The Tale of Genji

The Tale of Genji

Considered the world’s first true novel, The Tale of Genji was written just after 1000 A.D. by a noblewoman known today as Murasaki Shikibu. Her life in high society lends the novel a distinctly aristocratic color; largely set in the mansions and great gardens of Kyoto (the then-capital of Japan), the novel details the passions and troubles of Heian court. Among her contemporaries, The Tale of Genji was immensely popular and had a large following consisting mostly of other ladies-in-waiting.

The novel’s fifty-four chapters cover about seventy-five years beginning with the birth of Genji, the hero, and ending after his death. As the titular character, Genji is given the bulk of the novel’s attention with the lives of his lady involvements following close after in focus.

Table of Contents

1. Summary
2. Biography
3. Historical Context
4. Themes
   a. Jealousy
   b. Power
   c. Anonymity
5. Critical Discussion
6. Manuscripts and Translations
   a. The Manuscript Puzzle
   b. Lost (and Added) in Translation
7. Legacy
   a. Literature
   b. Film
   c. Art
   d. Opera
   e. Culture
8. References

Summary

There once was a boy born into what may have been the most unfortunate of fortunate circumstances. His name was Genji, and he was the son of an emperor and his favorite—but low-ranking—concubine. The jealousy and hostility his mother faced each day rapidly ate away at her health and she soon passed, leaving the emperor heartbroken and Genji at the mercy of the court.

As prophesied, Genji grew into a brilliant, beautiful young man. He became romantically involved with many women despite his marriage to an older woman named Aoi no Ue (with whom he shared little in common). Although Genji sampled from a wide array of lovers, they were all alike in that they helped realize his relentless longing for his mother. This longing is especially pronounced in his infatuation with Fujitsubo, the emperor’s wife who bore an almost uncanny resemblance to his late mother, as well as Murasaki, Fujitsubo’s young niece whom he adopts and eventually marries.

Genji falls from grace after he is exiled due to his affair with a daughter of one of his political rivals. Luckily, he is given a son after becoming involved with another aristocratic woman while he is away, and the son later becomes the emperor. With kin in the country’s highest-ranking position, Genji is able to return.
With wealth and rank again intact, Genji builds a mansion for himself and his ladies. His life takes a final plummet, however, when he marries his niece and angers the other women in the household; to make matters worse, his young wife is seduced by another man and gives birth to an illegitimate child. The child's name is Kaoru, and he becomes the central character after Genji dies in a self-prescribed exile.  

**Biography**

Murasaki Shikibu was the Japanese novelist and poet who wrote *The Tale of Genji*, the world's first psychological novel and one of Japan's literary masterpieces. Neither the exact dates of her life nor her real name is known; "Shikibu" was a title most likely referring to her father who served in the Shikibu Sh (the Ministry of Rites), and "Murasaki" (which literally translates to "Violet") most likely refers to either Genji's Murasaki or to her maiden name, Fujiwara, which carried much weight at the time. Although the exact dates of her life are not known, she is believed to have lived between ca. 976 and ca. 1031.

Shikibu was quick to learn as a child and more intelligent than her brother; in her diary, she writes that one of her father's greatest regrets was that she was born a girl and thus unable to be granted the same educational opportunities as was her brother. However, her father's position as a well-known scholar gave her access to childhood education and exposure to the Chinese and Buddhist classics that had been deemed improper for ladies at the time.

In 1004, Murasaki's father was appointed governor of the province of Echizen. This event catalyzed the beginning of her court life, as she was soon taken as a lady-in-waiting for Akiko, one of Emperor Ichijō's consorts. Murasaki kept a diary detailing her days in Heian court, and through her diary, readers are offered a vivid picture of the aristocratic scene at the time. It also gives many insights into Murasaki's thoughts; for example, she often writes about her distaste for the frivolous nature of court life. She also went to great lengths to hide her knowledge of Chinese, which was considered an unladylike language.

Shikibu most likely began writing *The Tale of Genji* before she began her life in court, but the bulk of the novel was written during and shaped by her experience as a lady-in-waiting. The novel became popular among the ladies of the Heian court immediately after its release, but because the novel was originally written to be read aloud, the first manuscript was lost.

Little is known about Lady Murasaki's life after court. Records indicate that, after the emperor's death in 1011, she retired with Akiko to a convent where she most likely spent her days until she died.

