

12-2012

Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki: The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of the Genji Monogatari.

Jessie Nutter

East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors>

 Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nutter, Jessie, "Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki: The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of the Genji Monogatari." (2012). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 156. <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/156>

This Honors Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki:
The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of the *Genji Monogatari*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

Jessie Nutter
The Honors College
English Honors Program
East Tennessee State University

November 28, 2012



Jessie Nutter
Honors Senior Thesis
28 November 2012

Rescue or Rape, Genji or Murasaki:

The Role of Gender Relations and the Unsung Heroines of the *Genji Monogatari*

Pre-modern world literature is typically regarded as a field dominated by male writers. Indeed, one need not be a scholar to be acquainted with the works of such literary giants as Homer, Cervantes, and Chaucer, and it is certainly a widely accepted fact that prior to the 19th century works penned by a woman's hand were much harder to come by in the Western world. That is not to say, however, that in the far remote corners of the world women beyond the gaze of Western Europe were not writing. In fact, many of the most widely renowned works of Eastern literature were written by women, most especially a wealth of Japanese folk tales and fables known as *monogatari*. As works of fiction, *monogatari* were by principle considered beneath the interests and pursuits of men, and thus even in cases where identity of the author has not survived, all known *monogatari* can safely be attributed to women.

Unfortunately, the process of incorporating even the paramount classics of Eastern literature into world literary canon can take centuries. This is no doubt the reason why, apart from literary scholars, few Western citizens today are aware of the fact that the work celebrated as the world's first true novel was written a thousand years ago by a lady of the Japanese imperial court. The *Genji Monogatari*—known in English as the Tale of Genji—was written around the turn of the 11th century (during the Japanese Heian Era) by a lady-in-waiting to the empress known to posterity only by the sobriquet Murasaki Shikibu. Although the term *monogatari* may imply light reading, the *Genji Monogatari* is a tale of epic proportions, spanning 1120 pages in its most recent English translation. The narrative follows the life of a particularly gifted courtier known to the reader as Genji, beginning with his birth and continuing on until well after his death.

Traditionally, the *Genji Monogatari* has been read, in accordance with all *monogatari*, as a romantic portrayal of the passionate liaisons between men and women and their sometimes joyful, though oftentimes heart-wrenching conclusions. Genji, so the narrative tells us, is the ideal lover: handsome to the point of being beautiful, unparalleled in his mastery of the arts, and eternally devoted to any woman he has once loved. He is unquestionably the hero of the tale, but is he truly its intended focus? As Royall Tyler asserts in his introduction to the most recent English edition of the novel, “Some contemporary readers insist that *The Tale of Genji* is less about Genji himself than about the women in it—their feelings, their experiences, their fates” (xiii). While this most recent interpretation of the novel may be controversial, it is certainly not without textual support. As *Genji* scholar J. M. Maki points out, “In the *Genji Monogatari* there is probably the most remarkable galaxy of feminine characters that has ever appeared in any literary work” (499). Indeed, while the tale contains only a handful of significant male characters, the considerable number and range of the female cast far outshine all but Genji himself, leading modern readers to wonder if Lady Murasaki was perhaps pushing a hidden agenda of her own when she penned the work.

With that in mind, it is of interest to note that in ancient Japan the tale was at times referred to not as the *Genji Monogatari*, but rather as the *Murasaki Monogatari*. Murasaki, the chief lady among the many women of the tale, was, like Genji, of such peerless beauty and accomplishments that she doubtlessly “made a deep impression on the men and women of the Court at the time and that the name of the ideal heroine, Murasaki, consequently, was given to both the book and its author” (Maki 482). Her significance to the tale is such that some, even as

far back as the Heian Era, consider her to be the true protagonist. Yet regardless of her evident popularity among readers of all time periods, it is to Genji that the narrative continuously returns.

However, that fact is insufficient to disperse the theory that the tale is in truth about the many women with whom Genji comes into contact. In much the same way that Scheherazade acts as the catalyst that holds the many tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* together, so might Genji, although enjoying a far more active role in the escapades, serve as a figure conveniently employed by the author to anchor her many lines of narrative framing into one continuous tale. Through Genji, the reader is able to experience the sad, interconnected fates of a host of women and thereby share in their trials and tribulations. As one among those most devoted to this reading, Valerie Henitiuk insists that “the author employs her attractive, charming hero and his frequently very entertaining relations with a variety of women to explore the insidious social problems at the very root” of a Heian woman’s existence (“Going to Bed” 56). Among the factors present within the novel that are most persuasive in supporting this reading are the foreshadowing employed by the author, her overall portrayal of the conditions and treatment of women, her subtle yet ever present distaste for the institution of polygamous marriage, the creative use of spirit possession as a means of protesting against the male-dominated society, and the lessons to be taken from the events that unfold at Uji.

