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Masaki Sakurai: *The Tale of Genji*

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## Chapter 1

### The cultural background

#### Politics

*The Tale of Genji* is the product of an aristocratic culture that flourished in Japan in the eleventh century at the height of the Heian Period (794–1192), a period that takes its name from the capital, Heian-kyō. It is seen to be the greatest achievement not only of Heian culture, but indeed of Japanese literature as a whole. Japan had just emerged from a time of substantial Chinese influence and was going through one of its periodic stages of readjustment, during which alien concepts were successfully naturalised. The *Genji* is thus the product of a native culture finding a truly sophisticated form of self-expression in prose for the first time. Chinese forms and Chinese ideas still remained a touchstone, a kind of eternal presence in the Japanese mind, but China itself was temporarily on its knees and was geographically far enough removed to allow for the unhampered growth of an indigenous tradition. The *Genji*, when it did come, owed very little to Chinese literary precedents.

Politically matters took roughly the same course. Attempts to impose a Chinese-style bureaucracy had failed to supplant native habits. Power remained by and large a matter of heredity, and what civil service there was never won a sense of identity for itself, so bound up was it with the aristocracy. The dominant political fact was that the Emperor, at the spiritual and psychological centre, was politically impotent and under the influence of whichever aristocratic family happened to be in a position to make decisions. The Emperor's links with the machinery of government were tenuous, and he was usually too young and inexperienced to be able to have a mind of his own. The coveted post was that of Regent, the degree of power being directly related to the proximity of

Regent to Emperor as measured through family ties. It is hardly surprising then that 'marriage politics' emerged as the major technique for the maintenance of such power.

The Japan of Murasaki Shikibu's day was dominated by one clan, the Fujiwara, and in particular by one man, Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027). His chief asset was a carefully designed network of marriage ties to the imperial family, which he manipulated to great effect: he became, among other things, brother-in-law to two emperors, uncle to one, uncle and father-in-law to another, and grandfather to two more. Such a position was only achieved, of course, after much internecine strife between various family factions vying for power throughout the late tenth century. Rivalry within the Fujiwara clan itself came to a head in 969, when the major remaining threat from a different clan, Minamoto no Takaakira, was finally removed from the scene on a trumped-up charge of conspiracy. From that time on there was a series of intrigues that set brother against brother, nephew against uncle, and that led to the early demise of three emperors. So it was that the Emperor Ichijō, who reigned during the time of most interest to us in the present context (986–1011), was enthroned at the tender age of six and remained under the domination of his charismatic grandfather Michinaga from the very outset.

When Michinaga succeeded his elder brother as head of the family, he came into conflict with his young nephew Korechika (973–1010). The story goes that Korechika, under the impression that a retired emperor was competing with him for the favours of a certain lady, surprised him one night and started a scuffle in which the eminent gentleman was nearly hit by an arrow. Whether the whole scene had been engineered by Michinaga or not is uncertain, but it provided him with the excuse he needed. It was enough to have Korechika banished from the court for several months, and from this point on Michinaga was virtually unassailable. In 999 he introduced to court his eleven-year-old daughter Shōshi (988–1074) as an imperial consort; she quickly became Ichijō's favourite. In the twelfth month of 1000, Korechika's

sister, who had been made the Emperor's first consort some years earlier, died in childbirth. Shōshi's position thereby became secure. It was only a few years later that Murasaki Shikibu was introduced into her entourage. The crowning glory for Michinaga came in 1008, when Shōshi gave birth to a son, so placing the Fujiwara leader in a powerful position for the future as well as the present.

Given this kind of marriage politics, women clearly had a role to play, passive though it usually was. They were vital pawns, 'borrowed wombs' as the saying went, and depending on their strength of character they could wield considerable influence either as mothers or as wet nurses to future emperors. We know that they had certain rights, income and property, that mark them off as being unusually privileged in comparison with later ages. Michinaga's mother, for instance, seems to have been a power to be reckoned with, and Michinaga's wife owned the Tsuchimikado mansion where he spent much of his time. But it is difficult to determine the true position of women in society at large. The testimony we have from the literature of the period, much of it written by ladies of a lesser class, draws a picture of women subject to the usual depredations of their menfolk, prey to the torments of jealousy, and condemned to live most of their sedentary lives hidden behind a wall of screens and curtains. Marriage conventions will be a matter for later discussion: suffice it to say here that the female world was highly formalised and restricted. Seldom were the women known by their own names; they existed rather in the shadow of titles held by brothers or fathers. Of course there must have been exceptions: the role of *femme fatale* was not unknown; but even here there is much talk of waiting to be visited, gazing out onto rainy gardens, and a sense of resigned listlessness.

