

[論 文]

Heian Culture and the *Tale of Genji*

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SUMMARY

The Heian era was a time of great cultural and artistic refinement in ancient Japan. The culture of Heian Japan still influences Japan to the present day. The purpose of this paper is to focus on what life, especially court life, was like in the Heian era. Murasaki Shikibu's great novel, The Tale of Genji and other works of the time provide a window through which we can glimpse what the manners, customs and thoughts were like in Heian Japan.

What makes the Heian era (794-1185) unique? If we were to look at only the political and economic aspects of the Heian era it would be just another stage toward the development of modern Japan. It would be remembered chiefly for the attempt to strengthen the emperor system, the failure of the Chinese inspired principles of the Taika reform, perhaps for the rise of the great Fujiwara family, the collapse of imperial rule, and the foundations laid for the subsequent feudal era. That is all.

But that is not all. What made the Heian period unique was the flowering of a Japanese culture that has continued to influence Japanese culture and art until the present day.

Thanks to efficient borrowing and imaginative adaptation, Heian Kyo had by Murasaki's time reached a high cultural standard-fantastically high when we recall that only some four centuries earlier the entire country had been in an abysmally primitive state, its people almost totally illiterate except for a handful of officials and priests, its organization still largely tribal and its "capital" a temporary grouping of rude dwellings, centered on the palace, which was merely a frail wooden structure roofed with thatch. 1

The rise of Japanese civilization can be seen as a kind of double flowering. The first flowering came as a result of the introduction of Chinese writings into Japan. A whole previously unknown world was open to its readers. Then, a second flowering took place when Chinese was adapted to native Japanese.

The slow rise of native Japanese culture is perhaps best observed in the development of an adequate means of writing the native tongue. This writing system was developed slowly during the ninth and tenth centuries by the process of using certain Chinese characters in greatly abbreviated form as simple phonetic symbols devoid of any specific meaning in themselves. Since the Chinese characters each represented one monosyllabic word or word-root, the phonetic symbols derived from them normally stood for a whole syllabary and not an alphabet, such as our own system of writing. 2

The development of kana writing helps to explain the interesting fact that almost every notable Heian writer is a woman. While the men continued to use the formalized, stiff, and archaic Chinese, the women were writing in the vigorous vernacular. From the birth of native writing, the greatest writer of all Japanese history emerged: Murasaki Shikibu. Early in the eleventh century she wrote what is still considered to be the greatest novel in the Japanese language, *The Tale of Genji*. There were other writers and artists of substantial interest during the Heian era, but it is Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* that best brings to life the manners, customs, and thoughts of her time. I have chosen to focus on this work because it best brings to light the shadowy world of aristocratic Heian-kyo.

It is a work of imagination, a masterpiece of fiction, but it is based upon the writer's own experience, and enlivened by her sensibility, so that in itself it is a most penetrating study of Court society. It is more than that, however, for like most great works of art it discloses much that does not appear elsewhere—the unconscious forces, the unspoken ideas, the silent motives of the period. 3

If other works such as the famous *Pillow Book* of Sie Shonagon and the *Sarashina Diary* are used as correctives, we should get a fairly accurate view of court life during the cultural high-point of the Heian era.

Before we enter this strange world that was Heian Japan, it will put a great many things into perspective if we take a short detour and first glance briefly at the life of Lady Murasaki, the author of *The tale of Genji*. No author can be separated from the milieu in which he/she wrote: Shelley and Romanticism, Tennyson and Victorianism, Sophocles and ancient Greece. The assumptions, the customs and the mind-set of the age are infused into the author, although the fine-tuning and the unique slants of perception are the author's. A George Sand in the Heian era was just not possible. In that strictly cordoned and aristocratic circle there could be no wearing of pants, flaunting of customs, and openly flagrant affairs with composers, writers and bohemians. In fact, Murasaki's life was, the little that we know of it, quite uneventful. Hers was an inner-world, played out in the mind, a world that was to prove a model for the Japanese percepts of themselves and of their roots for a thousand years.

Murasaki Shikibu was born about A.D. 978, the daughter of Fujiwara Tametoki, a scholar of Chinese who was assigned to the board of rites (*shikibu*). 4 Murasaki Shikibu was not her real name since it was considered bad taste to openly state one's real name. She was married in 998 or 999 to a distant kinsman, bore a daughter in 999, and was widowed in 1001. She served at court under the daughter of the famous and powerful Fujiwara Michinaga, Akiko. Upon the death of Akiko's husband, after a period of two years, she disappears from recorded history.

