicitly, even though we have just read of him doing exactly that. Saishō realizes that Chūnagon must have scruples against coercing Yon no Kimi to have conjugal relations because Saishō is aware that Yon no Kimi had been a virgin until his recent visit. Perhaps momentarily inspired by Chūnagon's good example, although Saishō considers kidnapping Yon no Kimi, he talks himself out of it by reminding himself that she does not at all reciprocate his love (indeed, she will not even communicate with him) and concluding that forcing his way into her quarters would be fruitless.[25] Perhaps he is thinking very specifically of the unlikelihood of a successful kidnapping leading to a happy relationship rather than simply additional non-consensual sex, but the point is that he is taking Yon no Kimi's feelings into consideration at this point. The fact that Saishō seems to be in a state of self-denial regarding his having barged in on and raped Yon no Kimi that recent night only enhances the significance of Saishō's renunciation of force here. The extent to which Saishō is unable to acknowledge his very own coercive sexual conduct implies the prevalence of a notion that it was inappropriate to engage in such behavior.

Saishō does not, however, give up his amorous pursuit of Yon no Kimi. He gains access to her by pressuring her attendant to let him into her quarters. Yon no Kimi continues to weep and worry through their encounters, but she begins to find Saishō attractive

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[25] . . .hitaburu ni midareiru beki yō mo nashi. Suzuki, 38. ". . .I can't force myself on her." Willig, 46. See also Torikaebaya monogatari in SNKBT, Vol. 26:139.

because Saishō also displays vulnerability: ". . .at each of these fleeting meetings, the weeping and distraught Saishō seemed enchanting and attractive. As time passed, Yon no Kimi was obliged to recognize his sincerity."[26]

An even more interesting example of vulnerability exacerbating a man's passion is the interaction in The Tale of Genji between Kashiwagi and the Third Princess (one of Genji's wives). Long in love with the Third Princess, when Kashiwagi manages an intrusion he anticipates no more than revealing his love and longs only for a kind word from her. Just as Genji frightened Utsusemi and Oborozukiyo by physically moving them from one place to another, so too does Kashiwagi pick up the Third Princess and take her from her bed. Like Genji, Kashiwagi feels compassion for the woman now trembling in his arms. In his first words to her he paints himself as thoroughly vulnerable: He is of relatively low status, his love has been causing him ever more regret, pain, fear and suffering.[27] He more or less apologizes for his intrusion and promises he will commit no transgressions against her. She is described as frightened, trembling, at her wit's end, shocked, speechless, distraught, on the verge of fainting, etc.[28] He calls her cold hearted for failing to respond to his pleas for compassion. But, having expected her to be intimidating, her dismay leads him

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[26] Willig, 49. Suzuki, 42.

[27] Kuchioshikumo, tsuraku mo, mukutsukekumo, aware ni mo . . . . Genji monogatari, IV:215-216.

[28] Asamashiku mukutsukeku narite.. . .wananakitamō sama. . . .mono mo oboetamawanu keshiki. . . . ito mezamashiku osoroshikute, tsuyu iraemo shitamawazu. . . .ito asamashiku, utsutsu to mo oboetamawanuni, . . . Genji monogatari, IV: 215-217.

to see her as approachable, vulnerable, and pliant.[29] Thus, his intentions to behave properly dissolve and he impregnates her. Like Saishō, Kashiwagi is blind to distress as a signal of rejection. He arbitrarily interprets the vulnerability of the object of his affections as acquiescence. Improbable as it may seem to us, the text clearly portrays Kashiwagi as believing that he is being indulged, if only for a crucial moment. As day breaks and the Princess remains mute, Kashiwagi despairs. Here is another man employing vulnerability as a way to win a woman's heart. He threatens to die of a broken heart if she does not at least tell him that she feels compassion for him. Pathetic as they both are, at this moment she rallies enough to offer him a parting poem.[30]

Conclusion:

I have proposed two hypotheses about the culture of the Heian court as depicted in its literature and considered implications of the way they interact with each other. The first thesis, that pity was a significant component of love, is virtually self-evident. The second thesis, that men in Heian court society tended to consider sexual coercion of women, especially women of equal status, to be bad form and usually tried to avoid it or rationalize it, is less obvious. The currency of this notion is almost obscured by the common use of aggression in the process of a seduction and by the fact that though this attitude might be called a norm, it was not enforced by the imposition of any consequences for violating it. Indeed, the phenomenon of the attractiveness of pitiable women undermined the disinclination to rape. Sexual aggression was one way to concretize a woman's vulnerability, thereby enhancing her

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[29] . . . natsukashiku rōtageni, yawayawa to. . . Genji monogatari, IV:216. Seidensticker translates this as "pretty and gentle and unresisting," 614.

[30] "Would I might fade away in the sky of dawn,/And all of it might vanish as a dream." Seidensticker, 615.

appeal and intensifying a man's desire. But this was not always the case. Every aggressive maneuver was not a seamless sexual assault. Genji is depicted as having used limited aggression as a strategy to facilitate his taking a consoling, nurturing posture and thus increasing his chances of winning a woman's trust and indulgence. On the other hand, insofar as a woman's interests tended toward on-going relationships, the connections leading from desire to rape, to pity, and then to a loving attachment meant that a woman might, on occasion, salvage something worthwhile from having suffered a sexual assault. Both Yon no Kimi and Lady Nijō develop satisfying relationships with the men who initially assaulted them. Another facet of the link between pity and love is that it was gender neutral, that is, women were also drawn to pathetic men. Men often found their love reciprocated once they revealed themselves as suffering the agony of unrequited love. Finally, yet another new dimension is added to our understanding of the nature of women's lives when we realize that this same link between pity and love could be manipulated by women to discourage sexual assaults. Women were sometimes able to fend off unwanted suitors if they avoided appearing vulnerable. If a woman could keep her cool and display total insensitivity, she might dampen a man's ardor. Since emotionality was so highly valued, if a woman comported herself with the impassivity of, as a common Japanese metaphor puts it, a rock or a tree, she had a chance, however slim, to control her fate when her physical integrity was threatened.