Murasaki Shikibu, <u>The Tale of Genji</u>
2 meetings discussion group--February

CHAPTERS 1-7

TIPS FOR READING

- Before starting to read, spend some time with the MI website. The videos especially will help readers conjure up images and sounds described in the reading.
- The introduction to the Tyler edition has a useful, short plot summary (pp. xii-xvii).
- Readers may, at first, have trouble identifying characters and speakers, who are referenced by titles or locations, not names. The indices at the end of the Tyler edition provide complete lists of characters and titles used in the novel, but these long lists can be overwhelming. The following minimal list of titles will help readers get started:
    - His/her Majesty—an emperor or empress
    - His/her Eminence—a retired emperor or former empress
    - His/her Highness—a prince or princess
    - Heir Apparent—formally designated successor to the reigning emperor
    - His Excellency—a minister or chancellor
    - Consort—an imperial wife whose father was at least a minister or prince
    - Intimate—an imperial wife of lower standing than a consort
    - Haven—a consort or intimate who has born a child to an heir apparent, an emperor, or a retired emperor
- Many of the footnotes in the Tyler edition are for specialists (e.g. they frequently trace poetic allusions). Although some notes are explanatory and helpful, on a first read it might be wise not to get bogged down in reading the footnotes.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. In chapter two, "The Broom Tree," the 17-year-old Genji participates in a conversation among older men about women: classifying them according to the social hierarchy of the time and recounting stories of various lovers who are too forward or too passive or too jealous or too proud of their learning or . . . . How does this scene serve as a frame for the relationships of Genji narrated in the subsequent chapters? How do the experiences of "the shining Prince" with the following women compare to the experiences narrated by his comrades?
    - Fujitsubo, Genji's stepmother
    - Aoi, Genji's first wife
    - Utsusemi—the married lady who rejects his advances
    - Yūgao—the hidden lady who had been the lover of his friend Tō no Chūjõ
    - The Rokujō haven, Genji's jealous former lover
    - Murasaki, the child Genji adopts
    - Suetsumuhana, the shy, lonely lady of little grace
    - The Dame of Staff—the coquettish older woman of "undying randiness" (p. 146)

2. What does the contemporary reader learn about the lives of women in Heian Japan from the conversation about women and the subsequent stories of Genji's affairs?
    - How are women's lives determined by class hierarchies?
    - How and to what end are women situated in domestic spaces?
    - What do court women do with their time?
    - What roles do servant women and nurses play in the complicated heterosexual relationships in the novel?
    - What vulnerabilities do even some of the most exalted women suffer? What options do women have to preserve their bodies, their health, their livelihoods, their status, their children, and their dignity?

3. This novel was written by a woman in a script mostly used by women. It was read out loud among court women, then later read privately in manuscript by women.
    - Given these facts, how is the reader to understand the chapter about men's opinions of women? Is Murasaki's narrator taking the position of what film critics call "the male gaze" in a straight-forward manner in order to set up the structure of what follows in the novel? Or is this female narrator mocking the views of these men, who seem to voice the eternal lament: "Women! Can't live with them; can't live without them."
    - Moreover, the narrator sometimes intervenes to locate herself as a female observer and taleteller: e.g. She opens chapter two with a disclaimer: "Shining Genji: the name was imposing, but not so its bearer's many deplorable lapses; and considering how quiet he kept his wanton ways . . . whoever broadcast his secrets to all the world was a terrible gossip." Is Murasaki characterizing her own narrator as this "terrible gossip" (p. 22, see also p. 80)?
    - These questions raise the larger question of how readers are to understand the tone and stance of the narrator throughout the novel. Is her fulsome praise of Genji sincere? Is she ever ironic? What about her humor? E.G. How are we to take comments like this condemnation of women who rebuff Genji: "Those who remained willfully cool simply failed, in the prim and proper heartlessness of their ways, to know their place . . . ." (p. 113).

4. In many ways this whole novel is about desire.
    - But the act of sex is always occluded. (e.g. When did Genji impregnate Fujitsubo?) What effects does this kind of occlusion create for the reader?
    - Contemporary categories for sex acts (e.g. homosexuality and rape) don't seem to apply to sexuality in Heian Japan. How do you read Genji's barging into Utsusemi's quarters? How do you read his taking of Utsusemi's younger brother as both go-between and sexual partner? How do you read his abduction of Yūgao for the night and Murasaki to raise as a perfect future wife?
    - Why is the episode of the Dame of Staff so comical?
    - How are readers to understand the repeated examples of surrogacy and substitution of sexual partners? (You will see more of these as the novel progresses.)
        - Genji is attracted to Fujitsubo, in part, because he is told she resembles his dead mother.
        - Genji is attracted to Murasaki, in part, because she resembles Fujitsubo.