In her diary, Murasaki notes that as a child she was interested in Chinese. Since it was not customary, even somewhat shocking, for a woman to know Chinese, she hid behind a screen as her father taught her brothers the rudiments of Chinese. She proved to be much more adept than her brother, and was soon proficient. There is good reason to believe that part of *The Tale of Genji* was already completed by the time that she went to court. Michinaga had his daughter, Akiko, surrounded by young women of learning and taste, and it is quite probable that word of Murasaki's work had spread to court and aroused interest.

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...That the work consisted of more than fifty chapters by the decade of the 1020's is apparent from the Sarashina Diary, written in the mid-eleventh century by another court lady. 5

The author of the diary recalls her breathless anticipation when she encounters each new section of *The Tale of Genji*, her heart beating and aching with anticipation.

One can visit a spot in the northern environs of Kyoto that is described as her grave: and the marvel is that it might just possibly be. 6

When I ran across these lines in Sidensticker's introduction to the translation, I was determined to seek out her grave. One hot day in Kyoto, after many a wrong turn and after many questions asked of startled passersby, I found her grave in a quiet little enclave next to a large building on a busy street. The grave was wrapped in shadows, and there were fresh flowers there. As I knelt next to the stone, and then touched the soil, I felt a special closeness to this shy woman who lived a thousand years ago

Also in Kyoto is the reputed site of Lady Murasaki's house. Although torn down long ago, there now stands a Buddhist temple. I sat on a wooden balcony of the temple and listened to the guide explain in Japanese about Murasaki's house. As she talked, I watched small birds scuttling in the stone garden in the sunlight, just as other birds might have done a millennium ago.

Let us now begin with a study of the novel itself. Western readers who read *The Tale of Genji* with Aristotelian expectations that a literary work should have a "beginning, a middle and an end" are frequently perplexed by the work. Although

...the *Genji* bears a striking resemblance to the nineteenth-century European novels, particularly in its psychological depiction and insight, it differs fundamentally in form and structure. 7

Still, it is unified by time and place and character and is written by one author. 8

...In its organic growth, *The Genji* resembles the utsusemi, the locust, or to be more precise, the cicada, which leaves its entire shell on the tree trunk after molting. 9

Murasaki's readers expected, with each installment that she wrote, another action to further develop the overall plot, plus an entity that was complete in and of itself, and that could be enjoyed in much the same way as a short story. It is a decentralized narrative, but nevertheless it possess unity.

The action of *the Tale of Genji* covers a period of approximately 75 years. There have been numerous theories as to the historical counterpart of different characters, particularly Prince Genji. The most often cited model for Genji has been Minamoto no Takaakira (914-82) who was the son of the Emperor Daigo.10 Her novel was not intended, though, to be historical.

All that can be said is that a vaguely nostalgic air hangs over the narrative, and that the setting is vaguely antiquarian. 11

Still, she must not be confused with a formulaic, romantic writer of the Barbara Cartland variety.

Apart from the historical works and official court annals, Murasaki was well acquainted with the wealth of Japanese poetry beginning with the vast *Manyoshu* anthology (the collection of ten thousand leaves) compiled in the eighth century. She was widely read in the vernacular kanaban literature, which had developed so brilliantly during the first two centuries of the Heian period—the diaries, the travel records, and the miscellaneous jottings, of which only a small portion has survived to the present day. Above all she must have used her long leisure hours to steep herself in those voluminous tales or romances known as “monogatari,” the form in which she was to establish her own name. 12

Coupled with her diverse reading was a quick eye for detail and psychological motivation.

While we have few facts about Murasaki's life, the *Diary* and *The Tale of Genji* do provide ample evidence about her knowledge and her experience of the world. Even the most cursory reading of the novel will suggest how intimately she was acquainted with the aristocratic life of her time, not only at court, but in town mansions and in remote houses beyond the limits of the capital. Murasaki had keenly observed how different kinds of men and women spoke and behaved, and she had tried to enter their feelings and to know why they acted as they did. She was sensitive to the natural surroundings in which these people lived and to the subtle effects that these surroundings had on them 13

Haruo Shirane has observed that:

...reading the *Genji* requires a double movement: understanding it as a narrative—in light of plot and character and in relation to sociopolitical history—and as a lyric, in terms of such poetic elements as imagery, rhythm, diction, tone and allusion. 14

It is the former aspect, that of “sociopolitical history,” that I am most interested in, for it sheds most light on Heian life and thought.

Two important concepts are vital for understanding *The Tale of Genji*, the lives portrayed, and the ideals indicative of the Heian era. One concept is “*miyabi*” or courtly elegance. In one memorable section

...describing an autumnal day at Suma, we find Genji engaged in music (koto), calligraphy (tenarai), painting (e, byōbu), garden landscape (senzai), sutra-chanting (zukyo), Japanese poetry (waka), moonviewing (tsukimi), and the chanting of Chinese poetry (roei)—all the refinements associated with *miyabi*....15

Perhaps the nearest equivalent for Western readers would be the “*spretzatura*” used by Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier*. Prince Genji is remarkable for his beauty, but his beauty is only one facet of his *miyabe*, which is rounded out and deepened by innumerable accomplishments in the arts.

