

1996

# **PARTINGS AT DAWN**

An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature

Edited by Stephen D. Miller

Introduction by Paul Gordon Schalow

1996

Gay Sunshine Press  
San Francisco

Anonymous, 12th Century

## PARTINGS AT DAWN

[Ariake no Wakare]

Translated by Robert Omar Khan

---

Literature exploring a rich variety of sexualities and gender identities goes back a long way in Japan, and some of the most fascinating documents of the classical literature have been preserved by a very tenuous thread indeed. Such is the case with the tale called “Partings at Dawn,” which imaginatively explores some most intriguing personal relationships at the Imperial Court in the late twelfth century. The text has been preserved in a single manuscript and tantalizingly little is known of its circumstances of composition. Nothing is known about its author, and a few clues, including a single brief mention in a work written about 1200 and calling it “recent,” give us only a rough guide to its dating.

The late twelfth century was the time of the war between the Heike and Genji samurai clans for the role of “protector” of the Imperial Court, ushering in the age of the Shoguns. Yet though it is highly likely that the author of this tale heard of, and probably witnessed first hand, the tumultuous events overtaking the Imperial Capital, they are entirely absent from the tale. This is typical of the style and content of the court tales like the *Tale of Genji* which precede it. It is an introspective work, totally absorbed in the life of the highest ranking aristocrats at the Imperial Court, and it focuses on sensibility, elegance, and personal relations, with a remarkable interest in psychological detail.

A style which is so obsessed with what people were feeling and thinking, and particularly with what other people must be thinking about them, inevitably has a somewhat gossipy quality. This is further borne out by the narrator’s voice, which makes itself felt from time to time identifying itself as a participant in the society whose emotional life and manners it chronicles so carefully. It is hardly surprising that in such a milieu sexual attraction and activity are described with extraordinary delicacy. Yet once one pieces together the hints that are so teasingly offered in this tale, it becomes clear that some quite unexpected and fascinating relationships are being presented.

The exact nature of the protagonist in this tale is only gradually revealed, and the process of discovery may well have been part of the work’s interest. In common with other tales written for this highly status-conscious society, the characters are only referred to by their court ranks, not by personal names. Since character’s ranks and titles change regularly during the tale, and modern readers are less attuned to their nuances, I have given the pro-

tagonist the name “Ariake,” rather than keeping to “the Major Captain,” “the Supernumerary Middle Councillor,” etc. It is also worth bearing in mind that, despite the impressive sounding titles, the principal characters are mostly in their late ’teens or early twenties.

So here we have an extraordinary tale in which several relationships are perceived as same-sex by one partner but not the other, and then develop in an unusual way once one partner’s unexpected sex is revealed. In short, they defy our modern classification of relationships and orientations, replacing them instead with something much more fluid. The treatment of cross-dressing is also much more subtle than merely showing how one individual could do an excellent job of impersonating the opposite sex.

It may seem surprising that a theme as traditional as the continuation of the imperial lineage is woven in with topics like cross-dressing and same-gender attraction. But it is important to recognize the significance of Ariake’s supernatural identity as well. There was in fact a well established tradition of stories about the divine origin of particular clans, often involving heavenly beings who descend and, willingly or unwillingly, marry the clan founder.

This period also saw a particular taste for the attractions of strange and mysterious beauty and even cross-dressing, in both life and literature. A highly favored class of professional dancers at the Imperial Court, the *shirabyōshi* dancers, were women who dressed as warriors, complete with swords and helmets. “Partings at Dawn” is also not the only tale from this period to explore relationships involving cross-dressing and sexual secrets. In fact it seems to have been inspired by an earlier tale called *Torikaebaya Monogatari*, literally “The Tale [where someone says], ‘If only they could trade places!’” in which a vexed father finally decides to let his unusual daughter and son swap gender roles (see Introduction page 13). And there remain other texts, untranslated and little studied, so the future promises further interesting discoveries regarding sexuality and gender roles in Japan eight centuries ago.

