



Reading  
*The Tale of Genji*



SOURCES FROM THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

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ORAL TRANSMISSIONS OF THE GOTOB  
 RETIRED EMPEROR, 1225-1227  
 (*GoToba no In gokuden*)  
 THE GOTOB RETIRED EMPEROR

Shunzei's dictum, once voiced, was accepted, in a general way, without challenge by the poetic community. Some, however, wished to attach certain provisos. One of these is the following by the GoToba Retired Emperor (1180-1239; r. 1183-1198).<sup>22</sup>

T. HARPER

*Item.* Shakua [Shunzei], Jakuren, and others have said that when composing poems for a poetry contest, one is by no means free to compose just as one pleases. Still, such poems are not fundamentally different in nature. "Consider carefully the sense of the topic, and avoid the poetic ills," they said. "One need not avoid using diction [*kotoba*] from *Genji* and other romances so long as one does not derive poetic conceptions [*kokoro*] from such works." As a rule, it has likewise been unacceptable in hundred-poem sequences to draw the conceptions of poems from tales, but in recent times the practice has not been objected to.

TRANSLATED BY T. HARPER



CONVERSATIONS WITH THE KYŌGOKU  
 MIDDLE COUNSELOR, CA. 1229  
 (*Kyōgoku Chūnagon sōgo*)  
 COMPILED BY FUJIWARA NO NAGATSUNA

*Conversations with the Kyōgoku Middle Counselor*, compiled by Fujiwara no Nagatsuna (dates unknown) sometime after the Eighth Month of 1229, purports to record the sayings of Fujiwara no Teika and Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158-1237), a claim generally accepted as authentic.<sup>23</sup> The following comment by Teika, in addition to noting some forms of attention that we have seen evidence of elsewhere, suggests another, more abstract, benefit of

reading *Genji* to the would-be composer of poetry, that of calming the mind, thus putting the poet in a proper mood to compose elegantly.

T. HARPER

The manner in which people read *The Tale of Genji* has changed of late. They will take a poem from it and use it as the source of an allusion in a poem of their own. Or they will pose as experts on precedent, argue over whose child Lady Murasaki was, and construct genealogies, or whatever it is they call them. In times past, there was none of this. Their most deeply felt concern was not disputing Murasaki's ancestry, or searching out poems to which they themselves might allude, it was the inexpressible beauty of the language. When one reads Murasaki Shikibu's writing, one's mind clears, and then one can compose poems of graceful style and diction.

TRANSLATED BY T. HARPER



PREFACE TO SINO-JAPANESE POEMS ON THE  
 TALE OF THE SHINING GENJI, 1290-1291  
 (*Fu Hikaru Genji monogatari shi*)

The *Sino-Japanese Poems* were composed in 1291 by an anonymous author. The text consists of a Sino-Japanese (*kanbun*) preface,<sup>24</sup> followed by fifty-four Sino-Japanese poems (*kanshi*), one on each of the chapters of *The Tale of Genji*, and concludes with a biographical poem on Murasaki Shikibu. The *Sino-Japanese Poems* are both unique and puzzling. As Sino-Japanese texts on a vernacular tale, they transpose the romantic *Tale of Genji* into the academic world of canonical scholarship, replacing the vernacular with the more prestigious *kanbun* and switching from a courtly, elegant, and amorous space to an academic, antiquated, and official male world.

The most fascinating aspect of this text is its elusive form and argument. Formally, it resembles *kanshi* poems introduced by prefaces, like those composed on canonical Chinese works such as the *Analects*, the *Book of Filial Piety*, and the *Three Histories* on special occasions. At times, the preface calls for elevating *The Tale of Genji* to canonical status on a par with the Chinese curriculum: Genji's son Yūgiri is given disproportionate attention because he can be presented as a paragon of Confucian virtue based on his formal training at the Academy. By the same token, the *Sino-Japanese*

*Poems* present an early formulation of later mainstream interpretive wisdom, which claims for *Genji* the status of history (as seen in the “Hotaru” chapter) and points to the tale’s value as moral instruction through the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto. At the same time, the *Sino-Japanese Poems* seem to parody the world of the Academy, picking up on Murasaki Shikibu’s entertaining invectives against the dull and dusty doctors in the “Otome” chapter. To make things even more complex, the vernacular tradition, too, is sometimes treated with deprecation. Although the indeterminacy of their genre and their agenda has deterred scholars from studying the *Sino-Japanese Poems*, this makes them even more significant in the context of the early reception of *The Tale of Genji*.