The second important concept in understanding *The Tale of Genji* is the concept of “*mono no aware*, an emotional sensitivity to things, involving sympathy and harmony with others. 16 The Japanese scholar Motori Norinaga advanced the notion that *The Tale of Genji* should not be judged in moral terms from Buddhist or

Confucian references, but from aesthetic and psychological criteria. The “good” characters are those imbued with *mono no aware*, and the “bad” characters are those with little or none at all. 17

An abundance of the two characteristics mentioned above, *miyabe* and *mono no aware*, is what sets Prince Genji apart and makes him unique. They were an ideal, a standard by which one judged and was judged. One has only to glance at the various writings of the Heian period to see how rigorously men and women were judged by these standards. The *spretzatura* of the Italian court was a measure of action as much as was its Japanese equivalent, and as much as such “modern” terms as business acumen, honesty and openness, and I.Q. are today.

The most striking feature of the aristocratic society of the Heian capital is its aesthetic quality. It is true that it was a society composed of a small number of especially favored people, but it is none the less remarkable that, even in its emptiest follies, it was moved by considerations of refinement and governed by a rule of taste. 18

In the Heian period, to be deficient in measuring up to expectations could be fearful. When Genji received a first letter from a lover his heart was always beating faster. His opinion of a woman he was courting rose or was irredeemably dashed by her handwriting. Genji strove to ascertain the woman's character from the style of the brushwork, the tint of the ink, the color of the paper, the scent of the perfume used on the paper, the dexterity with which it was folded, and the appropriateness of the accompanying spray of flowers that was attached to the letter, not to mention the comeliness of the messenger delivering the letter. The irrepressible Sei Shonagon had a very exact conception of the ideals a man should strive for when answering a letter from a lover:

I like to think of a bachelor-an adventurous disposition has left him single-returning at dawn from some amorous excursion. He looks a trifle sleepy; but, as soon as he is home, draws his writing case toward him, carefully grinds himself some ink and begins to write his next-morning letter-not simply dashing off whatever comes into his head, but spreading himself to the task and taking trouble to write the characters beautifully. He should be clad in an azalea-yellow or vermilion cloak worn over a white robe. Glancing from time to time at the dewdrops that still cling to the thin white fabric of his dress, he finishes his letter, but instead of giving it to one of the ladies who are in attendance upon him at the moment, he gets up and, choosing from among his page-boys one who seems to him exactly appropriate to such a mission, calls the lad to him and whispering something in his ear puts the letter in his hand; then he sits gazing after him as he disappears into the distance. 19

When Murasaki, who is one of Genji's wives, happens to glance at a letter sent to her husband from another woman, she is instantly alarmed; not because it is a letter from another woman, but because of the perfection of its style. She knew her husband must be attracted to a woman of such perfection and ability.

In the Heian upper-circles where Lady Murasaki moved, dress was of critical importance. Every member of the upper-echelon was under the closest scrutiny, not only as to their manners or their talents, but as to the way he/she dressed. The wearer's taste was ascertained by the combination of colors with which he/she dressed. To show to what extent members of the court were judged, it is interesting to observe a passage from

Lady Murasaki's *Diary*:

At court a lady-in-waiting appeared beautifully attired, but there was a little fault in the combination of colours at the wrist, where the edges of the sleeves of her numerous undergarments showed. This was noticed by the nobles present and it upset ...Lady Saisho, who said, however, "It was not really very bad-only one colour was a little too pale." 20

Perhaps the most modern aspect of *The Tale of Genji* is its psychological penetration. Prior to Murasaki, works contained more character types like those found in *The Tales of Ise*. Characters act and react, but we never learn why they act as they do. In *The Tale of Genji* we enter the characters' minds and see their anxieties, hopes and dreams. When the novel begins, Prince Genji is something of a "type," a little too perfect, and lacking in depth; we are in the world of romance. As the novel progresses, however, especially after his exile in Suma, clouds gather and dark shadows shade and deepen his character. He is more human, and his actions are at times flawed. We share, too, the fears of the character Murasaki who was not Genji's principal wife, that she would be deserted and left open to shame and ridicule. Although the life of women in Heian Japan was better than in the subsequent feudal era, it was often precarious. A Heian wife usually lived with her family even after marriage, and the husband visited his wife when he felt the inclination. Polygamy was the rule, although a man had a principal wife and then "other" wives and consorts. Genji's wife was not a principal wife and could never be one because she lacked the requisite family connections, which in turn made her hold on Genji tentative.

