

Genji monogatari and *The Tale of Genji*

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The Tale of Genji has often been called in English “the greatest masterpiece of Japanese literature” and “a classic of world literature.” It certainly is a founding classic of Japanese literary and artistic culture: one that corresponds to the description of a great classic given by the nineteenth-century French writer Chateaubriand. For Japan the author of *The Tale of Genji* was indeed, as

Chateaubriand put it, a “matrix genius” whose “traces are seen everywhere”; whose “made-up characters turned into real people with heirs and lineages”; who “furnish[ed] images, subjects, styles to every art”; who was accused of “bad taste” and praised as divine; and whose work was both parodied and “plundered” for its “finery.” Is it really a *world* classic, though, when its “words and names” never (again to Chateaubriand’s expression) “swelled the common vocabulary of nations” beyond Japan? Chateaubriand might have been surprised to learn that Japan had a literature at all, and he might have hesitated to rank *Genji monogatari*, had he known about it, with the work of the “matrix geniuses” he mentioned: Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare.

Surely, though, it *is* a world classic, even if in our present world the classics are no longer widely read. The classics mentioned by Chateaubriand all began in their home region and language, and they spread from there, in the original and in repeated translations, to readers distant in space and time. *The Tale of Genji* has done the same. However, its relationship to other great literature, at least of the kind readily acknowledged in the English-speaking world, remains ambiguous.

This may be in part because despite widespread, sincere appreciation of the tale and a general assumption of its importance, there is no coherent grasp of what makes it great and, particularly, no understanding of its greatness in terms broadly recognizable in English as applicable to other masterpieces. I first encountered this problem some years ago, when I was asked to write a detailed reader’s guide to the work, for the use of book clubs throughout the United States. As a

model I received the guide to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. This guide made me think. It was expertly done. The author clearly understood *Anna Karenina* very well. I, however, did not understand *The Tale of Genji* very well, and I did not know just what to say about it. I only knew that I refused to repeat platitudes about sensibility, the rule of taste, *mono no aware*, callous love affairs, *fin de siècle* heroes, and so on. I realized that I could not write such a guide without first working out my own view of the book. I therefore declined the request.

Above all, I knew that I had no grip on what *The Tale of Genji* is about. Taste, sensibility, *mono no aware*, and so on, are not narrative themes; nor are gender relations, unfailingly attractive though these may be to discuss. It seemed to me that the theme of *The Tale of Genji*, if any, must involve what happens in the tale. But what *does* happen in it? I knew of no satisfactory answer. Some even called the work episodic, a series of more or less disconnected scenes. Nonetheless, I sensed behind the text a vast intelligence, active on many levels. Surely such an intelligence would have pursued, at however leisurely a pace, a deep, informing idea. I therefore set out to understand in terms persuasive to me, with my background and my predilections, the work that I had translated. This lecture is about the understanding I reached. I hope that it will suggest a clearer kinship than before between *The Tale of Genji* and the wider family of established literary masterpieces that is available to English readers.

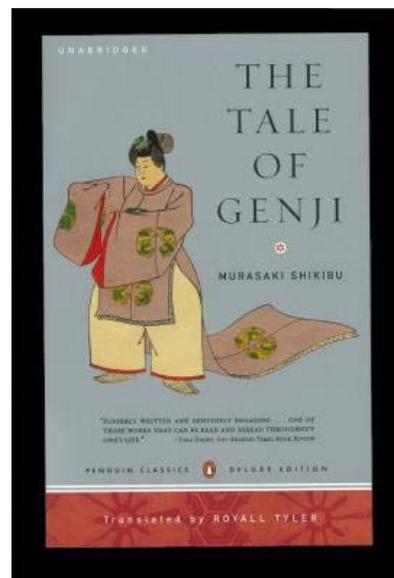
I will first review briefly the tale's reception among general readers of English. I will leave aside its academic reception in English-speaking countries; its long reception in Japan; and the immense contemporary pop reception, in which "Tale of Genji," "Genji," and "Hikaru Genji" are hardly more than brand names for everything from manga to video games. This review will show clearly why I felt the need to go beyond translation proper. Then I will summarize what seems to me to be the narrative theme of *The Tale of Genji*.

Some views of *The Tale of Genji*

In late 2001 my publisher sent me on a publicity tour of American East and West Coast bookstores. I would give a talk, and afterwards people would line up to have me sign a copy of the book. Among all the comments I heard, this was my favorite:

“I first read it in Arthur Waley’s translation, you know, and I was so enthralled that when Edward Seidensticker’s came out I read that, too, and it was wonderful all over again. And now you’ve done a *third* translation! Oh, thank you, thank you!”

Such enthusiasm confirmed that *The Tale of Genji* was still alive among the reading public, and the hundreds of web sites mentioning it suggested the same thing. This made me wonder again what has been for all these readers the essence of the tale’s appeal.



