

The Tale of Genji

(Study Guide for 1st year World Lit at an American university)

It's just like *Pride and Prejudice*. Except with more kimonos and, regrettably, zero white-shirted Colin Firths emerging from a pond soaked to the skin. Though the *Tale of Genji* and everyone's favorite Georgian-era novel were written 800 years apart, both are comedies of manners wryly pointing out the glorious absurdities of upper-class mating rituals. It's tough out there for a single person, and reading even just one of the 52 chapters in the Japanese masterpiece *The Tale of Genji* is enough to make plain that then, as now, finding the right partner was an endeavor fraught with peril.

The book's title character is a courtier named Genji who is widely recognized as the best thing to have ever happened to Kyoto. As the author tells us, he is smart, handsome, and legendary in the sack. Despite having it all on paper, Genji still struggles to find the perfect partner. His quest is what drives his tale.

When we meet Genji in the book's second chapter, "The Broom Tree," our hero is passing an evening with his best friend and brother-in-law Tō no Chūjō and two courtiers by discussing the various types of women they've encountered. As a plot device, this famous rainy night discussion serves as a means of introducing all the women that will appear later in the story. Taken on its own, however, it sounds very much like the kind of thing you might find in a modern men's magazine advice column. Potential titles might include:

Everything I loved about my girl now drives me crazy. Help!

I have two girlfriends. One is smart and one is pretty. Which one should I marry?

My parents educated me well, but have poor social standing. How do I marry up?

I have a few pieces on the side from time to time. My wife nags me to stop. I feel like as long as I'm discreet, it's okay. What should I do?

My girlfriend is too perfect. Should I look for someone a bit rougher around the edges and more interesting?

Maybe a men's mag from 1954. But even so, when it comes to love, *plus ça change*.

Historical tales of love, courtship, and marriage can be problematic for modern readers. Not because of their subject matter – love unrequited or parents suggesting unsuitable partners are tales as old as time – but rather because it is difficult to put our own modern ideas aside and view these stories within the moral and cultural context in which they were written.

Are Genji and his brother-in-law scoundrels for talking so carelessly about the women they seduce? Are they shallow because they care about things like beauty and social status over a true connection of souls? What kind of husbands are they if most of their time is spent avoiding their wives? Is Murasaki saying that all men are cads and

marriage is a bad deal or is she trying to give a warts-and-all inside look at courtly life?

Even after 1,000 years of annotation and study, scholars still disagree on the motivations and intent of *The Tale of Genji's* author, Shikibu Murasaki. Even her real name is a mystery. What little we know about her has come from her diary.

We do know that Murasaki was an exceptionally clever girl. Her father, who worked in a minor government role as a scholar, "lamented the fact she was not a boy because then, with her mind, she could have become a great scholar."¹ It's not that women weren't allowed to be educated during Murasaki's time; the twilight of the Heian period (794 - 1185 CE) is considered Japan's Golden Age.² Fathers were encouraged to educate their daughters; poetry, music, novels, art, and all sorts of other cultural pursuits were cultivated by women in the Emperor's court. The wrinkle was that subjects like politics, religion, and philosophy were taught in Chinese, a language considered to be too masculine for women. Murasaki found a way around this by listening to her brother's lessons. Paper walls can be useful at times.

21st-century feminists point to Murasaki as one of the first women liberated enough to write novels (Jane Austen didn't appear on the scene until 1813). This is a nice thought, but history doesn't support it. During the Heian period many women were writing novels and stories for other women, much like romance and "chick lit" writers do today; Murasaki just happened to be a lot better at it than her peers. As far as liberation goes, men felt a narrative focusing on human relationships written in Japanese was beneath them, a slight oversight considering that *Genji* is often regarded as the best Japanese novel ever written.

Heian women did spend a lot of time cloistered and wearing heavy robes that compromised mobility, but what they gave up in jogging ability they gained in behind-the-scenes power. From their position they were able to influence who married whom, who the cool kids were, and who had access to the men who (in theory at least) ran things. If there had been television a millennium ago, Kingmakers of Kyoto marathons would be a regular Saturday fixture.

Backing up this mean girls-style soft power was the right to own property (something that didn't happen in America for married women until the mid-19th century), and, if they remained discreet, the freedom to take as lovers whoever they fancied or, at least, found the most socially useful.

¹ Nutter, Jessie. "Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki: The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of Genji Monogatari" (Bachelor's thesis - East Tennessee State University, 2012.) http://honors.epub.etsu.edu/168/2/The_Role_of_Gender_in_the_Genji_Monogatari.pdf

² "Japan: Heian period (AD 794-1185)," The British Museum, http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article_index/j/japan_heian_period_ad_794-11.aspx

This was a two-edged sword, of course. Women were economically dependent on their father, their lover, or their husband. Naturally there was intense competition between men and women to snag the best possible partners. Men brought social status and money to the table, while women brought all that was necessary to soothe a fevered brow: the ability to play one or two instruments well, compose witty poetry on the spot, and listen to her man's problems.

