

## The Tale of Genji – the world's first novel

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A reclusive court lady pens one of the most complex and most influential literary texts in Japanese history.

### What is it about?

The novel's fifty-four chapters have traditionally been divided into three parts. The first part is comprised of chapters one to thirty-three, and follows the life of prince 'Shining Genji' (Hikaru Genji) from his birth to age forty. When he is 12, he is married to Aoi, but soon after he starts having affairs. His relationship with his stepmother Fujitsubo results in a son, Reizei, who eventually becomes emperor. However, an affair with Oborozukiyo leads to a scandal, determining Genji, now 26, to leave in exile for Suma, where he meets the beautiful Akashi lady. Back in the capital, Genji eventually builds a villa, the Rokujo-in, for his wives and consorts. Emperor Reizei, who had previously been told the truth about his birth, honours his true father Genji in chapter thirty-three. Some scholars think that this chapter, Fuji no Uraba ('The Wisteria Leaves'), marks the end of Murasaki's original text. The second part, which might have been added later by Murasaki, follows the consequences of Genji's marriage to the Third Princess at the request of Retired Emperor Suzaku. Another consort, Yugao ('Lady of the Evening Faces') is apparently tormented by the spirit of lady Rokujo and dies, while the Third Princess has a brief affair with Kashiwagi, the best friend of Genji's son Yugiri. Genji's grief ends this second part, followed by a blank chapter with the name Kumogakure ('Obscured by Clouds'), which glosses over Genji's death. The third part features the amorous affairs of Genji's grandson, Niou, as well as Kaoru, the son of Kashiwagi and of the Third Princess. Their imperfections in comparison to Genji lend a more realistic and elegiac tone to these last ten chapters.

When was it written?

At the beginning of the eleventh century, the country we now call Japan had its capital in the city of Heian-kyo (later called Kyoto). Here the emperor held court, but his political power was increasingly undermined by aristocratic families. The Fujiwara clan was the most powerful at the time, and at the time Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027) effectively controlled political power as a result of strategic marriages. The current emperor, Ichijo, was only six when he came to the throne, and was therefore easy to control. Ichijo would later read the manuscript of the Tale of Genji in 1008, commenting that its author was familiar with historical chronicles, which led to her being nicknamed 'Lady of the Chronicles' (Nihongi no tsubone). A refined court life was therefore strangled by the hold of a few aristocratic families while threatened by increasingly bold provincial military leaders. The nostalgic tone of the novel is therefore due to its longing for a court splendour already lost.

### **Who was its author?**

The novel was written by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady of the court. She was born in 973, and was the daughter of the accomplished poet Fujiwara no Tametoki, a member of a minor branch of the Hokke Fujiwara clan who once held the office of Secretary of the Ministry of Ceremonial (Shikibu no jo). This is where her name Shikibu comes from, as it was common practice to call women by the names of offices held by their fathers or husbands. Shikibu was widowed in her mid-twenties after her husband Fujiwara no Nobutaka died. Instead of following her father to the province he was governing, Murasaki entered the service of Empress Shoshi (also known as Akiko, 988-1074) as lady-in-waiting (*nyobo*) in 1001, through the auspices of Michinaga. At this time she had already begun writing the Tale of Genji, and by 1008, when emperor Ichijo read it, most of it had been completed. From 1008 to early 1010, Shikibu kept a diary from which we can gather additional biographical information. One episode tells of a festivity celebrating fifty days since the birth of Michinaga's son, Prince Atsuhira, which continues with a night of drunken revelry by the men, watched by the ladies-in-waiting. The poet Fujiwara no Kinto then taunts Shikibu by asking her if she has seen Murasaki, which prompts her to reflect that none of the men present are worthy of comparison to Prince Genji. This episode confirms the instant popularity of the tale at court, and explains the nickname 'Murasaki' (violet) being given to the author, after the name of one of Genji's wives, Murasaki no Ue. As for her real name, it might have been Fujiwara Takako (Kyoshi),

the name of one of the ladies-in-waiting mentioned by Michinaga in a 1007 diary entry. Murasaki was last mentioned in an official document in 1013, but her exact date of death is not known.

### **Was it written by more than one person?**

Because of differences in style, vocabulary and poetic techniques, the chapters Niou, Kobai and Takegawa have been suggested to have been written by another person close to Murasaki. Also, the last ten chapters have been attributed to another hand, most often to Murasaki's daughter, Daini no Sammi, although this theory is discredited now. It is generally recognized that most of the text was written by Murasaki, although possibly over different periods.