Perhaps this essence has to do with an impression of richness characteristic almost of life itself. That was my own naïve feeling when I first read Arthur Waley’s translation as an undergraduate. There seemed to lie between the covers of the book a complete, living world that stretched in undiminished detail beyond the bounds of what I remembered having seen. Others have described a similar feeling. For example, one Chris Miller recently compared the tale, in an Internet essay, to a Mahler symphony, in which “short, sweet melodic passages” add poignancy to “an endless dirge of impending doom.” His view suggests an intensely lyrical, engaging, and persuasive work realized on a vast scale. Countless readers have fallen under its spell, only to reawaken to dreary day when it ends after all.

The translation that truly cast that spell is Arthur Waley’s, published in six volumes between 1925 and 1933. Actually, Waley once described his work as a “transcreation” rather than a translation. Masamune Hakuchō would have agreed. Endlessly frustrated by his inability to read the original fluently, Hakuchō never actually enjoyed *Genji monogatari* until he read Waley’s *The Tale of Genji* while on a trip through the Suez Canal. However, he did not mistake his pleasure in it for pleasure in *Genji monogatari* proper. Rather, he enjoyed Waley’s *Genji* as a “beautifully told dream-tale about an exotic land.” Dismissing as irrelevant the many errors this tale no doubt contained, as a translation, he described what he had read as a novel that Waley himself had written after studying and digesting *Genji monogatari*; and he agreed that this novel probably belonged among the ten greatest literary masterpieces in the world.

Waley’s masterpiece was so enchanting that a generation and more of literary-minded people

read it as a matter of course, and many never forgot it. It impressed the American novelist Edith Wharton, whose requirement for any French translation of her work it also upholds. Wharton, who knew French extremely well, wanted two translators for any novel of hers, one to do “the main work” and one to do “the fine-tuning”; because, she wrote, “it is extremely difficult to translate from English into French, and...the first translator always has a tendency to stick too close to the text, so that someone else needs to go over it to give it more of the French turn of phrase.”

I discovered how right Edith Wharton was when, some years ago, I visited a distinguished American philosopher. I went to see her because she had been described to me as an avid admirer of *The Tale of Genji*. I was not surprised to discover that she loved Waley’s translation and knew nothing else. When I asked her what aspect of the tale impressed her most, she mentioned the beautiful pictures and images. Sure enough! I thought. I knew just what she meant. Waley often improved on the original in this way. “Actually,” the philosopher added, “I’m thinking of writing something about it.” I heard myself answer, “I think you’d better read my translation first.” Unfortunately, this went over poorly, and I left feeling like a wet blanket. Of course, by now there is a Seidensticker generation of *Genji* readers, too. However, one may still wonder whether either post-Waley translation, whatever its merits, has the magic to materialize a masterpiece obvious to the most discerning readers out of what was to them in Waley’s time, and often still is, thin air.

Virginia Woolf’s famous review of Waley’s first volume (through the “Aoi” chapter) illustrates the same point. To demonstrate the charm of the tale, Woolf singled out a line from the “Yûgao” chapter that is pure Waley, at his best; and his best worked. Woolf’s beautifully written review is enthusiastic. It also shows a brilliant grasp of several issues raised by these very early chapters and deep, sympathetic appreciation of the author’s achievement. Of course Woolf also missed this or that and got some things wrong, but how could she not have? And why should she not have compared harshly the British Isles around the year 1000, not to mention the modern England of her time, with what she gathered to be a wholly peaceful, deeply accomplished civilization? She, Waley, and their readers (like Edith Wharton) had lived through World War I. Donald Keene, too, described the joy of discovering *The Tale of Genji*, and the refuge he found in its “distant and beautiful world,” in the dark days of late 1940 when Britain seemed certain to fall.

Edith Wharton had read through Chapter 41 (“Maboroshi”) when, in 1928, she wrote to a close friend:

The solemn symphonic close reminds me of the end of [Proust’s] *Le Temps Retrouvé*. Think of these two great books having been given to us within the space of less than twenty years, & all the plentiful mannekins running up & down & making a fuss about *Lady into Fox* [by David Garnett] & *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* [by Thornton Wilder]! How the populace *hates* anything big.”

Le temps retrouvé, the last volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, had appeared posthumously the year before. Considering Wharton’s literary standing, as well as that of *Recherche*, no brief appreciation could more effectively elevate *The Tale of Genji*, in English, to the company of the great. By “solemn symphonic close” Wharton clearly meant “Maboroshi,” where Genji lingers on as the husk of a once great man; but “symphonic” also acknowledges the length and fullness of his journey toward this state. The analogy with Proust’s vast novel is powerful. As *Le temps retrouvé* approaches its own close the narrator attends, after long years of absence, a gathering of many he once knew, and he discovers with bewilderment the ravages that time has wreaked upon them. The once haughty, madly imperious Charlus, now bowed and white-haired, has sunk to saluting humbly people he would once have cut dead, and every guest wears likewise the barely recognizable mask of age. The last page yields an extraordinary vision of the tottering Duc de Guermantes, poised to fall like a leaf from the colossal, ever-growing height of his years. Wharton recognized in the two thirds of *The Tale of Genji* that she had read the great theme of time and decline.