#### Murasaki Shikibu

Given the fact that close relatives were set against each other with monotonous regularity and that matters of rank were sacrosanct, it is only natural that Murasaki Shikibu should

feel that she had little in common with those in the higher echelons of the ruling Fujiwara clan, despite the fact that they shared a common ancestry. Her particular branch of the family had been coming down in the world for some time and was only on the very fringes of the establishment. The men filled such posts as provincial governorships, which gave ample opportunity for financial reward, but which alienated the holder from the tightly knit world of court and capital; frequent visits to the provinces were regarded as onerous duties and indeed as a form of exile.

Yet if Murasaki's family was in no way powerful, it had reason to be proud of its literary lineage. Both her grandfather and her great-grandfather had known Ki no Tsurayuki, the driving force behind the rehabilitation of Japanese native verse in the early tenth century, and her father, dogged somewhat by ill luck, continued this tradition of scholarship, although his chief claim to fame must be the part he played in the education of his daughter.

The date of Murasaki's birth is a matter of some controversy, but 973 is generally accepted as being close to the mark. Our knowledge of her early years is extremely sketchy. She has left behind a set of autobiographical poems in which there is a suggestion that she accompanied her father to a province north of the capital in the summer of 996. She seems to have returned in 998 to marry Fujiwara no Nobutaka (950?-1001). This was a strange affair: he was almost as old as her father and already had a number of other wives. Tradition has it that her marriage to him was a happy one; they had a daughter in 999, but then fate intervened and he was carried away by an epidemic early in 1001.

For the next four or five years Murasaki led a widow's existence, during which she began the work of fiction that was to bring her fame and secure her a place at court. We can assume that she began writing *The Tale of Genji* in either 1002 or 1003, and that she had written a fair amount by the time she entered service with Shōshi, in either 1005 or 1006. From the diary that survives, it appears that Murasaki acted as cultural companion-cum-tutor with few specific duties to

perform. She certainly had time to record what was going on and tended to remain aloof, observing court ceremonial from a distance. She seems not to have had an official court post, but was employed privately by Michinaga to serve his daughter. Her name is a combination of part of a title that her father once held, Shikibu, meaning 'Bureau of Ceremonial', and a nickname, Murasaki, which is a reference to her main female character in the *Genji* and which, as we shall see later, may have been bestowed upon her by a witty courtier.

The best information we have about Murasaki's life at court is, of course, her diary, although there are considerable gaps in what she is prepared to reveal. Tradition has it that she was one of Michinaga's concubines, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support this. By her own admission she seems to have been somewhat retiring and even severe. Her contemporaries never ranked her poetry very highly. Poetry was an intensely social activity and Murasaki does not appear in a number of important poetry competitions where one would expect to see her name. There is also a remarkable lack of any record of correspondence or exchange of poems between her and any of her major female contemporaries. Her later years, as is the case with most Heian women writers and poets, are clouded in uncertainty. She may have died as early as 1014, and this would explain why her father suddenly gave up his post and returned to the capital in that year. She may, on the other hand, have continued to serve Shōshi as late as 1025. She is definitely missing from a list of Shōshi's ladies-in-waiting dated 1031.

#### Religion

Of the three sets of beliefs that one usually associates with Japan, Buddhism, Shinto and Confucianism, the last is of only minor importance for an understanding of Murasaki Shikibu's world. Confucianism was exclusively an academic subject, synonymous with Chinese scholarship and the bureaucratic examination system. Indeed, we have to wait

until the late sixteenth century before Confucianism really begins to impinge on the intellectual life of the nation as a whole. It is doubtful whether Murasaki Shikibu or any of her contemporaries paid much attention to this alien set of practical ethics; apart from the precept of filial piety, its relevance is confined to the later reception of the *Genji*.

