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MURASAKI SHIKIBU

The Tale of Genji, c. 1000

The *Tale of Genji* is, by some measures, the world's first novel. It was written by Murasaki Shikibu, a woman at the Japanese court, probably in the first decade after the year 1000. During the Heian period (794–1185) of Japanese history, women in the Japanese aristocracy differentiated their culture from the Chinese one that had dominated it since the seventh century.

Source: Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 155–61.

In *The Tale of Genji* we also see signs of multiple marriages and numerous lovers, consorts, and courtesans among the Heian aristocracy. The emperor had been married but preferred a lower-class courtesan, Lady Kiritsubo, who died shortly after giving birth to Genji. Lady Kokiden, a more powerful mistress of the emperor, ensured that her son, Suzku, would outrank Genji as the next emperor. She forced the emperor to make Genji a commoner and to make him go into exile. After Lady Kiritsubo's death, the despondent emperor met a princess, Fujitsubo, who reminded him of Kiritsubo. She became the emperor's favorite as well as the love of her stepson, Genji, who returned from exile. Fujitsubo bore the emperor a son whom everyone but she and Genji knew to be the emperor's, and that son became the Heir Apparent. Genji, cut off from intimate contact with Fujitsubo, and uninterested in his wife, played lover and patron to the young Murasaki, who bore him a future emperor, and carried out various affairs and liaisons—one of which is described in this selection. What does this relationship between Genji and one of the younger sisters of Kokiden tell you about sex, love, and marriage in upper-class Heian society?

This selection also reveals much about the culture of the Japanese court. Notice the cultivation of music, dance, and poetry among the court nobility. What, if anything, does this display of sensitivity have to do with ideas of love and marriage? What signs do you see here of the persistence of Chinese culture in Heian Japan?

Also, notice the absence of monogamy in the court. The emperor is married but has taken in turn three consorts: Kokiden, Kiritsubo, and now Fujitsubo. What is the relationship between marriage and sex in this society? What does that tell you about the mores of the time?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Would you call this a story of romantic love? In what ways is the love Lady Murasaki describes similar to, or different from, the love Andreas Capellanus describes in selection 3? What aspects of Heian Japanese culture are different from the culture of medieval Europe? Is the dominant upper-class idea of love in Japan during this period different from that of Europe? How is this Japanese idea of love and marriage different from that of India?

A little past the twentieth of the second month, His Majesty held a party to honor the cherry tree before the Shishinden.¹ To his left and right were enclosures for the Empress and the Heir Apparent, whose pleasure it was to be present according to his wishes. The Kokiden

¹ The main hall at the Kyoto Imperial Palace. [Ed.]

Consort took offense whenever Her Majesty received such respect, but she came, for she would not have missed the event.

It was a lovely day, with a bright sky and birdsong to gladden the heart, when those who prided themselves on their skill—Princes, senior nobles, and all—drew their rhymes and began composing Chinese verses. As usual, Genji's very voice announcing, "I have received the character 'spring,'" resembled no other. The Secretary Captain came next. He was nervous about how he might look, after Genji, but he maintained a pleasing composure, and his voice rang out with impressive dignity. Most of the rest appeared tense and self-conscious. Naturally, those belonging to the lesser ranks were even more in awe of the genius of His Majesty and the Heir Apparent, which stood out even then, when so many others excelled at that sort of thing. They advanced in dread across the immaculate expanse of the broad court, only to make a painful labor of their simple task. . . .

When the time came to declaim the poems, the Reader could not get on with Genji's because the gathering repeated and commented admiringly on every line. Even the Doctors were impressed. His Majesty was undoubtedly pleased, since to him Genji was the glory of every such occasion.

The Empress wondered while she contemplated Genji's figure how the Heir Apparent's mother could dislike him so, and she lamented that she herself liked him all too well.

*"If with common gaze I could look upon that flower just as others do,
why should it occur to me to find in him any flaw?"*

she murmured. One wonders how anyone could have passed on words meant only for herself.

The festival ended late that night. Once the senior nobles had withdrawn, once the Empress and the Heir Apparent were gone and all lay quiet in the beauty of brilliant moonlight, Genji remained drunkenly unwilling to grant that the night was over. His Majesty's gentlewomen all being asleep, he stole off toward the Fujitsubo, in case fortune should favor him at this odd hour, but the door through which he might have approached her was locked, and so he went on, sighing but undeterred, to the long aisle of the Kokiden, where he found the third door open. Hardly anyone seemed to be about, since the Consort had gone straight to wait on His Majesty. The door to the inner rooms was open, too. There was no sound.

This is how people get themselves into trouble, he thought, stepping silently up into the hall. Everyone must be asleep. But could it be? He heard a young and pretty voice, surely no common gentlewoman's, coming his way and singing, "Peerless the night with a misty moon . . ." He happily caught her sleeve.

"Oh, don't! Who are you?" She was obviously frightened.
 "You need not be afraid.

*That you know so well the beauty of the deep night leads me to assume
 you have with the setting moon nothing like a casual bond!"*

With this he put his arms around her, lay her down, and closed the door.
 Her outrage and dismay gave her delicious appeal.

"A man—there is a man here!" she cried, trembling.

"I may do as I please, and calling for help will not save you. Just
 be still!"

She knew his voice and felt a little better. She did not want to seem
 cold or standoffish, despite her shock. He must have been quite drunk,
 because he felt he must have her, and she was young and pliant enough
 that she probably never thought seriously of resisting him.

She pleased him very much, and he was upset to find daybreak soon
 upon them. She herself seemed torn. "Do tell me your name!" he pleaded.
 "How can I keep in touch with you? Surely you do not want this to
 be all!"