Where Edith Wharton saw the poignant workings of time, those familiar with Buddhist ideas naturally speak of karma. Indeed, the characters in the tale often attribute to karma (*sukuse*, among other expressions) whatever happens to themselves and others, much as characters in other literatures speak of “fate.” Time dissolves all things, but karma distinguishes in that process, especially for humans, the workings of cause and effect: what you do now influences what you will be and what you will suffer in the future. The example widely recognized by Japanese scholars is the blow Genji suffers when Kashiwagi violates Genji’s wife, Onna Sannomiya, in “Wakana Two.” This blow is understood to be retribution for Genji’s affair with Fujitsubo, his father’s empress, in “Wakamurasaki.” Elsewhere in the tale, cause-and-effect karmic retribution is difficult to distinguish from cause-and-effect plot construction, but the complex link between the Fujitsubo affair on the one hand, and the Onna Sannomiya disaster on the other, certainly

helps to shape the kind of theme discerned by Edith Wharton in both *Genji* and *Recherche*.

The American poet and essayist Kenneth Rexroth, too, saw karma in *The Tale of Genji*, but not the example of it that I just described. Instead, he saw karma in what he called a “concealed drama” perpetuated by the jealous anger of Rokujō no Miyasudokoro. In other words, he connected the deeper level of the tale with the tale’s famous possession scenes. Nonetheless, he described the tale as a whole this way:

[*The Tale of Genji*] is the story of the erotic relationships of Prince Genji...; of his friend and brother-in-law To no Chujo; and of their descendants, to the second and even third generation, with an illimitable number of women — wives, mistresses, and wives of others.

Such is the surface beneath which he detected the deeper current of Rokujō’s jealousy. If such a view of the tale ever occurred to readers like Virginia Woolf or Edith Wharton, they did not write about it. Perhaps there was something new in the air of the 1960s.

The missing ground

I was teaching briefly in the United States when a renowned literary thinker gave a lecture series on campus. On the last day I rang him at his sponsoring department.

“Do you know *The Tale of Genji*?” I asked.

“Of course,” he replied.

“What is your impression of it?”

“It is very long and very remote.”

He declined to go further, pleading exhaustion, but I was grateful. No doubt he could read fluently every literary language of Western Europe, but he knew where his horizon lay. Despite its charm, Waley’s *Genji* was to him “remote.”

He was right. From such a standpoint as his, *The Tale of Genji* really is different. Its very language is alien to anything in the Indo-European family. The style of narration, too, is different, as are the houses, furnishings, outlook, and unspoken assumptions of the characters and the author. While the “universals of human experience” abound, they, too, are phrased evenly, without rhythmic, climactic emphasis, or announced structure. If this and that moment are connected somehow, the narrator rarely says so; instead, the two moments are simply at the reader’s disposal, to juxtapose and relate, or not, in memory and the imagination. In any case,

much remains unsaid. The most familiar-seeming moments therefore grow in unfamiliar ways from unfamiliar ground, and their deeper significance in the tale easily goes unnoticed. For nearly all readers these moments stand out like isolated mountaintops glowing in the sunrise, while the slopes of the range plunge downward into darkness. It is the hidden landscape below that knits these peaks together.

The length and complexity of the tale compound the problem. The thinker I mentioned rightly recalled, as significant, that *The Tale of Genji* is “very long.” Few specialists can survey its full sweep reliably from memory. Those who publish appreciations of it in English seem invariably to err here and there, if they write more than a few lines, about what the narrative says or the characters do. Although rich in detail, the narrative also encourages false memories by leaving the reader so much to interpret or fill in.

Most readers seem to respond best to scenes that appeal plainly to familiar emotions or offend long-held convictions. Violent jealousy, always dramatic in expression, is immediately recognizable, and no doubt that is why Kenneth Rexroth, among others, highlighted the possession scenes. However, it is Rexroth’s description of the tale as the “story of the erotic relationships of Prince Genji...with an illimitable number of women” that particularly announces the tale’s reputation in recent decades. No view could more reliably appeal to some and repel others. In the generally post-Waley era, it seems to have overwhelmed all other possibilities.



In 1900 and 1901, Edith Wharton and her friend Walter Berry debated what Berry called “culture essay” and “heart-interest” in the novel. Berry insisted that the novel Wharton was then writing must not be simply a love story. He wrote to her in November 1901, “You have *got* to put in a lot of political economy now, if the book is to amount to anything.” By “political economy” he seems to have meant the elements that ground a work of fiction in the unsentimental, commanding realities of its world, and so give it weight and authority. Wharton read widely in several intellectual fields apt to supply her with “political economy.” If she had lived Murasaki Shikibu’s life, she would have known Chinese and its available literature as well as Murasaki Shikibu seems to have done, and she would not willingly have written a soap opera or had a novel of

hers taken for a mere “juicy scandal sheet.”

Unfortunately, a recent Internet essay on the tale (in the Seidensticker translation) begins:

Sometimes *The Tale of Genji* is called the world's first novel, though to me it's more like the world's first soap opera. For one thing...there is no one over-arching novelistic plot that works itself out to a conclusion. For another thing, the one and only theme is love. Or love affairs, rather. ...You'd never know from *The Tale of Genji* that the men of the time were involved in any activities other than the wooing of women. Not one of them gives a single thought to matters of state, trade, warfare or the internecine politics that must have been part of their daily struggle for position and wealth in the feudal court.