Shinto does, however, play a considerable role in the *Genji*. It can hardly be called an intellectual system, but the imperial family certainly claimed divinity via Shinto creation myths, and Shinto rituals connected with fertility and pollution were institutionalised in court ceremony. Over and above the simple animist beliefs lay a complex system of cults centred on certain sacred sites and shrines. Ise, Kamo and Sumiyoshi are the most important as far as the *Genji* is concerned. Unlike Buddhist temples, access to these shrines was strictly limited, and was largely the prerogative of the imperial family itself. This is why we shall find such shrines emerging only in relation to matters of state, in particular matters of imperial succession. When Genji chooses self-exile, one of these sacred places, the Sumiyoshi shrine, plays an important part not only in his return to the capital but also in his fathering of a girl who is destined to be a future empress. It is fair to say, then, that Shinto in the *Genji* is linked to matters of public rather than private concern.

It was in this last area of the private life that Buddhism played the largest part, and a cursory knowledge of basic Buddhist beliefs is central to an understanding of much that occurs in the *Genji*; it even helps us understand the shape of the work itself. On one level, Buddhism can be an abstruse subject with a plethora of conflicting doctrines expressed in a highly complex philosophical vocabulary. But it is doubtful whether anyone at the Heian court paid much attention to doctrine. The basic beliefs are reasonably simple and, as one might expect of a religion with such a huge following, emotionally satisfying.

Buddhism starts with the premise that life is marked by suffering and that such suffering is an inevitable consequence of human desire, of the craving for pleasure, attachment and

rebirth. If nothing is done to interrupt this process of birth, death and rebirth, it will continue in an endless cycle of transmigrating souls. The process of repetition is not random, but is governed by a strict law of causality known as karma. All actions in one life are to a certain extent governed by acts in former lives and will in turn be responsible for acts, and indeed incarnations, in future lives.

Given that the aim of Buddhism must be the interruption of this endless wheel, the right-thinking man, the one who has awakened from ignorance, must act to cut the cycle by attacking its root cause, namely the desire that gives rise to suffering. The aim is to negate desire in the self through intense mental and spiritual effort. Enlightenment and entry into that state of bliss known as nirvana, where the wheel no longer turns and where there is no death and no rebirth, occurs when all attachment, all desire is sloughed off. To enter nirvana is to become a Buddha, a divine being, a potential open to all men.

Clearly, if Buddhism was characterised solely by such a severe doctrine it would never have become a popular religion. The effort demanded here can only be for those few initiates who have the drive and intellect to carry through such an enterprise. For the ordinary layman there could be no hope. But at the heart of Buddhism lies compassion: there exists a secondary set of beliefs, more easily assimilated and offering a more realistic chance of salvation for the common man.

The world of birth and rebirth, of karmic law and transmigration, is not one world but many worlds: six in the popular imagination. Although these worlds coexist, they are ranked in strict vertical order: paradise, human, animal, mayhem, starving demons and hell. As these worlds coexist, passage between them is quite common, and illness, be it physical or mental, is easily explained by the belief that a spirit has wandered across the divide. Note too that paradise is not nirvana but lies *within* the world of karma. It is subject to the operation of karmic law, so that if one stops striving for perfection it is possible to slip back into a lower world.

Movement up through these worlds is achieved by good deeds and right thinking, and by evincing at least a willingness to try and negate desire. The karmic law of retribution for past sins and the transference of present sins into the future is of course not absolute, because then there would be no hope and no compassion. Salvation, in the form of an upward movement into a higher world, is always a possibility, even from the lowest of the hells. And if one lacks the ability or strength to help oneself, help is always at hand. There are a myriad divine and semi-divine figures, bodhisattvas, who have achieved enlightenment and yet through compassion remain present in all worlds to bring salvation to those who call.

Given that any form of desire will act as a block to ultimate transcendence, most of life is inevitably characterised by sin in one way or another. The Japanese word for sin, *tsumi*, literally means 'a piling-up', and it refers to that burden of past and present misdeeds that prevent birth into paradise, or even beyond. One is born, willy-nilly, with an initial burden, but the weight can be increased or decreased according to one's own free will.

The ensuing discussion of the *Genji* will illustrate how these ideas emerge in practice. The sense of transgression, for instance, is a basic principle without which the story could not operate, and the taking of vows in later life becomes an extremely important gesture towards ensuring rebirth in paradise. Vows are the sign of a genuine willingness to cast off desire, but by the same token they mark a heart-rending moment for those around one who are still tied to this world and its pleasures. Vows are in this sense a death-in-life, a renunciation, and a clear statement of the vanity of human passion. And yet it must be remembered that Buddhism is at root a religion of great hope and of everlasting second chances. The concept of eternal flux is more than partly responsible for the compassion that we find in the *Genji*, as well as the seemingly never-ending repetitions that it contains.