**Historical Context**

The imperial court during the Heian period (794-1185 CE) was rooted in Heian-kyō (now Kyoto), which was the seat of Japan’s political and cultural authority. The city's name translates to "Capital of Peace and Tranquility," which encapsulates the period's fascination with art, literature, and native aesthetics. This trend toward a more inward-looking culture saw the decline of Japan’s previous preoccupation with foreign influences, chiefly the Tang Chinese. In line with the shift away from Chinese cultural dependence was the use of Chinese only for official government documents; men handled such business, and it was considered unfitting for a woman to understand the language.

By the 9th century, the Fujiwara family had become the key power holders in Japan; though its members never formally replaced the imperial family, they controlled enough ministerial positions and governmental functions to effectively take the emperor as their puppet. The Fujiwara gained their power primarily through the marriage system in which children were raised by the mother’s family; in this manner, the Fujiwara were able to use their political sway to have their daughters appointed as consorts and empresses. When these girls gave birth, their children were then imperial heirs who could potentially produce imperial grandsons with Fujiwara blood. Later, Fujiwara men were also able to gain direct power by having themselves appointed as regents (the most powerful court figures).
Because the arts were so highly valued during the Heian period, Fujiwara women were constantly surrounded by talented writers in the hopes that they may gain imperial favor for their cultured upbringing. These writers were the ladies-in-waiting who authored many of the great poems, fictions, and memoirs of the era. One such lady-in-waiting was Murasaki Shikibu, who first landed the position due to her father’s connection to the Fujiwara family.

Aristocratic women of the Heian period enjoyed many rights (e.g., the ability to pass and own property, the ability to choose their heirs). Most were literate, and elegant handwriting and poem composition were considered very attractive at the time. Long hair was also considered beautiful, so women spent much time on its upkeep.

Despite the liberties allowed, women were constrained by both their clothing and by cultural expectations. Their elaborate and layered kimonos made movement difficult, and unlike men who were able to travel quite easily, women were discouraged from leaving the home. Despite being kept in semi-isolation behind many screens and doors, privacy was a foreign concept for them; men barged in regularly, and were allowed to do so. In her diary, Murasaki Shikibu often recounts instances of male harassment and speaks of the lonely days and drunken men. In general, she and other women were displeased with court life.16

Themes

Jealousy

Jealousy is a recurring theme in the novel beginning most notably with Genji’s mother; for her beauty and ownership of the Emperor’s favor, she is unwillingly pitted against His Majesty’s less-desirable Consorts and Intimates. Interestingly, jealousy seems to be a purely feminine construct in the novel: wherever jealousy is concerned, the reader can rest assured knowing one or many ladies-in-waiting will be on both giving and receiving ends. The contrast is especially evident after Genji is described as beautiful, intelligent, poetic—the paradigm of a man. With an arsenal of qualities such as his, Genji should have been subject to more jealousy than had his mother if the two sexes were compared using the same criteria; instead, he is adored for the very traits for which she had been ostracized.

The discrepancy speaks to the different relationships Heian noblemen and women formed with society. An aristocratic man was labeled not by his appearance, but by his store of power. On the other hand, an aristocratic woman of Shikibu’s period was worth only as much as the value others (chiefly men) placed on her beauty and class, which hinged her being completely on external sources of validation. With this knowledge, it is reasonable that the women were consistently jealous of each other for these superficial reasons – men, beauty, attention – since self-worth was at stake; unlike men, they were not able to determine or own what was theirs.

Power

Power was inextricably linked to the politics of marriage in Heian Japan. In the novel, Genji is seen only as a very weak threat due to his lack of maternal influence; despite his wealth, beauty, charm, and wit, his bloodline cut off access to the most elite positions even before he was born. In a society that placed such importance on rank and status, his entire life could be seen as futile in that he was powerless to change his outcome.

In addition, his relative incapacity underscored the even lesser role women played in Heian society. Women lacked mobility and were kept locked away behind screens and curtains for men to frequent and browse through; not even in isolation were women truly alone, though loneliness was a common sentiment. Genji’s ability to use women at will to both satisfy his urges (however “maternally justified” they may be) and to objectify as tools to move up the available ranks demonstrates what little real power women had in court society.