For this reader love affairs are the only peaks touched by sun's first rays, and the void between their islands of light obliterates all hope of depth or continuity. There is no landscape, even unseen. There is no ground. Other appreciations of the tale, even by sophisticated readers like Harold Bloom or Michael Dirda, acknowledge little more. Practically no one nowadays seems to recognize in the tale—at least in English translation—any trace of “political economy.” There is hardly anything in it to talk about but “love.”

Unhappily, “love” these days is not necessarily a nice word. At least with respect to *The Tale of Genji*, it seems to stand readily for anything that goes on between men and women, however crass or unfeeling. Where once, for Virginia Woolf, Genji's “libertinage was tempered by the most perfect courtesy,” now, for the contemporary American novelist Jane Smiley (reading the Seidensticker translation), “his superiority doesn't extend to what westerners would consider moral probity. In particular, he is often guilty of rape and seduction.” In one way or another, all of you are undoubtedly familiar with this change.

Who first, in English, associated the word “rape” with *The Tale of Genji*? Perhaps it was the novelist V. S. Pritchett, who wrote in his 1977 review of the Seidensticker translation:

[Genji's] second wife (i.e., Murasaki) was taken into his mansion as a child and he has brought her up to think of him as her father. He flirts with the little girl; then, when she reaches puberty, he can't control himself and gets into bed with her. It is a kind of rape.

Later writers adopted common-knowledge certainty on the issue. In this they were greatly encouraged by Setouchi Jakuchô. In 1999, Setouchi's immense popular authority in Japan as an expert on the tale led to her making a speaking tour of the United States. There, the *New York*

Times interviewed her. The article begins:

As Japanese heroes go, he is an unusual one. He never wore a tie, never got a job, and after seducing his stepmother when he was a teen-ager he had a string of affairs with women who included his own adopted daughter.

According to the article, which was printed by newspapers across America, Setouchi “sees in the novel a strong feminist voice, protesting the conditions of women at the time” and argues that “the key figures” in the tale are “the women whom [Genji] uses and discards.” “While Genji’s liaisons are normally described as seductions,” the interviewer wrote, “Ms. Setouchi scoffs at that. ‘It was all rape, not seduction,’ she says.” No wonder another *New York Times* writer, reviewing the memoirs of a prostitute, should have casually stated in 2001, “Sex memoirs are nearly as old as the world’s oldest profession. The 11th-century “Tales of Genji” is a biographical account of the sexual exploits of a Japanese prince in the demimonde.”

The reputation of “Japan’s greatest literary masterpiece” could hardly sink lower. However there is another twist to the story. In June 2000 the Opera Theatre of St. Louis staged the premiere of the opera *The Tale of Genji*, with a score by Miki Minoru and a libretto by the American Colin Graham. On the authority of the *Economist*, the *Washington Post* reviewer described the tale as “enjoying a resurgence of popularity in Japan today, fueled in part by the joyously decadent sexuality of its title character.” He then went on:

But does [the opera] have anything to do with Murasaki’s original, written around the year 1000? Sticklers have complained that the original Genji...is a disturbingly amoral character, a fictional Don Juan of 10th-century Japan...But to base a three-hour opera on the moral dynamics of the original, in which the women seem rather like isolated islands, waiting to be conquered by an unsympathetic hero, would have created a chilling and emotionally remote piece of work. So Genji is given a conscience and the capacity for regret.

Thus the reviewer approved the license taken by the American librettist, when the librettist gave Genji, over the complaints of “sticklers,” a conscience, a capacity for regret, and some semblance of humanity. The reviewer does not explain why anyone should wish to read so dreary a novel in the first place, still less turn it into an opera.

Perhaps the trend that turned a masterpiece into a dull catalogue of grievances against a mindless playboy—that is to say, a book quite unlike the one known to Virginia Woolf and Edith

Wharton—will end, since it had a beginning. However, it has done the tale's reputation in English no good. While *The Tale of Genji* continues to flourish in campus Japanese literature courses, where its importance is taken for granted, and while it has a following among consumers of Heian-derived fantasy novels written by American, British, and Australian authors, it seems no longer to be taken seriously in English as great literature.

Its relationship to the work of Proust illustrates what has happened. Arthur Waley wrote in 1921 that, "many passages [of the tale] could be inserted in M. Proust's next volume without anybody noticing the intrusion." Since then it has become a habit to link between the two. In his essay on the tale Michael Dirda casually attributed to it "Proustian depictions of jealousy," and the *Washington Post* opera reviewer wrote about "the Proustian obsessiveness of [Genji's] sexuality." In a recent newspaper interview on the tale, Setouchi Jakuchō, too, cited Proust for the benefit of the English reader.