With sweet grace she replied,

*"If with my sad fate I were just now to vanish, would you really
 come—ah, I wonder!—seeking me over grassy wastes of moor?"*

"I understand. Please forgive me.

*While I strove to learn in what quarter I should seek my
 dewdrop's dwelling, wind, I fear, would be blowing out across
 the rustling moors.*

We might be frank with each other. Or would you prefer to evade me?"

He had no sooner spoken than gentlewomen began rising noisily,
 and there was much coming and going between the Kokiden and His
 Majesty's apartments. They were both in peril. He merely gave her his
 fan as a token, took hers, and went away.

Some of the many women at the Kiritsubo were awake. "He certainly
 keeps up his secret exploring, doesn't he!" they whispered, poking
 each other and pretending all the while to be asleep.

He came in and lay down, but he stayed awake. What a lovely girl!
 She must be one of the Consort's younger sisters—the fifth or sixth, I
 suppose, since she had not known a man before.² . . . It was all very
 difficult, and he was unlikely to find out which one she was even if he
 tried. She did not seem eager to break it off, though—so why did she
 not leave me any way to correspond with her? These ruminations of his
 no doubt confirmed his interest in her, but still, when he thought of *her*,

² Genji's brother. [Ed.]

he could not help admiring how superbly inaccessible she was in comparison.

The second party was to be today, and he was busy from morning to night. He played the *sō no koto*. The event was more elegant and amusing than the one the day before. Dawn was near when Fujitsubo went to wait on His Majesty.

Desperate to know whether she of the moon at dawn would now be leaving the palace, he set the boundlessly vigilant Yoshikiyo and Koremitsu to keep watch. When he withdrew from His Majesty's presence, they gave him their report. "Several carriages have just left from the north gate, where they were waiting discreetly," they said. "Relatives of His Majesty's ladies were there, and when the Fourth Rank Lieutenant and the Right Controller rushed out to see the party off, we gathered that it must have been the Kokiden Consort who was leaving. Several other quite distinguished ladies were obviously in the party, too. There were three carriages in all."

Genji's heart beat fast. How was he to learn which one she was? What if His Excellency her father found out and made a great fuss over him? That would be highly unwelcome, as long as he still knew so little about her. At any rate, he could not endure his present ignorance, and he lay in an agony of frustration about what to do. He thought fondly of his young lady. How bored she must be, and probably dejected as well, since he had not seen her for days!

The keepsake fan was a triple cherry blossom layered one with a misty moon reflected in water painted on its colored side—not an original piece of work but welcome because so clearly favored by its owner. Her talk of "grassy wastes of moor" troubled him, and he wrote on the fan, which he then kept with him,

"All that I now feel, I have never felt before, as the moon at dawn melts away before my eyes into the boundless heavens." . . .

The lady of the misty moon remembered that fragile dream with great sadness. Her father had decided that her presentation to the Heir Apparent was to take place in the fourth month, and the prospect filled her with despair. Meanwhile her lover, who thought he knew how to pursue her if he wished, had not yet actually found out which sister she was, and besides, he hesitated to associate himself with a family from which he had nothing but censure. Then, a little after the twentieth of the third month, the Minister of the Right held an archery contest attended by many senior nobles and Princes and followed immediately by a party for the wisteria blossoms.

The cherry blossom season was over, but two of His Excellency's trees must have consented to wait, for they were in late and glorious bloom. He had had his recently rebuilt residence specially decorated for

the Princesses' donning of the train. Everything was in the latest style, in consonance with His Excellency's own florid taste.

His Excellency had extended an invitation to Genji as well, one day when they met at court, and Genji's failure to appear disappointed him greatly, for to his mind this absence cast a pall over the gathering. . . .

Genji dressed with great care, and the sun had set by the time he arrived to claim his welcome.

He wore a grape-colored train-robe under a cherry blossom dress cloak of sheer figured silk. Among the formal cloaks worn by everyone else, his costume displayed the extravagant elegance of a Prince, and his grand entry was a sensation. The very blossoms were abashed, and the gathering took some time to regain its animation.

He played beautifully, and it was quite late by the time he left again, on the pretext of having drunk so much that he was not well. The First and Third Princesses were in the main house, and he went to sit by the door that opened from there toward the east. The lattice shutters were up, and all the women were near the veranda, since this was the corner where the wisteria was blooming. Their sleeves spilled showily under the blinds as though for the New Year's mumming, but Genji disapproved and only found his thoughts going to Fujitsubo.

"I felt unwell to begin with," he said, "and then I was obliged to drink until now I am quite ill. May I be allowed to hide in Their Highnesses' company, if it is not too forward of me to ask?" He thrust himself halfway through the blind in the double doorway.

"Oh, no, please!" one cried. "Surely it is for little people like us to claim protection from the great!"

Genji saw that these ladies, although not of commanding rank, were not ordinary young gentlewomen either. Their stylish distinction was clear. The fragrance of incense hung thickly in the air, and the rustling of silks conveyed ostentatious wealth, for this was a household that preferred modish display to the deeper appeal of discreet good taste. The younger sister had no doubt taken possession of the doorway because Their Highnesses wished to look out from there.

He should not have accepted the challenge, but it pleased him, and he wondered with beating heart which one she was. "Alas," he sang as innocently as could be, still leaning against a pillar, "my fan is mine no more, for I have met with woe . . ."

"What a very odd man from Koma!" The one who answered seemed not to understand him.

Another said nothing but only sighed and sighed. He leaned toward her, took her hand through her standing curtain, and said at a guess,

"How sadly I haunt the slope of Mount Irusa, where the crescent sets, yearning just to see again the faint moon that I saw then!"