

Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji

Monthly discussion group—March, ch. 37-45

TIP FOR READING—It will be helpful to keep track of the most important characters in this section of the novel:

- Kashiwagi—Tō no Chūjō’s eldest son, deceased father of Kaoru
- Yūgiri —Genji’s son, husband of Kumoi no Kari, but pursues Kashiwagi’s widow
- Kobai—Kashiwagi’s younger brother, father of 2 daughters + 1 step-daughter
- Tamakazura--Tō no Chūjō’s daughter, widowed with 3 sons + 2 daughters
- The Eighth Prince—Genji’s half-brother, a widower with 2 daughters, who has retreated from the world to study the scriptures
- Kaoru—“The Fragrant Captain,” thought to be Genji’s son
- Niou—“The Perfumed Prince,” son of the Empress Akashi and thus Genji’s grandson
- Ben—daughter of Kashiwagi’s nurse, who cared for him when he was dying

1. As the novel follows the life of Genji and then his descendants, more and more characters take religious vows and retire from the world, or they yearn to retreat, but can’t.
 - What motivates these characters?
 - Religious commitment to renounce life’s never-ending cycles of desire and loss?
 - Intention to prepare for an approaching death?
 - Escape from an untenable situation?
 - Despair, depression, guilt, or other negative psychological state?
 - Other possibilities . . . ?
 - Which characters experience which of the above motivations?
 - Which characters find themselves unable to act, despite these motivations?
 - What factors prevent characters from acting on their desire to retreat from the world?
2. Secrets and gossip, especially about parentage, often become the engine that drives the plots of novels, and the revelation of secrets is often a climactic moment.
 - How does the revelation of the Emperor Reizei’s true father compare/contrast to the revelation of Kaoru’s true father?
 - What has aroused Kaoru’s suspicions about his birth? How has growing up with these suspicions shaped his personality?
 - Who else shares Kaoru’s suspicions? What has aroused their suspicions?
 - Why are nurses, waiting women, and monks so often the keepers of these secrets? What prompts them to reveal what they know?
 - Gossiping, keeping secrets, and sometimes revealing them are only one aspect of the importance of waiting women in propelling the plot of this novel.
 - What other important roles do waiting women play in the stories of both married and unmarried women?
 - Do these often-unnamed characters wield a measure of social power that belies their low social status?

3. As the friends/rivals Tō no Chūjō and Genji age, the focus of the novel shifts to the second generation. Specifically, chapters 34-36 relate the tragic death of Tō no Chūjō's eldest son Kashiwagi, then chapters 37 and 39 relate Yūgiri's pursuit of Kashiwagi's widow.
- How does Yūgiri's comportment in his pursuit of Kashiwagi's widow (the Second Princess of the Retired Emperor Suzaku) compare to Kashiwagi's pursuit of her sister (the Third Princess)? How would you compare/contrast their treatment of their wives?
 - Does Yūgiri's friendship/rivalry with Kashiwagi mirror the friendship/rivalry between their fathers? How do these supposed half-brothers resemble and/or differ from their real fathers?
4. The narration of Murasaki's final months, her death, and Genji's mourning seem to bring The Tale of Genji to a natural close.
- In what way does Murasaki perform the Heian era ideal of a good death?
 - What does Genji's mourning reveal about the self-knowledge that he achieves (or fails to achieve) before his own death?
 - Why is Genji so moved and comforted by the letter and poem of condolence that he receives from Akikonomu (the Rokujō Haven's daughter whom Genji had cared for and placed as Reizei's consort, then Empress)?

*"Had she no love then for sere wastes of withered
Moors, that the departed
never wished to set her heart on all
That commends autumn?
Now at last I understand."* (p. 763)

What episodes earlier in the novel do these words of condolence evoke? How does this letter relate to Murasaki's dying commendation of her red plum tree to her favorite, Niou?
5. Do you notice a change in prose style and/or narrative style after the blank chapter, "Vanishing into the Clouds," which signifies Genji's death?
- Prose style?
 - For example, after the blank chapter (p. 781), do you find many descriptive passages like the following excerpt?

"Down a mountain wind that stripped the trees and swept a rushing storm of leaves from the kudzu vines on high came faint scripture chanting and the calling of the Name. . . . The waterfall roared as though to rouse the stricken from their sorrows. Crickets among the grasses sang forlornly, in failing voices, while tall, dewy gentians sprang from beneath withered weeds as though autumn were theirs alone." (p. 737)
 - For another example, before the blank chapter, do you find many passages of exposition like the following excerpt?

"His Excellency of the Right took over the Left after that Minister's death, and the Fujiwara Grand Counselor assumed the Right, with a concurrent appointment as Left Commander. Their juniors all rose in turn. The Fragrant Captain became a Counselor and the Third Rank Captain a Consultant. No one seemed to matter then but those two gentlemen's sons." (p. 823)
 - Narrative style?
 - For example, chapters 42 narrates the youth of Kaoru and Niou; chapter 43 digresses to Kobai's plans for his daughters; chapter 44 details the problems Tamakazura faces in finding suitable partners for her daughters; and chapter 45

begins the story of the Eighth Prince, his daughters, and the revelation of Kaoru's true parentage.

- Did you find the plots in these chapters more difficult to follow than you found earlier chapters?
 - Did you find any narrative or thematic elements that connect the separate stories introduced in these chapters?
 - Which of these threads (Kobai and his daughters, Tamakazura and her daughters, the Eighth Prince and his daughters) seems to be the most promising for further narrative development in relation to the third-generation protagonists, Niou and Kaoru?
- Do you agree or disagree with the scholars who suggest that the part of the novel that follows Genji's death may have been written by someone other than Murasaki Shikibu? (This is a much-debated question.)