Anonymity

Scene from The Tale of Genji, Chapter 34
artist unknown
Late 17th century silk scroll painting
Beyond the Heian convention that providing individuals with names was rude, the need for anonymity was a common thread throughout the book. For example, Genji did not want to be identified while having his many affairs with women in order to preserve his reputation; often, the women he was involved with could not see his face. These episodes also took place at night, which often made the women unidentifiable to him as well. The Tale of Genji itself can be seen as a concealment device since the title does not identify him by name, simply referring to a “genji,” which was the title for “someone of first generation royal blood who has been declared unfit to be named Emperor.”

Critical Discussion

Critical discussion surrounding The Tale of Genji for the most part surrounds its title as “the world’s first novel.” First, there is the issue of being the “first” with the knowledge that other works of fiction had previously been published. Shuichi Kato writes in his book A History of Japanese Literature: The First Thousand Years of one such work: The Tale of Ochikubo. Written by an unknown author in the Heian period, the book is similar in plot to the Cinderella fairytale and is said to have greatly influenced many writers—including Murasaki Shikibu—at the time. However, others believe that Ochikubo’s lesser-known and authorless status disqualify it from consideration as the world’s first novel.

The second contended point is the word “world.” Some critics believe that, though the novel may hold a place of unrivaled esteem in Japanese literary tradition, its place in world literature is less pronounced. These critics call for a clearer distinction between the role The Tale of Genji plays in its birth country and the one it plays in the more global context.13

Manuscripts and Translations

The Manuscript Puzzle

Although the original manuscript of The Tale of Genji has been lost, around 300 different versions of Murasaki Shikibu’s novel exist with varying degrees of added content. This tangle is made worse by the likelihood that Shikibu herself went back through her own manuscript to make changes even after the manuscript was being circulated. Adding to the complexity of this puzzle is the method by which the manuscripts were acquired; before Edo Period wood block printing technology was developed and used to print books for mass distribution, books were obtained by borrowing from the few people who owned them or by commissioning the work to be copied by hand. The copying process often evolved into a re-writing process with whole sections altered or added. The novel’s volatile status continued until the early Kamakura Period in which Fujiwara Shunzei and Fujiwara Teika elevated the text to a fixed and sacred status for the sake of academic study. At that point, however, the “true” version of the text had already been lost (though scholars generally credit Fujiwara Teika’s 13th century manuscript as the most faithful to the original).3

Lost (and Added) in Translation

As of 2008, eighty-eight unique editions of The Tale of Genji were in circulation. Four of these eighty-eight are considered the most widely read and are each characterized by its translator’s personal taste and time period.

The first of these major translations was Suematsu Kench’s 1882 Genji, which was the first English translation of the work. It is an abridged version of the original—it only contains seventeen of the fifty-four chapters—and is not often read due to its lack of critical recognition.

The second major translation was completed by Arthur Waley in 1933. It was a huge success at the time despite its more liberal approach to the translation process. Waley’s goal in undertaking the project was to translate Asian literature for general readers, and in doing so, was more concerned with conveying the spirit than the accuracy of the original. This led to many additions that purists deemed too ornate and “lushly Victorian” to fit within the scope of Murasaki Shikibu’s style.

The third major translation was completed in 1976 by Edward G. Seidensticker, emeritus professor of Japanese at Columbia University and noted translator of modern Japanese fiction. Critics praised his work for its closeness to the original, thereby “conveying its sparseness as well as its stateliness and flashes of wry humor.”

Fourth is the Royall Tyler translation, which is often described as falling between the Baroque Waley and economical Seidensticker extremes. It was published in 2001 and is rigorously faithful to the original text; regarding the nearly 800 waka poems in Genji, Tyler translated each while preserving the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic pattern (for comparison, Waley incorporated the poems directly into the text and Seidensticker turned them into couplets). It also contains extensive footnotes, which the reader may find either instructive or invasive.2
Depending on what the reader wants to take away from her Genji experience, she has a few options from which to choose (the first, more obtuse version aside). If she would like to be entertained, Waley is her best bet. If she has a purist’s mindset, she should go for the Seidensticker, and if she wants a guide to lead her through the pages, Waley’s Genji should be the one to choose.

Legacy

Genji continues to exert much influence on both Japanese and world literature. Novelist Yasunari Kawabata took time in his acceptance speech for the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature to credit the amount to which Genji is imbued in his nation’s consciousness: “The Tale of Genji in particular is the highest pinnacle of Japanese literature. Even down to our day there has not been a piece of fiction to compare with it.”

