The Tale of Genji

The Tale of Genji is arguably the world's first real novel and indisputably Japan's greatest literary achievement. In part one of a two-part review of the novel, Professor Janine Beichman critiques the first forty-one chapters, which tell of "the life and loves of the 'shining' prince Genji."

The Tale of Genji, thought to have been written in the early years of the eleventh century by a court lady in the service of the Empress Akiko (or Shoshi), is a long novel of fifty-four chapters. Although we know quite a bit about its author, conventionally known as Murasaki Shikibu, we do not know her personal name. "Shikibu" was the name of the government bureau where her father held a post, and "Murasaki" was a nickname she acquired, probably borrowed from the heroine of her tale. Over 1,000 pages in translation, the tale's flowing, sometimes chatty narrative is in the voice of a court lady of middling rank, probably resembling the author herself. Set in the courtly world of the Heian period (794-1185), it covers three generations and some seventy-five years. The first forty-one chapters tell the life and loves of the "shining" prince Genji; the remaining chapters, after Genji's death, move on to the next generation.

Genji is the son of an emperor, but his life begins in tragedy, with the death of his mother when he is still a small child. Some years later, the emperor, still grieving, discovers a young woman who greatly resembles Genji's mother and brings her to court. It is Genji's misfortune to fall in love with his new stepmother, Fujitsubo. As a teenager, he forcibly seduces and impregnates her. The secret that his father's successor on the throne is actually Genji's own child haunts him until his death.

Meanwhile, even though he has been married off to Aoi, a high-ranking noblewoman, he embarks on a series of sexual adventures. In the course of these, he discovers Fujitsubo's niece, the young Murasaki, who greatly resembles her aunt and becomes his consolation for the loss of his "impossible, forbidden love." But his wandering eye is still untamed and he embarks on several more affairs, ultimately creating so many powerful enemies that he finds it prudent to go into self-exile in the provincial wilds of Suma and Akashi.

A few years later, conditions having changed, he returns home in triumph and enters on the period of his greatest glory. He is now in his late thirties, though, and at this moment of celebration an elegiac note is struck. One of the many affecting passages in the tale comes during a performance for the emperor when Genji, watching the young son of his boyhood friend To no Chujo dance, remembers how he and To no Chujo had once danced for an earlier emperor, their sleeves touching. He is moved to write a poem for his old friend. In Seidensticker's translation:

Though time has deepened the
hue of the bloom at the hedge,
I do not forget how sleeve
brushed sleeve that autumn.

Here is presented another aspect of Genji, namely his ever-present consciousness of the past and of the ineluctable passage of time, an awareness which begins early in the story and grows stronger as it progresses. This characteristic, on the face of it so at odds with his adventurous promiscuity, brings us to one of the most-discussed riddles of the tale: the contradictory character of Genji himself.

Genji is idolized by all for his beauty, charm, and sensitivity, but he has a dark side too. When he desires a woman, he will stop at almost nothing to get her. Perhaps the moment of his deepest depravity is when he accidentally discovers Tamakazura, the long-lost daughter of his good friend To no Chujo, and secretly installs her in his own home. He wants Tamakazura as a kind of souvenir of her mother, with whom, unbeknownst to To no Chujo, he had a brief but tragic affair that ended in the mother's sudden death before she was even twenty. After telling Tamakazura that she is to think of him as a foster father, a declaration which rings false from the start, he finds himself irresistibly attracted to her and his behavior becomes unashamedly seductive. Murasaki, used by now to his wandering eye, says nothing but is, as so often before, deeply hurt. At the same time, Genji, keeping up his pose as paternal protector and educator, lectures Tamakazura on how to handle her suitors. Even the most sympathetic reader can only think him a pompous
hypocrite. But then the narrator lets us see into his mind:

_He thought a great deal about Tamakazura. He often visited her and was of service to her in many ways. One quiet evening...[ h ] e slipped quietly away to her apartments. At her writing desk, she bowed courteously and turned shyly away, very beautiful indeed. Suddenly, gently, she was exactly like her mother. He wanted to weep._

As so often in this tale, the past returns, and one's heart gives way before the depth of Genji's grief. It gives way even further when, several chapters later, as he prepares to take holy orders, he burns the letters that his beloved Murasaki, by then dead, wrote him during his self-exile in Suma.

Genji can be callous, egotistic, even ruthless, but as the narrator tells us, he is also "a generous man and he did not abandon women to whom he had been even slightly drawn." It is because of his generosity and his gift for remembering that after his return from Suma he brings together all his women, even the ones with whom he no longer has a sexual relationship, in his mansion compound.

"Touching things, annoying things, Genji could forget none of them," we are told. And as he himself says, "I have a way of looking back upon things of long ago as if they were of this very moment." Or, most beautifully, "Remembering," he says, "is the crime to which I can not plead innocent."

In trying to make sense of Genji's contradictions, it is this last phrase that seems essential. For "remembering" is the same "crime" to which the novelist too pleads guilty, or at least the novelist as described in the defense of the novel in the tale's Chapter 25. In that famous speech, put into the mouth of Genji himself, the novelist is described as one who cannot rest without telling of the inexhaustibly absorbing and moving things of this world, the "things that happen in this life which one never tires of seeing and hearing about, things which one can not bear not to tell of and must pass on for all generations."

The source of this passionate desire to record one's deepest impressions "for all generations" is not only the inability to forget but also an intense craving for experience. Viewed from this angle, Genji and his creator almost seem to be symbiotic twins. Genji goes back and forth between his pleasure in the sensual world and his wish to give the world up for a monastic life; involvement and withdrawal are the two poles of his existence. In a similar way, the novelist is always negotiating between the desire for worldly experience, which provides inspiration for storytelling, and the need for retreat to "a room of one's own" (Virginia Woolf's phrase), the space which provides the detachment necessary to write the story down. Perhaps the author of _The Tale of Genji_ was able to win our sympathy for her philandering hero because in some subtle way, surprising as it may seem, she felt akin to him. Murasaki Shikibu and the shining prince Genji: both of them were creatures guilty of the wonderfully human "crime" of remembering.

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_Genji Monogatari_, or _The Tale of Genji_ occupies a place in Japanese literature similar to all of Shakespeare in English or Dante in Italian. From the great medieval poet Fujiwara Teika, who painstakingly reconstructed its original text, to the modern Nobel Prize-winning novelist Kawabata Yasunari, who pronounced it "the highest pinnacle of Japanese literature" and consoled himself during the war years by rereading it in the original, it has been the subject of more close readings than one can count. It has also been adapted innumerable times into every imaginable art form, high and low, beginning with a number of classical noh plays and emerging in recent years as the source for a host of popular manga and films. Many of Japan's most famous writers have translated the tale into modern Japanese; they include Yosano Akiko, Tanizaki Junichiro, Enchi Fumiko and, most recently, Setouchi Jakucho. Arthur Waley's beautiful translation into English, first published 1926-1933, marked the beginning of the tale's acceptance into the canon of world literature. Then, in 1976, came the translation of Edward Seidensticker, followed by that of Royall Tyler in 2001. There are also excellent translations into several other Asian and European languages.