---

## PARTINGS AT DAWN

[Ariake no Wakare]

### Book One

*[The tale opens with a tableau of a court lady waiting listlessly for her lover on a moonlit autumn evening. She has to content herself with a mere letter promising to visit when he has time. But he's actually a notoriously fickle seducer, so her prospects look bleak. On this note the tale proper begins, and we hear no more of their fate.]*

### CHAPTER TWO

SO THAT'S HOW it was. Now the men responsible in cases like that are by no means always the lower classes, you know. Far from it. Just start asking around, there's plenty of blue blood involved—descendants of this Emperor, that Chancellor. And if you're from the right family you get the court promotions you want too. The better the family, the better the rank.

The Specially Appointed Middle Counselor Ariake, now *he* could have gotten away with the most outrageous scandals. Could have, but sad to say, he was the quiet type. Even with female admirers who were quite forward, he was very circumspect, perhaps even standoffish. Compare him with those young princes who were his immediate juniors, the Third Rank Middle Captain and the Gate Guards' Commander and he was really quite inexplicably reticent. Not them. They didn't hold back with such women. People at court began to talk. They wondered if he might be somehow special.

He was the descendant of a Crown Prince on his mother's side, and his father, the Minister of the Left, really doted on him. Growing up, he was never left unattended, night or day. Early on, his looks and cleverness made the Emperor himself quite eager for his debut at court. Others among us at court were amazed that he wasn't conceited, which would have been understandable. He seemed quite blessed. Could a mere human really be like this? He was so controlled it was astonishing. Never the slightest flirtation—it was uncanny. Women even felt a bit uneasy about him.

Well, winter passed and he was promoted to Major Captain of the Right. His investiture was truly grand and he was always announced very formally on arrival and departure. Yet he remained single. I expect even those not close to him began to wonder, thinking it rather odd for someone of his rank. I would say he was three or four years shy of twenty. He was growing up precociously and flawlessly. He seemed so infinitely graceful and attractive that you could have gazed at him “for a thousand and one nights,” as the poem says, and still wanted more. But his gentleness and

charm were almost too much. He wasn't growing that tall, of course, but it didn't seem a problem for now.

Did I say he was good-looking? In fact, people said that the very words he spoke and the sound of his playing on the koto and flute positively amazed heaven and earth. Quite the unfathomable character. The Emperor himself was slightly concerned, wondering if there was something inauspicious about all this, and Ariake's father, the Minister of the Left, had his own worries about it too. His sleep was disturbed and it was sad how much his worries began to weigh on him.

Actually, the Emperor, although about the same age as Major Captain Ariake, seemed rather older than his years. Ariake's features were, needless to say, utterly appealing, and as the Emperor got used to him being close at hand he began to notice that Ariake also had a characteristic scent about him. It was uncanny how it pierced the Emperor to the very heart, and he wondered to himself how he would feel if there were a woman like that at court. Being of a quite passionate disposition, he felt rather confused longings. He kept asking Ariake's father to bring his daughter to court too, but the Minister remained evasive. He wouldn't want to embarrass the Minister of the Right's daughter, Kannotono, who should debut first, so he seemed very deferential. Still, the Emperor must have thought him far too cautious.

Not that there weren't a good number of women of lower rank than her in attendance. But you see, the Emperor still had no male imperial offspring. Without an heir to become Crown Prince, the Emperor passed his time being rather depressed. He couldn't help thinking of what he had heard about the Minister of the Left's daughter, but the Minister kept declining to bring her to court.

Everybody knew about Major Captain Ariake's reputation and skill, but it didn't seem to go to his head. He was so composed, never a hint of flirtatiousness. Some women must have been quite disappointed. "It's the flaw in the jewel," people said, and they wondered if he was lonely. Actually, deep in his heart, unknown to anyone, he felt that although he looked the part socially, his behavior really didn't fit in. "What else can I do?" he thought anguishedly, "If only I could interpret my dreams somehow." It made him even more depressed.

Now back when his father, the Minister, had his own coming-of-age ceremony he still had no male children, and thus no heir from his marriage, so astrologers were called in. All kinds of prayers were offered and he was very upset. Then his wife became pregnant with Ariake and apparently there was a divine revelation. That must have been why the child was brought up as a boy, which was actually not what one might have expected. But what a waste it would have been to hide the child demurely away, when it had such a brilliant talent for the koto and flute. That divine revelation must have been a wonderful thing indeed. For whatever reason, the child

was also granted a special means of concealment. I suppose it must have been just like the one we read about in the old romance called “The Cloak of Invisibility.” [This tale is now lost—tr.] With no private residences barred to him Ariake satisfied his curiosity about anywhere and everywhere, and there was no one he didn’t get a good look at, even women. Yet he never could find a suitable match worthy to appear beside him in a mirror.