In the meantime, the editors of the *New York Review of Books* declined to review my translation on the grounds that *The Tale of Genji* did not sufficiently interest their readers. There was no British review of it, either. In contrast, the *New York Review of Books* published in 2005, in successive issues, separate reviews by André Aciman of the first two volumes of the new Penguin *Recherche*. I did not necessarily accept Aciman's spirited stance on the question of how to translate Proust properly, but I enjoyed it, and his reviews attracted a spate of replies. I was sorry that nothing of the kind had been possible for *The Tale of Genji*. Quite apart from the tale's now dubious reputation, so few people read it fluently in the original that no discussion of how to translate it would mean anything to the readers of a general-circulation intellectual magazine. Those who read the tale in English can only take on faith, or reject without evidence, whatever the translator tells them about the style and tone of the original. This does nothing, either, to engage the literarily sophisticated reader's deeper interest.

Besides, for such a reader the world of *Recherche* is, or at least seems, far more familiar than that of *The Tale of Genji*. To read the tale well one must not only read it more than once, but also know things about its world and its background that the general reader is unlikely to know. The tale is indeed "remote" in a way that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is not. However, it just as richly rewards the attention it invites.

Continuity and strong meaning

In order to restore continuity to the tale, it is essential first to acknowledge the central, unifying significance of its hero. In practice, most readers probably take this step without thinking about it. Jane Smiley, for example, recognized that “Genji’s story is about the whole arc of one man’s life—his mistakes and his virtues, his experience and what he learns from it, over some 48 or 50 years.” However, Setouchi Jakuchō is reported to have described Genji, for the benefit of the *New York Times*, as “merely a literary device to carry the plot along and develop the more interesting characters of the women in court.” Setouchi thus likened Genji to a gallery wall on which to hang the portraits of interesting women. The women of the tale certainly *are* interesting, but to treat Genji as a mere “literary device” to string them together is to deny his role in their lives any variety or even identity. Virginia Woolf did far better when she wrote:

To light up the many facets of his mind, Lady Murasaki, being herself a woman, naturally chose the medium of other women’s minds. Aoi, Asagao, Fujitsubo, Murasaki, Yugao, Suyetsumuhana, the beautiful, the red-nosed, the cold, the passionate—one after another they turn their clear or freakish light upon the gay young man at the centre, who flies, who pursues, who laughs, who sorrows, but is always filled with the rush and bubble and chuckle of life.

One *could* gather from the first nine chapters that the very young Genji acts as a sort of foil for the women they display, but Woolf nonetheless caught the life, vigor, and variety of the hero himself. Further into the tale, the idea that Genji is a mere string on which to thread erotic affairs or wronged women becomes impossible to sustain sensibly. Past “Hanachirusato” (Chapter 11), Genji actually begins new relationships only with the Akashi lady, whose daughter by him is vital to his future and, much later on, with Onna Sannomiya. Neither of these is merely a love affair or an erotic adventure; nor could Genji be described as having callously wronged or “discarded” either woman. In both cases the situation is too complex, and in Onna Sannomiya’s it is also far too grave for that. Meanwhile, from “Wakamurasaki” through “Maboroshi,” Genji’s bond with Murasaki remains central to his life. Between “Wakana Two” and “Minori” the two certainly become estranged from each other, but that need not offend anyone. To imagine that the hero of a long novel must make every woman of his happy, on pain of censure and contempt, is to demand not merely the impossible, but the tedious.

This much may be obvious to any reader of fiction. Further along the same path, however, lies the realization that some of Genji’s relationships with women have a significance that goes far

beyond personal satisfaction or romance. The outstanding example is Genji's affair with Fujitsubo. General readers of English seem seldom to notice the importance of what Andō Tameakira, in a famous essay dated 1703, called "the crux of the entire work" (*ichibu daiji*). This affair is no mere scandalous episode complicated by an unfortunate pregnancy, but "political economy" so powerful that it has long embarrassed many admirers of the tale. The major issue is not outrageous behavior by a son toward his father, although that is bad enough. Rather, it is the implied possibility of a break in the legitimate imperial line. Naturally this issue touches no nerve in a reader of English, but that same reader should be able to understand its weight, and certainly to understand its consequences in the tale itself: the birth and eventual enthronement of Emperor Reizei, and Genji's subsequent appointment, by his secret son, as Honorary Retired Emperor.



As many English readers have observed, the author's capital was at peace. There were no wars for her hero to fight, no far lands to conquer. Seen from outside, Genji inhabited a circumscribed world. Actually, the society that counted for him (about 2,000 people) was the same size as the one that mattered to the great families of Edith