### Language

The use of language as a tool of cultural and sexual domination is of course a universal phenomenon, but it is rare to come across such a clear example as that afforded by conditions in Japan from the ninth to eleventh centuries, a period most notable for the uneasy coexistence of two essentially incompatible linguistic systems, Chinese and Japanese, each exerting a powerful claim to primacy. Written Chinese had been the language of government and authority in Japan for some centuries. At first a symbol of esoteric and talismanic power, it soon became the key to knowledge of a more practical nature. The first real threat to its commanding position came with the compilation of the first collection of native Japanese verse, the *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, in the late eighth century. The Japanese syllabary, evolved by adapting Chinese characters for use as a phonetic script, was still in an early stage of development, but it was adequate for the transcription of Japanese sounds and certainly constituted a threat to those who already had a vested interest in Chinese.

Such was the background to a sudden increase in emphasis on things Chinese initiated by the Emperor Saga when he came to the throne in 810. In a struggle for supremacy with his brother Heizei, who became associated with native verse, Saga inspired a passion for Chinese poetry and prose that proved to be crucial for the period we are interested in, namely the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is a measure of the prestige of Chinese that even after Saga's death in 842, Japanese poetry did not fully regain its status until the end of the century. It remained a second-class art until the first imperially commissioned anthology, the *Collection Ancient and Modern (Kokinshū)* of c. 905. The strains that resulted from this attempt to espouse Chinese and Japanese in equal measure gave rise in the last years of the ninth century to a number of texts that attempted to synthesise these two competing forms of textual authority: a major task, given the yawning gap between the two languages.

As one might expect, written Chinese was jealously

guarded and from its inception became the exclusive domain of the male. Indeed, in the public arena men were under considerable pressure not to use Japanese, to prove their fitness for office, and ultimately their masculinity, by their command of Chinese poetry and prose. Women were not taught Chinese and were thereby effectively excluded from participation in the power structure, and in order to perpetuate this state of affairs the useful fiction was generated that it was 'unbecoming' for the female to learn Chinese. We know from their diaries that by the end of the tenth century women did not always acquiesce in this fiction, but there were nevertheless powerful cultural constraints laid upon them. There can be no doubt that the acquisition of Chinese by women was seen as a threat, a subversive act of considerable, if undefined, moment. It is this attitude that lies behind the following passage from Murasaki's own diary:

When my brother, Secretary at the Ministry of Ceremonial, was a young boy learning the Chinese classics, I was in the habit of listening to him and I became unusually proficient at understanding those passages that he found too difficult to grasp. Father, a most learned man, was always regretting the fact: 'Just my luck!' he would say. 'What a pity she was not born a man!' But then I gradually realised that people were saying, 'It's bad enough when a man flaunts his learning: she will come to no good', and ever since then I have avoided writing even the simplest character. My handwriting is appalling. And as for those classics, or whatever they are called, that I used to read, I gave them up entirely. Still I kept on hearing these malicious remarks. Worried what people would think if they heard such rumours, I pretended to be unable to read even the inscriptions on the screens. Then Her Majesty asked me to read to her here and there from the *Collected Works* of Po Chü-i and, because she evinced a desire to know more about such things, we carefully chose a time when other women would not be present; amateur that I was, we read in secret the two books of Po Chü-i's *New Ballads*.

In such an environment it is only natural that women had recourse to Japanese and began to make it their own, creating a medium for the expression of their special concerns. Writing in Japanese did not become an exclusively female pursuit, but it was certainly marked as 'private' and was therefore associated with the concept of 'female'. Indeed the

word 'female' in the Heian period is often best understood as a metaphor for 'private'. It did not take long for the men to realise that in their obsession with Chinese they were beginning to lose control of their own language, and it is in part this kind of concern that lies behind the *Kokinshū* poetry anthology of 905. The commissioning of this work turned out to be a major achievement in reclaiming public status for the native poetic tradition; it also signified a reappropriation of the female into the male sphere – which is why women are under-represented in this collection.