- When Utsusemi rebuffs Genji he takes first her younger brother, then her stepdaughter as sexual substitutions.

Does the almost obsessive repetition of sexual surrogacy and substitution suggest anything about the psychology of these characters, about the social structure of Heian era Japan, about . . . ?

5. Nature and art are central to the world of these characters.
   - How do the rhythms of nature order time and emotions in the world of the novel?
   - How do natural elements (plants, weather, bodies of water, etc.) allow for the expression of emotion in the poetry that gallants and women alike are required to exchange?
   - Why does Murasaki devote so much attention to elaborate descriptions of dress (color and style), music (on a variety of instruments), dance, painting, calligraphy (on various types of paper), perfume, incense, etc.?
   - When Genji, behind a screening fence, listens to the orphaned Suetsumuhana play the kin (a 13-stringed zither), he muses, "Why, in the old tales this is just the kind of place that provides the setting for all sorts of moving scenes!" (p. 115). To what extent do characters in this world approach life as a work of art?

CHAPTERS 8-13

TIPS FOR READING--The major characters to remember in chapters 8-13:

- Fujitsubo—Genji's stepmother, the empress
- Reizei—Fujitsubo's son by Genji, the heir apparent
- Suzaku—emperor after Genji's father abdicates the throne
- Kokiden Consort—Genji's father's consort, mother of Suzaku, enemy of Genji
- The Rokujō haven—Genji's jealous former lover
- Akikonomu—the haven's daughter, the Ise Princess
- Aoi—Genji's first wife
- Yūguri—Genji's son by Aoi
- Tō no Chūjō—Genji's friend/rival and brother-in-law
- Oborozukiyo—Genji's conquest and sister of the Kokiden Consort
- Murasaki—the child Genji raises to be his second wife
- The Novice—a former minister, retired to religious life
- Akashi—the Novice's daughter, Genji's conquest

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Is there significant development in Genji's character in these chapters?
   - What is Genji learning, if anything, about the consequences of his actions?
   - What is he learning, if anything, about the inevitable tragedies of life?
   - How would you explain his wavering and sometimes contradictory attitudes toward the women in his life, especially the Rokujō haven, Aoi, and Oborozukiyo?
   - Are his feelings for Murasaki likewise subject to change?

2. The jealous woman who is transformed into a demon is an important figure in Japanese mythology (https://yokai.com/hannya/).
    - Of what specifically is the Rokujō haven jealous?
    - Is she the conscious agent of the destructive powers of her spirit?
    - How might the figure of this monstrous demon serve to help form female self-consciousness and identity?

3. How do Genji's sexual escapades entangle him in the power politics of the court?
    - Why does the Kokiden consort plot Genji's downfall?
    - Why is the heir apparent Reizei vulnerable in the current court atmosphere?
    - Why is Fujitsubo, Reizei's mother and Genji's great love, likewise vulnerable in the current court atmosphere?
    - Why does Genji go into voluntary exile?

4. Modern western ideas of marital fidelity obviously do not apply in Heian court culture.
    - What, however, seems to be a high moral obligation for these polyamorous men?
    - What consequences do the men in this culture face as a result of the pervasive sequestration and oppression of consorts, intimates, wives, and daughters?
    - Which characters, male and female, are preoccupied with problems of protecting powerless and vulnerable women? Without male protection, what options do women have?
    - How do you evaluate Genji's treatment of the women, old and young, in his life?

5. Do Genji's sexual escapades, marital trials, and political entanglements seem to be having a cumulative effect on his world view?
    - How does he interpret his court rejection?
    - How does he interpret his discovery of the Novice and his daughter?
    - How does he interpret the reversal of his banishment?
    - How would you characterize the attitude that replaces his youthful optimism and reckless impetuosity?

6. In exile Genjji encounters a community of humble seafolk.
    - What is suggested by Genji's inability to understand their impenetrable jargon?
    - When he asks them to share their harvest of shellfish with his guest Tō no Chūjō, what does he learn about the world beyond the Heian court?
    - How does Genji treat the seafolk during the terrifying storm?

7. What makes the Novice an eccentric, perhaps even comic figure?
    - What do you think of his ambitions for his daughter?
    - What problem do these ambitions pose for his commitment to religious retirement?