Wharton's nineteenth-century New York. Nonetheless, he and his fellows knew about conflict. Campaigns, greater or lesser in scale, were fought in the provinces. Educated people, of whom the author was certainly one and her hero another, were also familiar from their reading with the many wars fought in China. Moreover, life in the capital was not always easy for anyone. Security in the streets could be poor, thefts and other outrages occurred even within the imperial compound, and devastating fires and epidemics sometimes swept a city where the greatest "palaces" offered fine gardens, no doubt, but nothing resembling any current notion of "palatial" comfort. Meanwhile, fierce jockeying for advantage at court could sweep aside an emperor or destroy a distinguished career. The picture conveyed by *The Tale of Genji* is art, after all, like a handscroll that turns an armed clash or a burning building into a clean, colorful composition, despite the visible blood, the terrified faces, the billowing smoke. In this world Genji aspires to be as nearly as possible what the emperor his father wished him to be, rather than what his father, out of harsh political necessity, was obliged to make him; and to this end he employs the skills not only of an accomplished lover and a master of all the arts, but also of a brilliant politician. The author barely shows the hand of Virginia Woolf's "gay young man...filled with the rush and

bubble and chuckle of life,” but there is more to him than mad amours. He aims high, and for a man with his gifts, “the highest of the high seem[s] hardly good enough.” Such is the young man who makes love to his father’s empress and fathers an emperor. When at last he accepts the title of Honorary Retired Emperor and towers over his son’s court, all this is still, for him, “hardly good enough.” That is why he overreaches himself and tips his life into slow tragedy.

Konishi Jin’ichi wrote that while the first part of the tale (Chapters 1-33) ends in glory for Genji, the tone suddenly darkens at the beginning of Part Two (Chapters 34-41); and he went on to ask rhetorically, “Does this not strike the reader as strange?” No, the reader of the tale in English has no reason to find it strange. No one expects a hero’s glory and good fortune to last forever. Genji does not fall visibly, but his inner collapse over the years is enough, since it follows from just the kind of error of judgment (*hamartia*: his accepting Onna Sannomiya) that Aristotle recognized as precipitating tragedy proper. In the end Murasaki’s death, caused ultimately by his own folly, destroys him, and the reader last sees him as a broken man.

To the readers of Waley’s day, several aspects of his *Tale of Genji*—whether rightly or wrongly perceived—seemed uncannily familiar. Among these were the narrative’s personal, private perspective, the author’s psychological insight, and the work’s seemingly pervasive concern with beauty, courtliness, taste, and the arts. Surprised and delighted to discover a kindred spirit in a work so old and from so far away, some understandably welcomed it as “modern.” However, *The Tale of Genji* could never really be “modern” for any English reader. Among other reasons, its concern with sovereignty and the emperor’s transcendent prestige perhaps evokes more readily an age still aware of myth, as does the “arc” of the supremely gifted hero’s life, grandly conceived and followed at length.

In scope and depth *The Tale of Genji* is also atypical of Japanese literature. Konishi Jin’ichi called *The Pillow Book*, in comparison, “much more Japanese.” Nothing that survives from before the tale announces its quality, and the fiction that succeeds it stands almost invisibly in its shadow. It is as though eight centuries of *Genji* reception in Japan have been devoted in the end to domesticating it, and to containing within consensual borders a masterpiece that constantly overflows them.

Anticipating further volumes of Arthur Waley’s *Tale of Genji*, Virginia Woolf wrote near the end of

her review:

We can take our station and watch, through Mr. Waley's beautiful telescope, the new star rise in perfect confidence that it is going to be large and luminous and serene—but not, nevertheless, a star of the first magnitude. No; the lady Murasaki is not going to prove herself the peer of Tolstoi and Cervantes or those other great storytellers of the Western world whose ancestors were fighting or squatting in their huts while she gazed from her lattice window at flowers which unfold themselves “like the lips of people smiling at their own thoughts.” Some element of horror, of terror, or sordidity, some root of experience has been removed from the Eastern world so that crudeness is impossible and coarseness out of the question, but with it too has gone some vigour, some richness, some maturity of the human spirit.

Woolf had enjoyed nine chapters by the author she described as “the quiet lady with all her breeding, her insight, and her fun,” but her assumption that the rest would prolong them in kind was understandably wrong. She had not read enough to catch the significance of “the crux of the entire work,” nor could she have noted the early signs of a still greater, related theme derived from Japanese myth: that of fraternal rivalry for dominion over the land, and of the younger brother's subjection of the elder.

Haruo Shirane observed that once a work like *The Tale of Genji* has been canonized, it is expected to convey “strong meanings” and “profound truths about large issues.” One could say similarly, of a king, that he is not crowned because he is intrinsically great (since he is in fact much like anyone else) but, rather, that political and social forces conspire to place the crown on his head; and that once the crown is in place, greatness is expected of him. Seen from this perspective, a literary work is canonized not because of its intrinsic value, since it has none in particular, but because of its “social signification.” This proposition may apply better to kings than to literary works, which I prefer to think are crowned largely *because* they have intrinsic value and convey “profound truths about large issues.” However, I admit that I myself probably expected more from the tale, in the way of “strong meanings,” precisely because it has been held up so long as a great masterpiece.