In a very interesting diary of the Heian era, *The Gossamer Years (kagero nikki)*, a noblewoman who is not a principal wife waits daily for the sound of her husband's carriage. Her jealousy and frustration are clearly visible, as are her fears of being left alone:

Each night I secretly expected to see him, but finally even his letters stopped, and there followed a long period of complete silence. In spite of my bewilderment, I tried to pretend that I noticed nothing amiss. At night I would lie tense at the sound of the carriages passing by, and then I would somehow drift off to sleep and wake to another joyless morning. 21

The Tale of Genji also shows the extent to which superstitions penetrated everyday Heian life:

Even urgent affairs of state were delayed by calendrical superstition. An expedition against a dangerous Taira rebel in 1028 had to wait over a month before an auspicious day could be found to dispatch the troops.

As if these restrictions were not sufficiently onerous, there was a mass of additional taboos derived from miscellaneous sources. Fingernails, for instance, could only be cut on the Day of the Ox and toenails on the Day of the Tiger. Bathing, at best a perfunctory process, could take place once in five days-and then only if the day was auspicious. When Prince Niou visits his consort Naka no Kimi, he is annoyed to find that she is having her hair washed (an immensely time-consuming operation in the Heian period when a woman's hair was often as long as she was), and he asks her ladies why they had to choose that particular day. "We normally do it when Your Excellency is not here," replies one of the ladies, "but for one thing or another it has been impossible for the past few days. There are no more auspicious days until the end of the month, and of course the next two months are taboo. So you see, Your

Highness, we really could not miss this opportunity.”²²

Needless to say, superstitions could be used to one's own advantage. If Genji wanted to visit a lover and ignore his wife, he could send a messenger to his wife with a note saying that it was impossible to visit her because the location of her house was in an unlucky direction.

If one has the perseverance to read *The Tale of Genji* to the end, there is one final conclusion that is inescapable: the people of the court of Heian-kyo were obsessed with beauty. Murasaki's characters show pride, anger, jealousy, love and loneliness much in the same way people do the world over. What sets them apart, finally, is the degree to which their lives were governed by the concepts of good taste and beauty.

Not only did the rule of taste extend to every sphere of life and apply to the smallest details, but (with the single exception of good birth) it took primacy over all else. Artistic sensibility was more highly valued than ethical goodness. Despite the influence of Buddhism, Heian society was on the whole governed by style rather than any moral principles, and good looks tended to take the place of virtue. The word *yoki* (“good”) referred primarily to birth, but it also applied to a person's aesthetic sensibility; the one implication it lacked was ethical rectitude. For all their talk about “heart” and “feeling,” this stress on the cult of the beautiful, to the virtual exclusion of any concern with charity, sometimes lends a rather chilling impression to the people of Genji's world.²³

Here, then, is one of the keys to understanding the downfall of Heian-kyo. The rarefied atmosphere of court life was too removed from the actual daily life of the vast majority of Japanese people. Characteristics that would make good reading, good literature, and create beauty for future generations sapped the vigor, practicality, compassion and courage from their lives and spelled their ruin. One almost feels that the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer had the Heian court in mind when he wrote *The World as Will and Idea*. The narrow court world was the quintessence of the “Idea,” while the fledging provinces with their rude ways and growing economic and military might were the “Will”. The “Will” always ultimately triumphs over the “Idea”. The only triumph of the “Idea” is death. The fall of Heian-kyo to the feudal order was only a matter of time.

Footnotes

1. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1964), p. 170.
2. Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan: Past and Present* (Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1964), p. 33.
3. George Sansom, *A History of Japan*, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1964) vol 1: *A History of Japan to 1334*, p. 178.
4. William J. Puette, *Guide to the Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu* (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1983), p. 50.
5. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Edwin Seidensticker 2 vols. (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1976), p. vii.
6. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

7. Haruo Shirane, *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of "The Tale of Genji"* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp.xix-xx.
8. Ibid., p. xxi.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 10.
11. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Edwin Seidensticker, p. x.
12. Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, pp. 257-258.
13. Ibid., p. 256.
14. Shirano, *The Bridge of Dreams; A Poetics of "The Tale of Genji"*, p. 120.
15. Ibid., p. 22.
16. Ibid., P. 175.
17. Ibid.
18. Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334*, p. 178.
19. Donald Keene, etc., *Anthology of Japanese Literature to the Nineteenth Century* (New York, New York; Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 131-132.
20. Sansome, *A History of Japan to 1334*, p. 192.
21. *The Gossamer Years*, trans. Edward Seidensticker (Tokyo, Japan and Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1964), pp. 81-82.
22. Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, pp. 127-128.
23. Ibid., p. 195.