

Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji

Every other month discussion groups—December

## 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?