But what of love? Up until 20th century, no one expected to marry his or her soulmate. There was too much else at stake and besides, in cultures like the one Murasaki lived in, that's what affairs were for. In the case of the far East, what we would recognize as romantic love is characterized in literature as infatuation, nostalgia, tenderness, sorrow, and pity. In Japanese literature, in fact, love is often associated with death.³

In "The Broom Tree" chapter, after Genji leaves his friends to travel to another house, there's a scene where he's given a place to sleep and some food, only to insist on helping himself to Chūjō, the lady of the house, as well. He discovers her asleep in her room and frightened of his advances.

His response? "I am driven by thoughts so powerful that a mistake is completely out of the question. It is cruel of you to pretend otherwise. I promise you that I will do nothing unseemly."⁴

Murasaki explains, "Genji had to feel sorry for her. Yet the sweet words poured forth, the whole gamut of pretty devices for making a woman surrender."

Is this seduction or rape? It depends on whom you ask and is an infinitely more complicated discussion than might first appear.⁵ In the 21st century it has become popular to see Genji as a serial rapist who took advantage of his social position and good looks to sleep with women all over Kyoto. A backlash called *Genji-girai* ("detestation of Genji") has developed in Japan for precisely this reason.

On the other hand, many people, including possibly Murasaki herself, argue that Genji represents the ideal lover. He is never violent, never abandons any of the women he has

³ Nutter, Jessie. "Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki: The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of Genji Monogatari" (Bachelor's thesis – East Tennessee State University, 2012.) http://honors.epub.etsu.edu/168/2/The_Role_of_Gender_in_the_Genji_Monogatari.pdf

⁴ Shikibu, Murasaki. "Tale of Genji," Edward Seidensticker, trans. 1976, last modified July 19, 2013 <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/murasaki-shikibu/tale-of-genji/chapter2.html>

⁵ Tyler, Royall, "Marriage, Rank and Rape in *The Tale of Genji*," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* Issue 7, March 2002. <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue7/tyler.html>

relationships with, and values character as much as physical beauty.⁶ Plus, he is very handsome and renowned for knowing his way around a lady.

Despite a disastrous first date, Genji is charmed (or at least feels sorry for) Chūjō and writes her poems. No doubt he was a poet without equal, as Murasaki assures us, but the act of communicating metaphorically through verse was commonplace in the 11th century. It was considered déclassé for men and women to communicate their thoughts directly.

Even using someone's name was considered to be too intimate. Honorifics or a person's position (Minister of the Right) were used instead. If that weren't enough, the characters in the book, all 400 of them, age in step and as their rank and social situation changes, so do their names. One of Murasaki's greatest feats when writing this novel is continuity. Genji alone is referred to as the captain, the consultant, the commander, the grand counselor, the palace minister, the chancellor, and the honorary retired emperor.⁷

Almost since it was finished in 1008, Genji has been annotated, illustrated, translated, and abridged. It is one of Japan's best social commentaries on the lives of 11th century women and, at heart, a great clear-eyed love story. Aside from updated versions of the book, there have also been film, animé, and two manga versions, one, as the *Economist* puts it, "sugar and spice and all things nice," and one with "plenty of explicit sex and vengeful women".⁸

At the end of our chapter, things take a surprising turn. Genji and Chūjō engage in a lengthy, and ultimately futile, exchange of poems all hand delivered by Chūjō's little brother. After an embarrassing number of nos from Chūjō, our hero finally gets the message. Undeterred, or perhaps resigned, Genji asks the boy to lie next to him.

"The boy was delighted," writes Murasaki at the end of the chapter, "such were Genji's youthful charms. Genji, for his part, or so one is informed, found the boy more attractive than his chilly sister."⁹ You've got to hand it to Murasaki – she sure knew how to keep those pages turning.

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Tyler, Royall, "Marriage," <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue7/tyler.html>

⁷ Nutter, Jessie. "Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki: The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of Genji Monogatari" (Bachelor's thesis – East Tennessee State University, 2012.) http://honors.epub.etsu.edu/168/2/The_Role_of_Gender_in_the_Genji_Monogatari.pdf

⁸ "Playboy of the Eastern World" *The Economist*, 18 December 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/12811335>

⁹ Shikibu, Murasaki. "Tale of Genji," Edward Seidensticker, trans. 1976, last modified July 19, 2013 <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/murasaki-shikibu/tale-of-genji/chapter2.html>

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