The case with prose is somewhat different and of major interest in the present context. Japanese prose had to wait for its true beginnings until the phonetic script had become fully established, because to write Japanese exclusively in Chinese characters was an extremely cumbersome business. The history of style in the tenth century is largely the history of the attempt to create a Japanese prose style that could rival the overwhelming presence of Chinese, and the wonder is that the Japanese managed so soon and so well. The earliest examples are usually considered to be by men, but by the middle of the tenth century we have a growing tradition of female writing. A list of works from this period would include *The Gossamer Years*, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, *The Tale of Genji*, *The Murasaki Shikibu Diary*, *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, and *The Sarashina Diary*, all written by women and all of major importance. This list is a distinguished one, and it includes many autobiographical works that must be some of the earliest examples of the attempt by women living in a male-dominated society to define the self in textual terms. Indeed, it is largely because of these works that classical Japanese becomes of more than parochial interest; as a result the Heian period as a whole will always bear for us a strong female aspect. To a great extent it is the women who are the source of our historical knowledge; they have become our historians, and it is they who define the parameters within which we are permitted to approach their world and their men. In retrospect it is a form of sweet revenge.

In the context of prose as well as poetry, then, 'Japanese'

was marked as 'female' and 'private', so here too the men found themselves being divorced from their own language and condemned to work in a foreign classical medium, which of necessity channelled their thoughts and expressions along non-native paths. The realisation that such a state of affairs existed in prose came somewhat later than in poetry, but it was the same man who saw the development and acted to reverse the trend. In 935 Ki no Tsurayuki, one of the driving forces behind the *Kokinshū*, wrote a short fictionalised diary called the *Tosa Diary*, in which he pretended to be a woman writing in what he termed a male literary genre, the diary form. Having managed to shift Japanese poetry into the public, and hence male, domain, he was now trying to do the same with Japanese prose. His strategy to neutralise the female connotation largely failed, however. Women not only stayed in control, but went from strength to strength and built the tradition that has *The Tale of Genji* as its centrepiece.

#### A grammar of sexual relations

The domination of the written culture by women only becomes clear, of course, with the advantage of hindsight; the picture that women paint of themselves in their diaries is by no means one of the female triumphant. Man is at the very centre of their world, and women define themselves almost exclusively in relation to this all-powerful other. One can in fact extract from these works a set of rules that governs the literary expression of sexual relations, a sexual grammar that remains remarkably constant throughout the period, and that lies at the heart of the *Genji* and many of its presuppositions.

As with most polygamous societies, care was taken to distinguish between the status of formal wives and concubines; and because there could be a number of women in each group, the potential for rivalry and jealousy was enormous. The image of marriage is not one of domesticity. *Genji*, for instance, is supposed to live with his first wife Aoi at her father's mansion, for it was assumed that a man would set up household with his main wife either in an independent

house or at the home of the *wife's* parents; but in fact he is perpetually absent. As much of the literature concerns romantic attachments with women other than the main wife, it is full of the kind of tension that could arise when the woman's actual position *vis-à-vis* the man depended more on how often he came to visit than on any formal or legal arrangement. Only the Emperor was visited by his women; outside the palace, men visited women.

The 'rule' behind the majority of relationships was therefore that couples lived apart, and given this rule it is hardly surprising to find that the literary persona of the female is defined in terms of waiting, pining for the male, existing as the object of desire whose thoughts are constantly on the next visit. Woman is the passive centre of the narrative, there to respond to passion in the male but unable to initiate it. Fantasies centre on being seen and being spied upon; screens are there to be penetrated and a move by the male through a curtain signifies total capitulation by the woman. The very act of being seen in such an environment becomes identified with violation: the *locus classicus* for this topos of visual rape, known as *kaimami* or 'seeing through a gap in the hedge', is the first section of *The Tales of Ise*, a mid-tenth-century 'male' text that consists of a series of poems with extended prefaces:

Long ago a man who has come of age goes hunting on his estate at Kasuga village near the Nara capital. In that village live two very beautiful sisters. He sees them through a gap in the hedge. Amazed to find such an incongruity in the old capital, he loses his head. Ripping off the hem of his hunting cloak he writes down a poem and sends it in. Now the fabric is a purple print called 'wild passion': 'Ah young purple fern of Kasugano, this printed cloak, the wild disorder of my passion knows no limit.'

So goes the first section. Here the act of poetic creation is explicitly tied to the onset of sexuality. The young male must learn that the production of poetry and the tight control over emotional expression that it signifies are the *sine qua non* of the cultured man. When passion strikes, it is seen in terms of occupation by the other; love is a loss of self-control, a

spiritual possession in inverse proportion to the physical. Once the woman has been seen, activated as it were, she then has the potential to produce obsession in the man, but even this is largely out of her own control, for it is a mystery of the male rather than the female mind. Hence few of the women in the *Genji* are actually aware that they are causing so much inner turmoil. A knowledge of their capacity to generate emotion is cruelly hidden from them.