My personal background and limitations being what they are, however, the meanings that readers seemed to find in it did not impress me as very “strong.” Their relationship to the narrative content of the tale also escaped me. That is why I felt impelled to comprehend for

myself the work I had translated, and why this effort has constituted, for me, a second stage in the project of translation. No one, centuries ago, saw in the tale tragedy consequent upon Aristotelian error, nor do people now. No one sees either, in the relationship between Genji and his elder brother Suzaku, that between the two brothers in the myth of Hosonuseri and Hikohohodemi. Nothing could therefore demonstrate more vividly the tale's richness and greatness, or its capacity to stand as a world classic, than the way the narrative itself has supported and rewarded my effort to read it from outside its own culture. Did the author "intend" it to be read as I read it? I have no idea. However, I am satisfied that *The Tale of Genji* excludes neither tragedy nor a powerful succession struggle and its aftermath, and that since a reader like me can find these in it, they can also serve to describe what *The Tale of Genji* is about more intelligibly, for readers of English, than talk of love affairs and sensibility—talk that tends to turn the tale at best into a novel as engaging but structurally weak as one by the late nineteenth-century American writer Sarah Orne Jewett.

Marcel Proust, whose early volumes were charged with lack of cohesiveness, nonetheless spoke of "building his work like a cathedral." He described it as "so meticulously 'composed' ...that the last chapter of the last volume was written right after the first chapter of the first volume." Edith Wharton wrote similarly, "My last page is always latent in my first." According to one of his biographers, Proust

always worked like a mosaicist, taking a particular scene, anecdote, impression, image, and crafting it to completion. In his notebooks, there are many notes to himself about such bits: "To be placed somewhere," or a memo to give a remark or trait to a certain character.

The Tale of Genji, too, shows signs of a similar method. However, one can hardly imagine the author building her work "like a cathedral" or writing Chapter 54 immediately after Chapter 1. I was therefore astonished one day to realize that what I had just written about the last chapter, on the subject of the conflict between Genji and Suzaku, linked it to the first.

I had just understood for the first time the significance of a passage in "Kiritsubo." This passage makes it clear that although Suzaku, the heir apparent and elder brother, has expressed interest in Aoi, Aoi's father has decided nonetheless to give her to Genji, a mere commoner. No one just starting to read the tale in English, or perhaps in Japanese either, is likely to understand that the minister's decision is highly unusual, still less to grasp its intensely political character. Suzaku is

entitled to assume that if he wants Aoi, she is his. However, Aoi's father snubs him in favor of Genji, the younger brother with an uncertain future. This is the first sign of the political and personal struggle that will dominate the tale. This struggle is founded in myth, but the myth takes the brothers' story only through the triumph of the younger over the elder, who remains little more than a cipher. *The Tale of Genji* goes further.

"Fujinouraba" (Chapter 33) ends with Suzaku's complete subjection. As retired emperor, he and



Emperor Reizei, Genji's secret son, pay a formal visit to Genji, as though to a greater monarch, at Genji's recently completed Rokujō estate. Precisely at that moment, the "arc" of Genji's life tips downward. At the start of the next chapter, Suzaku invites Genji to marry his beloved daughter, Onna Sannomiya. The result is disaster for himself and for Genji. Call it karma or call it folly, the

subjected elder brother wrecks his own last years just as surely as he wrecks those of his triumphant younger brother, and still without ever regaining the upper hand. If the "horror, terror, or sordidity" that Virginia Woolf missed in the first nine chapters are present anywhere in the book, it is in these chapters that follow, no doubt with interspersed digressions, the awful, step by step consequences of Genji's acceptance of Onna Sannomiya. For "horror," one might mention Kashiwagi's ghastly presence at the party that Genji traps him into attending, and Genji's killing glance; for "terror," the scene when Rokujō's resentful spirit speaks; and, for "sordidity," Kashiwagi's pathetic appropriation of Genji's wife. The story culminates in the terrible moment when Onna Sannomiya calls her father down from his mountain temple and, over Genji's protests, has him ordain her as a nun. The two men exchange no harsh words, but by this time harsh words would only attenuate the nightmare. Genji has catastrophically failed Suzaku, and Suzaku's attachment to his daughter has ruined the rest of his life.

Once, while I was translating such scenes as these, I rushed out of my study to exclaim to my wife, "*This* is beyond anything! If *The Tale of Genji* is known worldwide for anything at all, it should be known for *this*! *This* is what lifts it into the company of the few greatest works of literature ever written!" I did not yet understand consciously how one event followed from another in this part of the tale, or how the narrative had managed to produce this effect. I now see, however, how rightly Virginia Woolf demanded of the greatest literature moments of "terror,

horror, or sordidity” and wrote of missing, in what she had so far read of the tale, a “root of experience” that she thought had been “removed from the Eastern world so that crudeness is impossible and coarseness out of the question.” No, in *The Tale of Genji* that “root of experience,” those transcendent touches of “crudeness” or “coarseness,” which anchor grace and beauty in lived human truth, are there after all. They take the tale to the heights of the sublime.