*[Ariake continues to wander secretly into the residences of the aristocracy at night, using his Cloak of Invisibility. There he witnesses a variety of cruel relationships and finds himself especially touched by the plight of two of the women: a young girl being sexually abused by her predatory step-father, and another woman who is deeply in love with her secret lover whom Ariake knows to be deceiving her. After their initial fright, they are both comforted by the gentle words of this mysterious but sympathetic nocturnal visitor. He feels rather uneasy himself, given that they do not know “the truth” about him, but he finds himself even more disturbed to hear what gossip is circulating about him, and about the Emperor.]*

## CHAPTER FIVE

[ . . . ] He was stealthily making his way through a room where a lamp was burning when he overheard the voices of what sounded like a number of young female attendants chatting away. He thought they were up rather late, and though he wasn’t particularly interested in them, he secretly listened in. It turned out they were actually talking about himself.

One was saying, “Really you know, for such a splendid-looking person he’s altogether too reserved—he’s just like some holy man earnestly performing rituals. Absolutely too intense. It’s *so* disappointing.” At which another remarked,

“Other people are so nonchalant about getting involved in relationships, is it any surprise he’s not interested in the people of our world? But I wonder what he really has in mind. Is he waiting for some heavenly maiden to appear?” Another one had this to say,

“Oh dear, if only instead of going against our master’s wishes Major Captain Ariake had agreed to marry the master’s daughter. It would have put years on my life, I can tell you. Even the way he intones the sutras is quite different from that man she ended up marrying.”

“Well really, what’s the point?” said another, “don’t keep going on about what might have been. What will be will be and that goes for everything. If someone is too outstanding they incur the curse of an early death, you can be sure of that. Anyway, Ariake’s father, the Minister, is so excessively attached to him that he’s brought about this lamentable state of affairs by preventing any marriage. It’s exactly the same with Ariake’s young sister. She’s kept out of sight behind the curtains. What with such

distasteful behavior from the Minister, I've heard people are speaking very ill of him. Yet he will probably keep deferring the daughter's presentation at court. But then again, perhaps it's actually her who wants to be single. If that's the case then she's just like that Atemiya in the old 'Romance of the Hollow Tree' [the *Utsuho Monogatari* which is still extant—tr.] who kept putting off suitors, isn't she? The fact is, Ariake is so outstanding who else could be a match for him other than our master's daughter? Now if they were to live together then the two of them would surely be received by heavenly maidens!" Yet another added,

"You know, they say that the Emperor himself is actually in no particular hurry to receive Ariake's sister. And that the Minister, Ariake's father, is not that close to the Emperor and probably doesn't do much to advance the suit. Now if the Emperor specifically asked for her, how could he decline? The Minister knows just how very worried the Emperor is at not having any children from his women, so why doesn't he present her without worrying about offending the other Minister?"

Ariake found this empty gossip quite hateful, so he left uttering a poem,

"Leave the wave-washed pine tree of disloyalty and  
Do not confuse the pure moonlight with the clouds"

The women could smell the scent of his robes but not see him, so their hair stood on end with fright as they said, "This must be a rebuke from the god of the Kasuga Shrine for our worthless gossiping," and they shivered in fear . . .

*[Ariake eventually rescues the abused girl, Princess Tai, from the clutches of her wicked stepfather, the Major Captain of the Left, and brings her to his residence as his wife. It turns out she is already pregnant by her stepfather, but Ariake agrees to acknowledge the child as his. The Princess is overwhelmed with gratitude and quite in love with Ariake, despite their mysterious absence of conjugal relations. But the secret of his identity weighs heavily on him and he contemplates abandoning this world. His exceptional qualities continue to attract some unwelcome attentions.]*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

[ . . . ] Ariake was deep in melancholy thought. "Once she has the child and everything returns to normal, I will no longer conceal my real self, but I'll find a way of making the change without anyone realizing it." He continued with these sad reflections, thinking about the devoted attendants who had served him night and day all his life without knowing the truth. His heart wept despite himself as he watched them, sadly thinking of the time when he would part for an unknown future.