The corollary of this waiting female is man condemned to live outdoors, the eternal visitor, the eternal traveller from curtain to curtain, the constant aggressor in constant motion. He must come in the dark and leave at dawn in the best of taste. Sei Shōnagon, for instance, after a long disquisition on how men should act, demands that 'a good lover will behave as elegantly at dawn as at any other time . . . Indeed, one's attachment to a man depends largely on the eloquence of his leave-taking.'

There is, however, one area where women can become active: once activated, the predominant trait, indeed the only dynamic trait, turns out to be jealousy, a passion that tries to take revenge on any other woman who threatens to lure the man away; and whatever satisfaction the pain of other women might provide, the rules stipulate that female passion be invariably self-destructive. In *The Gossamer Years* the mother of Michitsuna reveals herself at one point as follows:

It began to appear that the lady in the alley had fallen from favour since the birth of her child. I had prayed, at the height of my unhappiness, that she would live to know what I was then suffering, and it seemed that my prayers were being answered. She was alone, and now her child was dead . . . The pain must be even sharper than mine had been. I was satisfied.

In such a world of physical separation it is hardly surprising to find an overwhelming emphasis on communication as a means of bridging the gap between self and other. Language represents a way of ratifying one's very existence, and the ability to express oneself in poetry becomes a necessary part of being desirable, for either sex. The gap itself is erotic, productive of desire, and so is the poetry that closes it, be it ever

so temporary. Narration often proceeds in the form of ritualised repartee, an exchange of poems that stands for a civilised form of coupling and recoupling. Fully half of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, for instance, consists of such exchanges. And given the rule that space must be maintained between the partners, the medium is to a large extent written poetry with the hand-carried letter as the means. The letter is, of course, a substitute, a sign of absence; and by that token the physical object, its form, its 'hand', becomes a fetish. Thus, when a letter is sent, great care is taken to choose the paper, the accompanying gift, and even the messenger so that they all correctly match the mood of the occasion.

Even more important, the 'hand' reveals sex, age, status, and taste; as such it triggers sexual passion. Relationships often begin solely on the basis of handwriting, and graphology becomes an essential talent, an integral part of sexual mores. So strong is the mystique of the written sign that it becomes the mark of certain identity. In this body of literature there are many examples of physical substitution, of intentional and unintentional mistakes in the dark, but on no occasion does writing become the agent of deception. The written cannot lie; it cannot be allowed to lie, for otherwise communication would become impossible; mistakes occur only when the letter fails to reach its destination. Writing seems at times to be privileged over presence itself.

The old Japanese word for a letter, for writing, is *fumi*, said to derive from the word for a 'print' or 'trace'. Whether this definition is etymologically correct or not, it was seen to be so and the script is often referred to as being like the tracks of a bird on sand: it is what remains. And yet the culture imbues these signs with certainty. The letter is proof of absence, but at the same time it testifies, containing within it the essence of the absent party. But it is not the written word *per se* that constitutes proof; it is the 'hand' itself. The message is often deliberately obscure and couched in vague terms on the grounds that words can actually betray, but the 'hand', the graphic sign in and of itself, cannot.

It is in this kind of context that one can perhaps speak



metaphorically of woman seeing herself as a text to be read by man whenever he chances by. In the frustration of waiting, she first begins to read and then writes herself. And as she exists to generate male interest, she can have no power of her own until she is in turn 'read'. Indoors, forever waiting, she can become a force only when seen and opened, for without the male reader the female text is barren. This is why for the cataloguer Sei Shōnagon the unopened, unread letter comes under the rubric of 'depressing things':

One has written a letter, taking pains to make it as attractive as possible, and now one impatiently awaits the reply. 'Surely the messenger should be back by now', one thinks. Just then he returns; but in his hand he carries, not a reply, but one's own letter, still twisted or knotted as it was sent, but now so dirty and crumpled that even the ink-mark on the outside has disappeared.

And the man? He is of course never allowed to read the female text at leisure, but can open only the first few pages, an act to be endlessly repeated in future visits. The form of most of the introspective writing by these women in turn reflects this sexual grammar: they produce diaries rather than fully fledged autobiographies and betray a noticeable lack of interest in endings. For both male and female, reading means suspension rather than resolution, and it is the opening of the book rather than its closing that constitutes the obsessive gesture.