Genji and Suzaku both die between “Maboroshi” and “Niou Miya,” roughly two thirds of the way through the tale. How could their conflict then extend to the end of the book and so make the struggle between them the armature of the whole? I have argued elsewhere that the defeated Suzaku’s angry spirit prolongs the struggle by seeking to wreak vengeance on Kaoru, presented in the narrative as Genji’s chief successor. Evidence for this reading of the last third of the tale appears at the very beginning of the Uji chapters. The opening of “Hashihime” explicitly ties these chapters back to the bitter struggle, long ago, between the faction of the left, focused on Genji, and that of the right, focused on Suzaku. In the end Suzaku had to abdicate in favor of Genji’s secret son, and Hachinomiya, with whom Suzaku’s supporters had tried to replace Genji’s son as heir apparent, vanished into obscurity. Hachinomiya then settled with his two recognized daughters in the village of Uji, where Kaoru established a tie with the father and both daughters; Niou (Genji’s grandson) married one of the daughters; and both young men then pursued Ukifune, Hachinomiya’s third, unrecognized daughter. The Uji chapters thus bring together, very uncomfortably, Genji’s descendants on the one hand, and, on the other, a hapless victim of Genji’s triumph and his daughters. The shadow of the old struggle, with its lingering resentments, still darkens all these lives.

Trade: a story for the poems

For the reader of English, this underlying narrative theme provides a new answer to the question, “What is *The Tale of Genji* about?” In reply some have suggested “impermanence” or “the pathos of things”; others, “the cult of sensibility,” “the hero’s endless love affairs, or “protest against the conditions of women at the time.” My favorite is “The beautiful ways of antiquity” (*kodai no bifū*), proposed by Kumazawa Banzan, because it conveys such heartfelt admiration. In contrast, “Fraternal rivalry for sovereignty, prolonged beyond death,” sounds unfamiliar because it suggests a story with vast scope for victory, disaster, error, and bitterness—a story that demonstrates in the end the folly of clinging to vain things.

However, there is another aspect of *The Tale of Genji* that lies largely beyond the English reader's reach: the poetry. For centuries, the 795 poems of *Genji monogatari* constituted the heart of the work for many Japanese readers, and perhaps they often still do. Unfortunately, no poetic genius on the translator's part could make these poems equally absorbing for readers to whom the tradition and practice of classical Japanese poetry mean nothing, and who have no unmediated access to the linguistic techniques that make them poems in the first place. In the classroom, students may be taught why and how the poems are valued in Japan, but they are unlikely ever to feel instantly, intuitively, the life and resonance of a poem in its context. General readers of the tale probably just skip most of the poems, being unwilling to readjust their attention repeatedly in order to grasp a fragment of text quite different in kind from the surrounding prose and usually without any obvious narrative relationship to it. Those who read the poems after all may prefer plain translations, as much like prose as possible and so easier to grasp. No *Genji* translator can omit poem after poem any more, or merge a poem's narrative gist into the surrounding prose. For the sake of the tale's reception in English, however, Waley was probably right in his time to do both. Perhaps the narrative theme I propose to readers of the tale in English compensates somewhat, though in a very different coin, for the loss of the poems.

Conclusion

Given more time, I could now go on to praise the countless, more visible qualities that make the tale so magnificent. One of these would certainly be richness and freshness of invention. Virginia Woolf wrote, "Unhasting, unresting, with unabated fertility, story after story flows from the brush of Murasaki." Scholars search out sources and influences, and analyze the tale's recurring patterns, but for readers at large each chapter seems so real that it must truly have happened just that way, and a repeating pattern's every occurrence seems new. Had the author not written like this, her tale's long-matured moments of "terror, horror, or sordidity" would merely shock or disappoint. Only the greatest writing can support pages that transcend words.

Another of these qualities, especially in the earlier chapters, would be humor. Proust, too, has that gift. Hearing me laugh again and again while I read *Recherche*, my wife teased me that a great classic is supposed to be *serious*. But no: a spacious masterpiece easily accommodates wit. Although perhaps less likely to provoke outright laughter, *Genji* humor is marvelous for the way the author makes a character or a situation funny while still conveying sympathy and respect

for everyone concerned. Suetsumuhana is at once comical and touching, ridiculous and dignified, while the randy old Genji no Naishi no Suke is at one and the same time a character from slapstick comedy and a woman of substantial gifts. It is dazzling that the author should have been able to pass without visible effort from the delicious scene where Genji daubs his nose with red, in "Suetsumuhana," to the vaudeville tussle between Genji and Tō no Chūjō in "Momijinoga"; from Genji's misadventure with the unsuspecting Nokiba-no-ogi in "Utsusemi," to the agony that he and Fujitsubo share in "Wakamurasaki"; and from there to the immortal chapters that follow.

The great sixteenth-century essayist Montaigne once praised the three men whom he considered the giants of antiquity. One of these was Homer. In a manner that could serve equally well to describe the author of *The Tale of Genji* Montaigne wrote of Homer:

It is against nature that he made the most excellent creation that could ever be; for things are normally born imperfect, then grow and gather strength as they do so. He took poetry and several other sciences in their infancy and brought them to perfect, accomplished maturity. Because of this one may call him the first and last of poets, in accordance with that fine tribute left to us by antiquity: that, having had no predecessor to imitate, he had no successor capable of imitating him.

Nothing in Japanese literature announces *The Tale of Genji*, and nothing ever approached it again. It is an enduring miracle. Arthur Waley's skill established it as a work of English literature, but perhaps in the future readers of English will look beyond his vision and a host of clichés to discern the deeper characteristics that should come through any conscientious translation, past or future, and secure the place of the tale among the world's greatest literary achievements.