"It would be unthinkable to let people see through my present disguise

and then let myself be married off in the usual way without it being quite ghastly. I would rather turn my back on this world and become this 'sister' of mine we've spoken about for so long, kept hidden away behind curtains without ever coming out."

As the years had gone by he developed quite profound artistic talents, and the thought of now having to give up the flute and change his style of koto playing added to his misery. In fact, on occasions when he performed officially at formal court ceremonies, those present were astonished at what they saw and heard. The Emperor himself was convinced that there was no one to compare with Ariake, and he formally requested him to perform at morning and evening music parties. Ariake really exercised the utmost control over himself when playing, to be very sparing with the soft touches. And if ever he engaged the Emperor in conversation without there being other people in attendance, he did not approach him too familiarly.

Now courtiers such as the Minister of the Right and the Major Captain of the Left were very much given to sensual pleasures. They would compare Ariake with women and fantasize about seeing a woman just like him. They couldn't help yearning for him, and they would hang longingly on his every word. Other than occupying his official post at court and appearing when summoned by the Emperor, Ariake kept his distance at lesser social events and exchanged not a word with the others. Of course, this keeping to himself and refusing to mix really made them worry about how people would be criticizing him for such behavior. [ . . . ]

*[The young woman Ariake rescued to be his wife bears her stepfather's child, a son. Now Ariake's parents have a publicly acknowledged male grandchild to ensure their lineage. Ariake himself continues to distinguish himself at court. He is especially outstanding at characteristically masculine courtier activities such as playing the flute and composing Chinese poetry on public occasions. Strangely, his flute-playing evokes unexplained supernatural omens—the heavens resound, unusual clouds gather in the sky, and fragrant breezes blow. The Emperor himself becomes more and more intrigued by him, eagerly requesting him to show his skills.]*

## CHAPTER TEN

[ . . . ]

It was all very well that Major Captain Ariake was such a splendid success at these court gatherings. But with all he had to worry about he was significantly more confused than he had been before. He just kept wondering how he would ever manage to achieve his one heart's desire now, to withdraw to a religious life, with no more disguising his behavior. Wherever he turned there was some constraint put on him, forbidding him to carry out his wishes. All he could do was excruciate at feeling so trapped. Yet despite all this, he also felt relatively at home in the role he had grown



so accustomed to. And as vain as all things were in this world, was he to “return” to an uncertain life he had actually never known—abandon his present identity, this comfortable identity despite all its contradictions? Return to what? No. It was quite unthinkable now.

“When I looked at myself in the mirror I never thought I would find someone to be a match for me. But now there is the Emperor himself who really seems to think I brighten up his world. The way I feel about him, my heart will never change. Yet it’s quite natural that I will see the time when he can’t help turning bitter toward me. If that happened I would be so disappointed the only thing for me to do would be to hide myself away at the bottom of a valley or deep in the unexplored mountain fastnesses and peacefully devote myself to religious austerities.”

With these thoughts he resolved to stay on in this world. He involved himself in organizing sumo wrestling festivals and hosting Return Banquets for contestant participants. He followed all the protocols established by precedent, but his taste in the robes and ornamented ox-drawn carriages he provided was simply fabulous, resplendent beyond anything anyone had ever seen. Even the attendants and their liveries were quite unusually arrayed. The fact is, everything he involved himself in left people quite amazingly impressed.

[ . . . ]

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was around this time that the Emperor started having strange and incomprehensible recurring dreams. He couldn’t fathom them at all. How could it have happened that so late in life the Minister of the Left was granted a long-awaited for child. But the child born to him was a girl! The Emperor turned this over and over in his mind. It was still incomprehensible. How could he find out for sure what it meant?

[ . . . ]

*[On the Fifteenth Night of the Eighth Month a Full Moon Banquet is being held at the Imperial Palace. Ariake absents himself briefly, and, in a chance encounter with a court lady, exchanges amorous poems. Then he returns to the banquet.]*

The next day the Emperor summoned him with quite reckless insistence, so he went back to the Palace again. The Emperor talked casually with him about anything that came to mind, then asked him to play something for him on the koto. Ariake ended up spending the whole day in attendance since no opportunity presented itself for him to leave. This evening at least there appeared no ominously trailing clouds drifting across the sky as there had when he performed before. Ariake gazed out across the serene expanse of sky, deep in thought, kept there at the Emperor’s wishes. His figure and features were just as they always were, but needless to say, being at such

intimately close quarters he was attractive in every detail. So the Emperor just gazed at him very intently.