WIEBKE DENECKE

*The Tale of the Shining Genji* is a profound text of our nation. If you skim it and know little about it, you may consider it a playful toy, but if you ponder it and study it well, you will take it as the foundation of devoted learning. It records events since the divine age and describes those of the human age, just as the illustrious volumes [the *Nihon shoki*] by our courtiers and princes do. In assembling hundreds of texts into one book, it is like Sima Qian’s [ca. 145–86 B.C.E.] *Records of the Historian*. Who would ever call it “a go-between of flowers and birds”?<sup>25</sup> In short, it sums up all of Japanese and Chinese writing.

This is the gist of *The Tale of Genji*: As four generations of benevolent sovereigns succeed one another, their magnificent abundant virtue spreads everywhere, and their bond with the Three Dukes and the Hundred Officials, who admire [their ruler’s] transformative moral power, is like a fish in water.<sup>26</sup> At one time [Genji] enters the flowery curtains of the female palace quarters and ties the knot in secret [with Fujitsubo], just as Colonel Ariwara [no Narihira] abandoned himself to beautiful ladies. At another time, [the Akashi] lady from humble origins becomes his consort, just as [Major] Katano’s lady rises to prosperity. Now, the way the Crown Prince brought glory to his Eastern Palace, the way the high officials conducted palace affairs, [and] the ways of the silk-clad beauties of the inner quarters and of the heirs of the aristocracy—the battlement, the bulwark [to their ruler]—all this is in keeping with the laws of the sage governance of sage eras and absolutely *had* to be recorded by the Left and Right Historians.<sup>27</sup>

What is more, when discussing principles of government, [*The Tale of Genji*] reveres the Confucian way of the “Three Relations” and the “Five

Constants.”<sup>28</sup> With the procession to Ōharano at Mount Oshio [in the “Miyuki” chapter], it describes hunting outings. In discussing the divinations for the High Priestess of Ise, it pays its respects to the *kami* [gods], and when showing the deep tenets of the manifest and secret teachings, it turns to the Buddha.<sup>29</sup> It is not just about the lifting of brocade curtains to host banquets under moon-drenched blossoms in the courtyards of the Orchid Bureau [Secretariat] and the Emperor’s Pear Garden [theater], or about how to make merry by rushing the imperial chariot over the gateways of waters and rocks in detached palaces and estates. No, it reaches moments like these: That Genji sighs [in exile] on the shores of Suma and Akashi, yet later reaches the exalted station of Honorary Retired Emperor or that with Aoi’s and Murasaki’s descent to the underworld of the Yellow Springs, he alone has to face the law of destiny, showing that worldly fortunes are unstable, that heavenly destiny is in the hands of [Zhuangzi’s] dream world of Southern Blossoms, that people’s pleasures and sorrows change easily, and that our evanescent life succumbs to the autumn at [Luoyang’s cemetery] Beimang Hill!

How great that there is the beloved heir of the Genji clan [Yūgiri], a disciple of the Apricot Terrace<sup>30</sup> in Locust Tree District.<sup>31</sup> Tirelessly he studied at night, the snow substituting for a cantilevered lamp. He reviewed unremittingly while fireflies shed their light on his five-colored bamboo mat.<sup>32</sup> When they finally had him take the exam for the “Literary Scholar” degree, his talent ascended unencumbered like a scaly [dragon] at Dragon Gate.<sup>33</sup> In his position as Adviser, he showed the utmost loyalty, and his reputation spread far as he was “taking wing” in the “Phoenix Palace.”<sup>34</sup> To love learning and to serve one’s father is the beginning of filial piety. He fastened his purple sash<sup>35</sup> and ascended to the position of the three highest ministers. Meanwhile, because he helped with “affairs” at the morning court, he was called “Yūgiri,” meaning “Evening Affairs/Mist.” Meeting with enlightened times, he exercised ministerial powers on behalf of the realm. This is the significance of the saying that “he governed the world through *wen*”<sup>36</sup> and is a good part of the [tale’s] essential meaning.

Alas, texts that illuminate reality through fiction are [tales of the] marvelous, like that about the prince from the eastern state of Wu and the lord from the western state of Shu,<sup>37</sup> and parables like the one [in the Lotus Sutra] about the old man’s destitute house or about the people lost in the Phantom City are wonderful for instructing the people. They are not written in elegant Confucian wording but do rely on the Lotus

Sutra that the World-Honored Buddha pronounced at Eagle Peak. The [tale's] meaning pervades the esoteric and exoteric, and its words adumbrate past and present; isn't that precisely the appeal of this literary work?