The current order of the chapters, however, was probably due to another hand. Shikibu's diary also mentions a large and lavish project to copy the Tale of Genji at court. This involved at least two versions of the tale, one of them a revised text. At this stage the chapters did not have titles, which were probably set by later editors. Their order was also fluid, at least in the first two hundred years after their creation. As each chapter was bound as a separate booklet and not numbered, their order would depend on how many chapters each reader got hold of (few could acquire a complete set) and their personal preferences. Each reader was therefore also an editor, especially since the author included some inconsistencies while writing this long text over many years. Since the twelfth century, when the first standardized order appeared, there has been a long debate on which order is correct. One current theory states that the Suma and Akashi chapters were the original seed of the text, and chapters 2,3,4 and 6 were written later, after chapter 14. So although the number and order of the chapters is set now, we should keep in mind that there is a certain incompleteness to the text which allows different ways of reading through it.

### **Does the text refer to historical events?**

'In a certain reign (whose can it have been?' These opening words of the text are unusual in their invitation to the reader to guess the specific historical period. Further clues in the text indicate that Murasaki set her tale approximately one hundred years in the past, to the beginning of the ninth century, in the reigns of emperors Daigo and Suzaku. This was seen as a golden age of imperial power and prestige of local culture. Later emperors had favoured Chinese culture and writing, which was monopolized by men in positions of power, confining women to expressing themselves in cursive phonetic script. Murasaki was unusually knowledgeable in reading imperial

chronicles written in Chinese characters, and this is why the novel is rich in details of court life from one century before. For example, the family name Genji was originally bestowed on imperial princes which had been downgraded to commoner status. Conversely, the figure of prince Genji might have been based on Minamoto no Takaakira (914-82), the tenth son of emperor Daigo. Just like Genji, Takaakira had been made a commoner and exiled, and eventually returned to the capital. However, narrative conventions would have played an equally important part: the figure of the exiled prince had often been featured in stories, starting with the exile of the deity Susano'o included in eighth century imperial chronicles.

### **How has the novel been interpreted?**

In the history of Japanese literature, this novel marks the transition to a more mature form of writing, superseding the genre of *monogatari*, where personal confession seldom left space for narrative, by infusing it with a historical spirit and a multi-layered plot. Although the novel's title still includes the term *monogatari*, literally meaning 'the telling of things', it is the first work to rely less on oral elements and more on textual effects. A conversational style is still present, however, in the polite and vague language which occludes grammatical subjects, often making it difficult to pinpoint which character is speaking or acting.

In the medieval period, the influence of Buddhist doctrines led to stories of Shikibu being punished in hell for her deceiving words. Medieval commentaries added stories about the text's genesis. One of the most used was that relating how Shikibu started to write the chapters about Genji's exile at Suma while herself in a similarly isolated place: the Ishiyama Temple south of Lake Biwa. At the same time, the Tale of Genji influenced subsequent court narratives, as well as poetry composition. Genji's many lovers also provided characters for noh theatre plays, many of them ghosts who cling to the events of the past. Although they are inspired by the novel, these plays added their own medieval interpretations: for example, although in the chapter Yugao ('Evening Faces') it is unclear who haunts and kills Genji's lover, the noh play with the same name identifies the spirit of Lady Rokujo as the culprit.

The interpretation of the novel has always had a strong visual component. The earliest surviving text from the twelfth century is in a handscroll format (*emaki*), interspersed with lavish illustrations – their selections and treatment of scenes from the text amount to the earliest

interpretation of the novel. Later in the medieval period, the Tosa school of court painting adapted Genji themes to square album-sheet compositions, paired with selections from the 795 thirty-one syllable *waka* poems in the text. These refined paintings functioned as symbols of an ideal court life lost in the past.

In the Edo period, the novel's summary was compulsory reading. The first 'floating world tale' (*ukiyo zoshi*), Ihara Saikaku's 'Life of an Amorous Man,' has fifty-four chapters and a Genji-like main character. And Genji's popularity was sustained through parodies such as *Nise Murasaki Inaka Genji* ('Phony Murasaki and Rural Genji'). The game of guessing the names of incenses (*kodo*) had developed visual codes for specific incenses associated with each chapter of the novel, and these codes came to be well-known, especially after they were included in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Allusions (*mitate*) were also widely used. One of the most common was a reference to an episode from chapter 34, *Wakana* ('New Herbs I'): the cat of the Third Princess escapes the interior of the house under a bamboo blind, and Kashiwagi manages to peek at the pursuing princess. The motif of a single feminine figure near a bamboo blind became one of the common tropes of depictions of courtesans in the *ukiyo-e* genre. At the same time, the literary scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) reinterpreted the novel as the author's attempt to make her readers sensitive to what he called *mono no aware* ('the pathos of things'). Although this aesthetic concept has been very influential, it is important to acknowledge that it was partly the result of Norinaga's idealization of the culture and language of the first centuries of Japanese culture.

In conclusion, although revered as a literary classic, the Tale of Genji continues to be controversial by accommodating ever-changing interpretations. These make the novel relevant to new generations, and reaffirm its crucial role within Japanese culture.