In fact, he was so indescribably appealing that the Emperor simply could not restrain his feelings. Instinctively taking Ariake by the hand which held his fan, he moved himself closer beside him. I'm telling you this happened, though Major Captain Ariake was quite a strong and forceful person. But he was so inclined to keep himself apart socially, and he had never been able to understand just how things were between men and women. He simply concluded that men could be disturbingly unreasonable and kept such thoughts at a distance.

But with the Emperor pressing so intimately close to him he became so alarmed that he began to sweat profusely. His face colored delightfully, and the scent of his robes at close quarters was strangely and irresistibly intoxicating to the Emperor, who was feeling quite alarmed himself now too. The Emperor said,

"Ever since we were both little children we always promised to keep nothing from each other, so why are you being so distant towards me? Being so unfriendly will make me resentful you know."

Saying this he drew very close indeed and stretched out beside Ariake. Ariake was quite ill at ease and distressed, but he forced himself to calm down and said,

"How embarrassing! This is really a very awkward position for a man to be in."

But his voice was unusually submissive, and he looked even more mysteriously enchanting, so with no thought for the past or the future the Emperor pressed yet closer still and pulled loose one side of Ariake's court robe. Ariake was in anguish at his helplessness, and utterly miserable at the thought of what this was leading to in the end, and his tears kept welling up. In this state he looked quite appealingly vulnerable, his unparalleled distress showing in his features, so the Emperor's perceptive mind all of a sudden made the connection with the strange dreams he was having before.

"They say women are elegant and lovely, but could any of them be so outstanding to compare with him? But now I understand! How slow I have been to realize! I have been quite taken in right until this very moment."

Now he felt provoked, and quite mercilessly did as he pleased with Ariake. Strong-willed as Ariake was, how could he find the will to resist such shocking treatment? He was disoriented, hardly knowing whether he was alive or dead. But he looked so fetching as he choked on his tears, he was a thousand times more attractive than any ordinary woman one could think of. He had really turned the Emperor's heart, and so quickly it was quite unheard of.

The bamboo blinds that had been tightly drawn were now softly opened by the Emperor, so the palace room where they were reclining was rather

exposed, and Ariake was quite unreasonably stung by pangs of guilty conscience. Yet it was quite usual for them to be together like this, and there were no court ladies in attendance, so I can't help thinking it would be silly for them to spend that night talking about formal court business . . .

Now even Ariake's familiar path homewards seemed a long journey in the self-conscious and troubled state he was in. The Emperor went so far as to accompany him personally as far as the door of the Imperial Bath Pavilion to see him off. What a remarkable indication of his feelings about their relationship! Furthermore, the Emperor kept hold of his sleeve and would not let him take his leave, saying

“What am I to do?  
Though I request a visit tonight  
Who knows its path?—  
Moonlight of the pale dawn moon

My dear Ariake, keeping this from people's prying eyes must be terribly hard for you to bear. What possessed you to behave so strangely? How distressing it is, now that we have exchanged vows of love!”

Saying this he could no longer speak, and his tears poured forth. There was absolutely nothing Ariake could say either really.

If the dawn moon should transfix me  
With its cold cruel stare  
Would I not then just end up  
The topic of court gossip?

In the pale glimmer of the fading moonlight Ariake was utterly distraught, and the sight of him departing with his hair all sleep-tousled far surpassed that of the typical woman secluded behind brocade curtains with her hair nine feet long, and the Emperor thought how remarkably elegant he was as he looked on after him.

*[The Emperor and Ariake conduct a secret affair until Ariake becomes pregnant. From now on the tale is more direct about Ariake's real sex and eventually he lets people believe he has died, so he can assume the identity of his mysterious sister and be presented at court as one of the Emperor's women. To great acclaim he provides the Emperor with a son and heir and is promoted to Empress. But the tale's fascination with same-gender relationships continues, for the Empress finds herself nostalgic for her days as the handsomest man at court, and even resumes some romantic relationships with women. The Emperor too thinks back fondly on his affair with the incomparable Major Captain Ariake . . . ]*