

Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji

Monthly discussion groups—October, ch. 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 Chūjō
 - 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 tale-teller: 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?