8. What do you make of the poems that dot the narrative?
    - How does their technique of allusive indirection enhance the love stories in which they play a large role?

- Do you find them beautiful, expressive, and romantic, or are they too often repetitive and commonplace? How does their variable quality characterize their authors?
- In addition to writing poems and letters in fine calligraphy, painting, and playing musical instruments, how do these characters seem to live their quotidian lives (even in the most tragic moments) as if they were creating an aesthetically beautiful object?

9. Periodically, Murasaki's narrator interjects comments—about what constitutes good or bad poetry, about what a woman can and cannot write, about how she will be judged for revealing Genji's flaws, etc.
- What effects do these self-conscious interjections have on the reader?
- Why would Murasaki craft her tale as mediated by a specifically female (and sometimes intrusive) presence?

Chapters 14-22

1. Politics

How do shifts in the balance of power at the court bring about Genji's recall from exile?

- Despite the re-instatement of his rank and status, what attitude does Genji take to the new political order in the court and to the exercise of political power in general?
- Once Genji's half-brother, the Emperor Suzaku, abdicates and Fujitsubu's son, Reizei, becomes emperor, what new dangers arise to threaten the political order of the court? Why would Reizei feel that he should abdicate and yield the position of emperor to Genji?
- Despite Genji's repeatedly stated desire to avoid court duties and do as he pleases, how do his relationships with important women in his life keep drawing him back into court intrigue? E.G.
    - Fujitsubo, the retired empress and secret beloved of Genji
    - Oborozukiyo, his former love who becomes Mistress of Staff to Emperor Suzaku
    - Akikonomu, whom the Rokujō haven asked Genji to care for as a daughter
    - Akashi, his daughter by the lady of Akashi
- How does the friendly adolescent rivalry between Genji and Tō no Chūjō evolve into a political rivalry? How does this rivalry manifest itself in relation to sons, daughters, and even art?

2. Taking care of women

In a parallel scene to the conversation between male friends about their experiences with women in chapter 2, Murasaki stages a conversation in chapter 20 between Genji and Murasaki about the important women in Genji's life.

- How does Genji evaluate his relationship with the following women in this conversation? Does the evaluation he voices to Murasaki match what the reader knows about his engagements with each of these woman?
    - Fujitsubo, the retired (then deceased) empress with whom he fathered the now Emperor Reizei
    - Murasaki herself

    - Asagao, the former Kamo princess who resists Genji's advances
    - Oborozukiyo, the lover with whom Genji was caught in the episode that precipitated his exile
    - Akashi, the Novice's daughter with whom Genji had an affair during his exile that resulted in a daughter
    - Hanachirusato, the lady in the east pavilion
- How would you describe Genji's relationship with Murasaki, whom he considers "the lady of his house"?
    - How does Murasaki cope with Genji's seemingly incorrigible tendency to pursue whatever woman attracts him at the moment?
    - Why does Murasaki immediately agree to take charge of the daughter Genji fathered by the Akashi lady during his exile?
- Why does Genji repeatedly take on elaborate. costly building projects: rebuilding a mansion at his residence in Nijo, renovating the run-down house of Suetsumuhana, then constructing an elaborate complex in Rokujō?
    - How do the denizens of these complexes relate to their neighbors in other wings?
    - Why does Genji continue to care for Suetsumuhana, the graceless lady with the red nose?
    - What do these construction projects of both dwellings and gardens reveal about Genji's most deeply held values?
- Given Genji's generosity, how is the reader to judge the decisions of the women who resist his will?
    - Might Utsusemi (the lady of the cicada shell) and Asagao (the lady of the bluebells) have fared better in the end if they had yielded to Genji?
    - Why does the Akashi lady, who agrees to relinquish her daughter, resist Genji's entreaties to move to his complex?

3. Taking care of children

In this section of the novel, Genji evolves from rake to caretaker, not only of his former lovers, but also of several children, his and others'.

- How do you evaluate his parenting of Yūgiri, his son by Aoi?
    - What do you think of Genji's decision to insist that Yūgiri rise through the ranks in this elaborately hierarchical society by his own merits?
    - Does this decision have unintended consequences?
    - Is Yūgiri a chip off the old block or does he differ from his father's younger self in significant ways?
- How would you compare Genji's parenting of his son Yūgiri to Tō no Chūjō's parenting of his daughter Kumoi no Kari?
- How does Genji see his role as Akashi's father? What drives his sense of obligations toward her future, and what plans does he make?
- What threats does Genji face to the great secret of his paternity of the Emperor Reizei? How does the father try to look out for the son's well-being, all the while keeping his paternity a secret?
- What do you think of the Rokujō's dying wish that Genji care for her daughter, Akikonomu, the former Ise Princess?