In contrast to male writings in Chinese, with their interest in names, objects, dates, and the careful recording of ceremonial in the interests of documenting precedent, the autobiographical writings by the women are never situated in a concrete, historical context. There are few dates, few names, no references to political realities. It is as if the women have consciously cut away that part of the world over which they have no power, preferring to concentrate on private fears and sorrows. The effect is disturbing, not only because women present themselves in a permanent vacuum, but because there is apparently no hope or even desire for order: just an endless repetition of seasonal cycles, and visits by their reader. It is in such a context that Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of*

*Genji* takes on such importance and constitutes such an extraordinary advance. As we shall see, it is precisely by taking history and politics into account that Murasaki first managed to break out of the autobiographical strait-jacket that her contemporaries had so successfully created for themselves.

### History and fiction

Titles often contain clues for the careful reader, and *The Tale of Genji* is no exception. The word 'Genji', or 'Minamoto clan', is originally a family name given to imperial princes who had been reduced to commoner status, a measure begun during the reign of Emperor Saga (r. 809-23) for largely financial reasons, and continued on and off for the next hundred years. The connotation is therefore that the bearer of such a name, particularly if he belongs to the first generation, is of royal blood and has been hived off as an embarrassment; he is unlikely ever to succeed to the throne. What is more, by Murasaki Shikibu's time in the early years of the eleventh century very few members of the Genji family held high office, nearly all the power being in the hands of the Fujiwara. From the outset, then, we have a hero who is dispossessed of a potential birthright, but who will also inevitably incur the displeasure of the Fujiwara Regents; he is still close enough to the throne to represent a latent threat, but he himself has lost the advantage of being a prince. The story is pregnant with political significance from the very beginning. The hero is in the centre of a charged field, the two poles of which are power and sexuality.

Cultures often commemorate their victims in literature. Indeed it is only when the culture finds a way to pacify and pay homage to its victims that it can live with itself, and literature lies at the heart of this slow process of self-realisation and rehabilitation. The general impression most people have of the *Genji* is of indolent court life devoted to the arts and other aesthetic pursuits, the 'Rule of Taste' as the historian Sir George Sansom put it; but in fact the story opens with a catalogue of violent upheaval. Society has strict rules, and

none more so than a court society for which the maintenance of artificial hierarchies is a major preoccupation.

The plot of this vast story is set in motion when the Emperor conceives an unreasonable passion for a woman of unsuitable rank. The paradox at the centre is that although the Emperor is personally surrounded by an excess of sexual opportunities, it is vital that the royal lineage be carefully monitored; distinctions between his allowable wives and a miscellany of concubines are sacrosanct. So when the Emperor breaks a fundamental rule, the whole world is set in turmoil. A violent passion provokes a violent response. The lady in question, Kiritsubo, is hounded to death very early on by her betters, and her child, so beautiful and radiant that he represents a kind of miracle, is born a victim destined to lose both birthright and mother. He will spend the rest of his life in search of both. Note, however, that the Emperor himself is also a victim, in the sense that his obsessive attraction that flouts all rules of normal behaviour is not only miraculous but also dire in its effects. We shall return to this question of obsession and possession in due course. In the world of the *Genji*, this inexplicable and unavoidable part of human nature is akin to original sin. It generates the tale itself, fuels much of its progress, and, in the form of the explicitly Buddhist sin of a lingering attachment to this world and all its pleasures, remains to haunt us at the end.

The Emperor's 'original sin' in this case must be seen in the framework of the political system with which Murasaki herself was familiar. The Japanese Emperor, being in essence a sacred centre, did not rule at all. Power lay in the hands of those around him, and in particular the Fujiwara. Emperors were largely puppets, and very young puppets at that. Much of court intrigue was concerned with getting a Fujiwara woman from the most powerful arm of that family to become the Emperor's main wife, thus ensuring that the next occupant of the throne would have a Fujiwara mother and hence be controllable. In a sense the battle was also generational: the Fujiwaras tried to produce a situation where the Emperor was in fact little more than a raw youth, subject to the

enormous pressure of a grandfather figure. In Murasaki's time this figure was of course Michinaga. The question of legitimacy was indivisible from Fujiwara power and dominance. They were concerned to control and use the excess of sexuality at the centre for their own ends, so that when the Emperor flaunted his desire, the whole system that bound him was implicitly threatened. In the context of the *Genji* this 'original sin' becomes a kind of anti-Fujiwara, anti-establishment device, full of dramatic potential.