In my idleness, I opened a copy [of the tale], and stirred by a thousand feelings, I have composed [poems] about its principal appeal. Not a single one is missing from its fifty-four chapters, and I've not left out a single one of the thirty-two rhyme categories. Moreover, at the end I added a short biographical composition on the author. Although the tale violates the "Six Poetic Principles,"<sup>38</sup> I could not resist singing its high praises.

Unfortunately, my "Lu-ish" dullness<sup>39</sup> is incorrigible; I am worlds apart from Bo Juyi's ancient style; and since it's hard for me to get used to the "Hymns of Zhou" [from the *Classic of Poetry*], I am ashamed to play around with the evanescent words of Murasaki Shikibu. That is what [Zhuangzi] means when he says that the wisdom of a frog in the well knows nothing about the turtle in the ocean and that the happy quail on the fence does not envy the giant *peng* bird in the clouds. Natural principle makes it thus.<sup>40</sup>

In the fourth year of Shōō [1291] of our imperial calendar. Drawn up in the crisp coolness of the Eighth Month.

TRANSLATED BY WIEBKE DENECKE

## Notes

1. G. G. Rowley, *Yosano Akiko and The Tale of Genji* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2000), 17–33.
2. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 28–29.
3. Inaga Keiji, *Genji monogatari no kenkyū: seiritsu to denryū* (Tokyo: Kasama Shoin, 1967), 4.
4. Translated from Kitamura Kigin, *Hachidaishū shō*, ed. Yamagishi Tokuei (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1960), 2:434.
5. Probably because it fails to take proper account of the *Kokinshū* poems (1007, 1008) in the background of this episode in "Yūgao," 12:210. See Fujiwara no Shunzei, *Roppyakuban utawase*, ed. Kubota Jun and Yamaguchi Akiho, SNKBT 38:102–3.
6. Translated from Shunzei, *Roppyakuban utawase*, 186–87.
7. Takanobu is perhaps best known as the painter of the two magnificent portraits of Minamoto no Yoritomo and Taira no Shigemori.
8. Translated from Fujiwara no Shunzei, *Shōji ninen Shunzei Kyō waji sōjō*, ed. Inoue Muneo, in *Karon shū*, ed. Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, Chūsei no bungaku (Tokyo: Miyai Shoten, 1971), 1:271–76.
9. No longer extant.

10. By Ōe no Chisato (dates unknown):

teri mo sezu kumori mo hatenu haru no yo no / oborozukiyo ni shiku mono  
zo naki

Of a spring night, neither shining brightly nor yet completely clouded;  
naught is there to compare with the light of a misty moon.

This poem first appears in Chisato's anthology *Kudai waka* (*Japanese Poems on Chinese Themes*, 894).

11. Translated from Sojaku, *Shimeishō Kakaishō*, ed. Tamagami Takuya (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1968), 16.

12. Ikeda Kikan, ed., *Genji monogatari jiten* (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō, 1960), 2:532.

13. For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Ikeda Toshio, *Kawachi-bon Genji monogatari seiritsu nenpu kō: Minamoto Mitsuyuki ittō nenpu o chūshin ni* (Tokyo: Kichōhon Kankōkai, 1977), 50–52.

14. The word translated here is *misekechi* (visible deletion), which means that the word(s) to be deleted are not defaced or obliterated but are left fully legible, with only a light mark at their side—often two dots at the left in the space between lines—to indicate that they should be omitted when the text is read or copied.

15. Actually his granddaughter, but traditionally called his daughter because she was adopted by Shunzei when her father was implicated in the unsuccessful Shishigatani plot to overthrow the Taira in 1177.

16. See, for example, Takeda Munetoshi, *Genji monogatari no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1954), 142.

17. Translated from Ichijō Kanera, comp., (*Matsunaga-bon*) *Kachō yosei*, ed. Ii Haruki, GMKS 1:10.

18. Translated from Fujiwara no Teika, *Meigetsuki*, ed. Nanba Tsuneo et al. (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1970), 2:411.

19. Inaga suggests that the text stolen was Shunzei's own (*Genji monogatari no kenkyū*, 494).

20. *Hakushi monjū*, 70.

21. *Analects*, 9:10.1.