Genji remains relevant in other parts of the world for many reasons, but as put by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges in his 1939 essay entitled “The Total Library,” “What interests us is not the exoticism—the horrible word—but rather the human passions of the novel.” Because Genji feeds on what is human, it is applicable without cultural or timely constraints.

Film

Over the years, film and television have digitized The Tale of Genji for modern audiences on four major occasions. The first was directed by Kozabur Yoshimura in 1951 as a live-action movie and won the award for Best Photography and Composition at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. The second was a 1966 live-action remake directed by Kon Ichikawa and was not as popularly received as its predecessor. Third was a 1987 anime film directed by Gisaburo Sugii that followed a shorter and more psychologically motivated plotline than did the novel, and fourth was an eleven episode-long 2009 anime series produced by Osamu Dezaki for network television.

It is interesting to note that, aside from the 1987 anime, none of these “modern” adaptations has strikingly altered the plotline; after the rise and fall of centuries and empires, The Tale of Genji still encapsulates a very human essence to which anyone can relate.

Art

Many artworks have drawn subject matter from The Tale of Genji since its inception, the most famous of these being the Genji Monogatari Emaki, a 12th century Japanese illustrated handscroll now officially considered a National Treasure of Japan. This handscroll is the earliest existing example of a Japanese “picture scroll,” which was a collection of illustrations and calligraphies surrounding one piece of literature.

The emaki was a particularly fitting medium for The Tale of Genji because its format was tailored almost specifically for narrative content; composed of sheets of paper or silk bound horizontally, emakis were meant to be unfurled one segment at a time in sections measuring two feet in length. Like a book, a handscroll makes for an intimate viewing experience held at once only in the hands of one viewer and in the eyes of a few.

Only about 15% of the original scroll remains with three rolls housed in the Tokugawa Art Museum and one roll in the Gotoh Museum; however, because they are so delicate, the rolls are usually only publicly displayed for one week in November.
Another famous art form popular among Genji enthusiasts (especially during the early Edo period) was the silk screen. These screens were generally six-paneled pieces with gold backgrounds on which scenes from *The Tale of Genji* were painted with mineral pigments. The screens were sturdily fashioned from heavy wood and were built to discourage wind and evil spirits from entering the home. Because the manuscripts were copied by hand, owners of these texts often removed pages from their scrolls to hang up on their walls. Calligraphy was held in high esteem, which led patrons to appreciate the pages not only for their literary merit, but for their visual appeal as well.

Opera

Premiering in the summer of 2000 at the Opera Theater of St. Louis, *Genji monogatari (The Tale of Genji)* is an opera written by Japanese composer Minoru Miki with the libretto and stage direction by the American artistic director Colin Graham. The libretto is based on the first three books of the novel by the same name and tells the story of Genji and his many adventures and romances.

Miki stated in an interview for The Japan Times that Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji* has had an enormous influence on art and literature since its birth largely because of its “universal appeal and emotion,” factors by which he has been heavily impacted. “Anybody, regardless of age, cultural background or time in history, can relate to and understand the psychology of the characters in the story.” With this sentiment in mind, it makes sense that he and Graham chose to write *The Tale of Genji* opera in English to accompany its elaborate Japanese costuming, scenery, and choreography.

The opera was well received at its premiere, with Opera News calling the production “a triumph” and the Wall Street Journal calling Miki’s score an “atmospheric masterpiece.”

Culture

*The Tale of Genji* remains very relevant in modern culture, especially in that of Japan; for much of Japanese institutional history, the novel has been considered a staple reading in the curricula of most Japanese schools. In addition, the 2000 Yen banknote issued in commemoration of the 26th G8 summit features a scene from the novel on its reverse side.

A more recent example of *Genji’s* cultural legacy is the 2008 Japanese celebration of the novel’s millennial anniversary. The event sparked music festivals, parades, and other festivities in many areas of Japan, but the celebration was especially vibrant in Kyoto; the home of both author and novel, the city was overtaken by *Genji*-themed poetry readings, moon-viewings, and performance art in the many gardens and streets mentioned in the novel.

Reference


6 http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jilh/hd_jilh.htm


12 http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Murasaki_Shikibu.aspx


14 http://www.colorado.edu/cas/tea/curriculum/imaging-japanese-history/heian/essay.html

15 http://academic.mu.edu/meissnerd/witt.html

16 http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson2/lesson2.php?s=0