    - What threatens to derail Genji's paternal obligations to Akikonomu?
    - Why, in the end, does he exercise unusual self-restraint in his relations to his former lover's daughter?
- Why does Genji decide to bring the long-lost Tamakazura, Tō no Chūjō's daughter by Yūgao (Genji's lover killed by a spirit), to live at Rokujō and to raise her as his own daughter? How is she to fit into the female social order of the complex?

4. Religion

Throughout the novel the plot moves through the courtly calendar of Shinto festivals to celebrate the seasons; episodes with significant meetings begin with pilgrimages to Shinto shrines; the trajectory of action is changed by Shinto taboos prohibiting contact with death; princesses are exalted to duty at important Shinto shrines, etc.

- Since the Emperor is a descendent of the Shinto Sun Goddess and is thus the preserver of the cosmic order, why is Reizei so disturbed to learn that he is Genji's son?
- Besides the importance of Shintoism in the structure of the novel's plot, do Shinto religious beliefs and practices seem to have a determining force in the characters' psychology?

Likewise, throughout the novel, characters become monks, novices, and nuns; prayers to the Buddha are offered when characters are sick or dying; and some characters who experience death and loss are drawn to the Buddhist idea of renouncing the endless cycle of the world's trials.

- How do Buddhist beliefs impact Genji's understanding of his relation to the Novice and his daughter Akashi?
- Despite Genji's triumphant return from exile and his lavish patronage of brilliant court festivals, why does he build a private chapel in the hills?
- After experiencing the treachery of court intrigue, the suffering of exile, the death of Fujitsubo, then her return in a dream to chastise him, has Genji fundamentally changed? Or is he deeply conflicted? Why does he not act on his "desire to shut himself away in peace, so as to prepare for the life to come" (p. 330)?

Do the Shinto elements of the novel's plot and setting clash with the Buddhist call for renunciation that speaks to some characters? Are these religions portrayed as conflicting world views, or do they co-exist in a space beyond theological inconsistency in Murasaki's representation of her novel's world?

5. The Arts

Although Murasaki, who herself knew Chinese, repeatedly has her coy narrator voice a reluctance to judge poetry (p. 383), she often allows her characters to mock bad poetry: e.g. the poem that an oafish suitor sends to Tamakazura (p. 411-12) and the thank-you poem Suetsumuhana sends Genji for a new year's gift (p. 426-28).

- What aesthetic criteria seems to shape these judgments of what constitutes bad poetry?

The court rivalry between Reizei's two consorts, Akikonomu (Genji's adopted daughter) and the young Kokiden consort (Tō no Chūjō's daughter), becomes focused on a painting contest, which, of course, Genji's side wins. After the winner is announced, Genji and the prince who judged the

contest discuss the aristocratic attitude toward the practice of the arts—whether painting, poetry, or music (pp. 329-30).
Why is the ideal of the amateur artist (who has talent in many arts, but never works hard at any) so appealing to aristocratic cultures—whether in Heian Japan or Renaissance England (cf. Sir Phillip Sidney)?

Chapters 23-32

TIPS FOR READING—It will be helpful to keep track of these new characters as well as these previously-introduced characters who become important in this section of the novel:

- Tō no Chūjō—Genji's friend/rival, father of
  - Kashiwagi—son
  - Kōbai—son
  - The Kokiden Consort—daughter who is a consort of the Emperor Reizei
  - Kumoi no Kari—daughter, who was pursued by Yūgiri
  - Tamakazura—long, lost daughter by Yugao (see chapter 2)
  - Omi—newly discovered daughter
- Yūgiri—Genji's son by Aoi
- Hotaru—Genji's half brother
- Higekuro—husband of Tamakazura
- Higekuro's wife who is afflicted by a spirit

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. At this half-way point in your reading, does The Tale of Genji seem to be a unified whole? Or does it read more like a series of slightly related episodes?
   - The novel is punctuated by scenes in which Genji discusses or visits the women who are or have once been important in his life. What purpose(s) do these scenes serve in the narrative?
   - Likewise, the novel is punctuated by descriptions of seasonal festivals (e.g. the dragon boat excursion to see the spring flowers), rituals (e.g. the donning of the train ceremonies), and/or courtly entertainments (e.g. mumming at New Year's). What purpose(s) do these scenes serve in the overall narrative?
   - Frequently, events from the distant past reemerge into the present (e.g. the discovery of Tamakazura, the "little pink" whose birth Tō no Chūjō mentions in chapter 2). Moreover, history seems to repeat itself (e.g. Yūgiri is attracted to Murasaki, the wife of his father, whose great love was the wife of his father). Can you think of other similar narrative repetitions? What purpose(s) do these types of repetition serve in the overall narrative?