22. Translated from Hisamatsu Sen'ichi and Nishio Minoru, eds., *Karon shū*, *Nōgakuron shū*, NKBT 65:144.

23. Translated from Fujiwara no Nagatsuna, comp., *Kyōgoku Chūnagon sōgo*, ed. Kubota Jun, in *Karon shū*, ed. Hisamatsu, 1:332–38. The work is known by several different titles, the most common of which is *Sendatsu monogatari*.

24. Translated from the text in GR 9:270–71.

25. A defense against the accusation in the Sino-Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū* that some *waka* poets abuse their art for trivial love exchanges.

26. Like the proverbially close bond between Liu Bei (161–223), the ruler of the kingdom of Shu, and his general Zhuge Liang.

27. According to the Confucian classic *Book of Rites*, the Left and Right Historians recorded, respectively, the ruler's words and actions.

28. "Three Relations" are between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. Although the lists of "Five Constants" differ, one includes the Confucian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and trustworthiness.

29. Three examples of how *The Tale of Genji* addresses the “Three Teachings” of Confucianism, Shinto, and Buddhism.

30. Confucius’s school near Qufu in present-day Shandong Province.

31. A poetic name for the university.

32. Yūgiri studies in same way as did the famously poor scholars Che Yin and Sun Kang, who compensated for their lack of money for lamp oil with the light of fireflies and moonlight reflected from snow.

33. The gates to the examination facilities, hence a metonymy for success in the official examinations.

34. A metaphor for successful court service is that of becoming a feathered immortal.

35. A sign of high rank.

36. Yūgiri is described in the words that the *Book of Rites* uses for the virtuous King Wen (twelfth century B.C.E.) of the Zhou dynasty. The character *wen* 文 of King Wen’s name has a broad spectrum of meanings, ranging from “pattern” and “ornament” to “cultivation,” “sophistication,” and “literature.”

37. In Zuo Si’s (ca. 253–307) “Three Capitals Rhapsody,” a lord from Shu, a prince from Wu, and a master from Wei compete in a fictional dialogue over the respective advantages of their capitals.

38. The “Six Poetic Principles” are listed in the “Great Preface to the *Book of Poetry*” as narration (*fu*), comparison (*bi*), evocative image (*xing*), Airs (*feng*), Odes (*ya*), and Hymns (*song*). They are a revered staple of Chinese and Japanese poetics.

39. A pun on the word 魯 *lu* (J. *ro*). It both means “dull” and is the name of Confucius’s home state of Lu.

40. This phrase echoes one in the Sino-Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū* that describes *waka* poetry as the product of human instinct in response to the world.



## Chapter 4

### Obsequies for Genji

“OBSEQUIES FOR GENJI” is a rough translation of *Genji kuyō*, a term for which there is no precise English equivalent. A *kuyō* is a dedicatory service in which the merit acquired in preparing for and performing the rite is assigned to another person, usually deceased, in order to diminish that person’s suffering and speed his or her progress toward Buddhahood. The title *Genji kuyō* was applied to various such rites performed on behalf of Murasaki Shikibu, her readers, her hero the Shining Genji, and even *The Tale of Genji* itself.

The reason that such rites were thought necessary lies in the doctrine of Buddhist morality that counts four of the “ten evils” (*jūaku*) as “sins of the word” (*kugō*): falsehood (*mōgo*), equivocation (*ryōzetsu*), slander (*akku*), and frivolous or specious talk (*kigo* or *kigyo*).<sup>1</sup> As these were commonly held to apply to both the written and the spoken word, the writer of almost any sort of secular literature could be considered a sinner, for even the use of ornamented or poetic language could be construed as *kigo*. Writers of fiction stood in the greatest danger, for they were guilty of *mōgo* as well. And the danger was great, for the commission of any of these sins, depending on the seriousness of the deed, could result in a sentence to hell, rebirth as an animal, or a term as a hungry ghost (*gaki*, Sk. *preta*).<sup>2</sup>

In Murasaki Shikibu’s day, these strictures seem not to have troubled many readers or writers very deeply. A few devotees of Chinese literature, members of the Society for the Advancement of Learning,<sup>3</sup> had taken to chanting a passage from the *Hakushi monjū* that had found its way into the Japanese anthology *Wakan rōeishū* (NKBT 73:200): “May the worldly writings of my present incarnation, all these wild words and fancy phrases [*kyōgen kigo*], be transformed into hymns of praise of the Buddha’s