

Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji

Monthly discussion group—January, ch. 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
- Hige-kuro—husband of Tamakazura
- Hige-kuro’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 Higeкуро?
  - What does the fate of the wife of Higeкуро 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?