In this sense, then, the sacred centre was controlled by a very profane and intensely politicised secular authority. The *Genji* as a whole shows that this was not really an ideal state of affairs, because it brought into question the nature of the imperial family. Matters had not always been so, as Murasaki Shikibu herself was very much aware. This is one of the main reasons that the *Genji* is in fact set in a period roughly one hundred years prior to the time that she was writing. In an earlier period the Emperor had been infinitely less shackled, the Fujiwara less dominant, and the *Genji*, those dispossessed princes, still very much in the picture.

Clues as to what precise period Murasaki had in mind for a background abound in the early parts of the book; they range from the kind of musical instruments used, to the names of institutions and even to the names of emperors. Identification of such details was a major preoccupation of the medieval commentaries in their drive to root the story in some kind of historical reality and thus strengthen not only its status, but also its actual use as a document that could be referred to for precedent. Some of the details, however, are of more than antiquarian interest and are of importance for the present-day reader as well; they help us to understand how Murasaki saw her task, and how readers of the time probably approached the work as a whole.

The two most important clues given in the text are as follows. First, the opening passage 'In what reign was it?' is somewhat different from the more usual opening formula for Japanese tales: 'At a time now past'. It is more specific and invites us to try and identify a historical period. Chapter 1

gives us the first clue by referring to the Emperor Uda (r. 887-97) twice by name, once when Genji's father is gazing at Uda's illustrations to Po Chü-i's 'Song of Everlasting Sorrow' (S 11) and once again in connection with the Korean Embassy (S 14). The first reference also includes the historical names, Ise, who was Emperor Uda's favourite concubine, and Ki no Tsurayuki (868?-945?), the famous court poet to whom we have already referred. A Korean Embassy is also mentioned in this chapter, and we know that the last official Korean visit to Heian-kyō was in 928. The Kōro Mansion where the Koreans are accommodated (S 14) was a real building, known to have fallen into disuse soon after this time, for we have a memorandum complaining to the Emperor Murakami (r. 946-67) that it was already reduced to little more than a melon patch. The above clearly suggests that the opening chapters are set in the years 901-23, an era that we know from other sources was treated as a kind of golden age in Murasaki's time. It signified the time when court culture as Murasaki knew it had been truly formed, when the first imperial anthology, the *Kokinshū*, had been compiled, and when the Fujiwaras had been kept in their place.

The second clue involves a possible model for Genji himself. The most likely historical figure that Murasaki had in mind when she created her hero was the last 'first-generation Genji', Minamoto no Takaakira (914-82), whom the Emperor Daigo had made a commoner in 920. He rose to the position of Minister of the Left, incurred Fujiwara displeasure and, as we have already mentioned, was exiled in 969, accused of plotting against the government. The incident rocked the court at the time, and is the only political incident to be recorded in the otherwise private and self-centred pages of *The Gossamer Years*. These equivalents can be correlated to reveal the following picture:

*Tale of Genji emperors*

The former Emperor  
Ichi no In  
Kiritsubo Emperor  
Suzaku  
Reizei

*Historical emperors*

Kōkō (r. 884-7)  
Uda (r. 887-97)  
Daigo (r. 897-930)  
Suzaku (r. 930-46)  
Murakami (r. 946-67)

Given this kind of historical backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that when Emperor Ichijō listened to *Genji* being read out to him, he exclaimed about its author: 'She must have read the Chronicles of Japan . . . she seems very learned.' It is a commonplace of *Genji* criticism that Murasaki arranged all this on purpose in order to give the work a seriousness and relevance that fiction was not meant to possess. As we progress through the work this historical crutch becomes less and less important, and indeed less and less tenable, as Genji eventually fathers an emperor, but in the early stages it certainly plays its part. In this sense, then, the *Genji* is a historical novel. But it should be stressed that such historical detail is of the same status as any other technique designed to increase the verisimilitude of the fictional world; it is a matter of legitimisation, of filling it with so many signs of the public domain that the illusion is created that the fiction itself is of the same ilk.

Another commonplace is that as the early miraculous story becomes gradually overlaid with both political and psychological complications, the *Genji* moves from romance to something like anti-romance, or novel. As the romance wanes so the historical background weakens, until they are both in the end deemed unnecessary. Neither should we ourselves be tempted to place too much emphasis on these historical equivalents. Murasaki, after all, produced her own world, and it is this world that we must now explore.