2. This section of the novel foregrounds the problems of fatherhood. E.G. Toward the end of chapter 28, Tō no Chūjō complains to his mother, "To tell the truth, I think one can do without daughters. They are nothing but trouble" (p. 495). Then, toward the end of chapter 32, Genji doles out sage advice to his son Yūgiri that (comically?) reminds the reader of the father's own past failures (pp. 555-56).
   - What motivates Genji in his role of "father"

    - to Yūgiri?
    - to Tamakazura?
    - to Akashi?

  What role(s) do personal, familial, and political motivations play in his actions and decisions?
- What motivates Tō no Chūjō in his role of father
    - to Kumoi no Kari?
    - to Tamakazura?
    - to Omi?

  What role(s) do personal, familial, and political motivations play in his actions and decisions?

- Putting aside our contemporary conceptions of fatherhood, how would you evaluate Tō no Chūjō and Genji as fathers in the context of Heian court culture? As young men they were rivals in love and courtly accomplishments, how does this rivalry continue into their competing motivations in raising the next generation? Is one the better father?

3. Previous chapters have introduced the motif of surrogacy and substitution of sexual partners (e.g. Genji is attracted to Fujitsubo, in part, because he is told she resembles his dead mother, then he is attracted to Murasaki, in part, because she resembles Fujitsubo). In this section of the novel, these sexual/familial entanglements flirt with actual or indirect incest.
    - Which relationships flirt with father/daughter and mother/son incest? Which relationships flirt with brother/sister incest?
    - Why and how do many of these relationships center on Tamakazura?
    - What do these sexual/familial entanglements suggest about the psychology of these characters, about the social structure of Heian era Japan, about narrative titillation, about . . . ?

4. The central plot of these chapters focuses on the plight of Tamakazura as a trapped woman.
    - How and why does she become central to the lives of all the male characters?
    - How does being the object of the relentless male gaze affect her psyche and health?
    - What specific traps are posed by
        - the attentions of her adoptive father Genji?
        - her secret relationship to her real father Tō no Chūjō?
        - the pursuit of multiple young suitors?
        - potential palace service to the Emperor Reizei?
        - possible marriage to Higekuro?
    - What does the fate of the wife of Higekuro suggest about traps that Tamakazura might face in her future?
    - What escape options does Murasaki's narrative offer for such trapped women?
    - Does the fact that a female author analyzes in such complexity the no-win position these women face make this novel a feminist classic, as some have claimed?

5. Chapters 25 and 32 present scenes that reflect on the work of Murasaki, the author, who is writing these very scenes.

- When Akashi's mother sends her illustrated books of old stories, Tamakazura is fascinated by these tales. But Genji launches into a critique of fiction as lies that resembles Plato's famous rejection of fiction in his ideal "Republic."
    - What is the tone of Genji's critique?
    - How does he then mount "a very fine defense of tales" (p. 461)?
    - But why does he later warn Murasaki about allowing the young Akashi to read tales about "a heroine secretly in love" or "evil stepmothers . . . since the old tales are full of them" (pp. 462-3)?
    - How do Genji's comments reflect on the extent of his own self-knowledge? How do these comments reflect on the author's conception of her own narrative art?
- When Genji is preparing for Akashi's donning of the train ceremony, he wants to give her a box full of books. This episode allows Murasaki to describe in great detail nuances of writing in *kana*, "the woman's style," the script in which Murasaki herself has written this novel (pp. 552-55).
    - What does the reader learn in this passage about the arts of "reed writing" and "poem pictures"? about who excels (and who does not) at calligraphy? about paper types and colors? about preparing ink, etc.?
    - How does this episode reflect on the art that is gendered as female and that produced the novel that contains this episode?

6. Both Tamakazura's oafish suitor (pp. 409-12) and Omi, Tō no Chūjō's talkative daughter (pp. 510-12), are mocked by other characters in the novel.

- Of course, what is funny is culturally determined. So in the context of Heian court culture, why are these figures singled out for ridicule? What traits do they share that makes them the butt of jokes?
- Is the reader supposed to share the mirth? Is there any hint of a critique of the mockers?