Despite the fact that the novel’s many leading ladies are not present from the start of the narrative as is Genji himself, the attentive reader is nonetheless ever aware of their impending arrival. As early as the second chapter, Lady Murasaki presents her audience with sufficient evidence to expect them. In the early part of this chapter, one of the most memorable scenes the novel has to offer is found: the famous “rainy night conversation” that takes place between Genji, his closest male companion (the Secretary Captain), and two other men of little consequence as they discuss women and past love affairs. This scene occurs immediately following the first chapter of the work, which serves to introduce Genji’s background and position him as the narrative’s central figure - the thread that ties together the various women’s individual tales. Hence, the rainy night conversation is essentially the primary initiation into the meat of the plot. Frequently within the conversation direct allusions are made to women who will later figure prominently in at least an episode if not the entirety of the tale. For example, the Secretary Captain expresses the view that “even among those known as Governors” can be found a “house [which] boasts every luxury, and all those daughters of his, showered with love and dazzling wealth, grow up in grand style. Girls like that often do better in palace service than you might imagine” (*Tale of Genji* 23). One who is familiar with the characters of the *Genji Monogatari*, after reading this passage, cannot help but be reminded of Genji’s Akashi Lady who, never mind fitting the description exactly, goes on to do so well in Genji’s service that she achieves the unheard of (for a Governor’s daughter) rank of birth mother to an Empress.

Another example can be found in the passage that reads, “the really fascinating girl is the one of whom no one has ever heard, the strangely appealing one who lives by herself, hidden away in some ruinous, overgrown old house; because, never having expected anyone like her, you wonder what she is doing there and cannot help wanting to know her better” (*Tale of Genji* 24). This passage brings to mind the unfortunate princess Suetsumuhana, who with the death of her parents had fallen into ruin and obscurity before Genji happens upon her. Other women, rather than being vaguely alluded to, are very nearly named outright, such as the Secretary Captain’s description of his lost love Yugao, who not surprisingly takes center stage a mere two chapters later.

In addition to foreshadowing the arrival of the novel's primary ladies, Lady Murasaki frequently recalls the rainy night discussion within the text to ensure that her readers make the connection. While one line in the discussion remarks on "those of middle birth" as being "the ones among whom you can see what a girl really has to offer and find ways to distinguish one from another," a later passage in referring to Utsusemi recalls that "she nicely represented the middle grade they had discussed, with all its appeals, and [Genji] understood how truly the man of broad experience had spoken" (*Tale of Genji* 23, 41). This reference back to the rainy night conversation ensures that the reader notices the link and makes it obvious that Lady Murasaki intended the passage to be read as foreshadowing. If only Genji himself were capable of grasping this intention, he may have been more wary of the warning to "please take my humble advice and beware of the pliant, easy woman. Any slip of hers can make her husband look a fool" and thus have avoided the disaster that was his marriage to the Third Princess (*Tale of Genji* 31).

Far from being merely a discussion that serves to spark Genji's interest in women, as the scene has frequently been read, in truth this passage serves to introduce through foreshadowing the numerous women who will figure in the tale and thus highlight their importance before they even arrive on stage. Such an understanding of this pivotal passage goes a long way in supporting the view that Lady Murasaki intended her novel to be read as a narrative frame containing the many individual tales of Heian Era women and their consequent fates.

Many of those who assert that Lady Murasaki wrote the *Genji Monogatari* with just such a reading in mind claim she did so out of a wish to condemn the patriarchal culture that ruled the day. Perhaps the most efficient way to understand Lady Murasaki's portrayal of women within the novel and their implications is first to understand the role women played during the author's period in history. In Heian Japan, high-born women were kept secluded from the eyes of men and therefore enjoyed little freedom of movement; they were quite literally "walled off" in that they remained jealously guarded behind several layers of both moveable and immovable barriers ("Virgin Territory"). In addition, noble women were further "weighted down... by cumbersome clothing and by the requirement to travel almost exclusively by ox cart" (Childs 1063). These considerable restrictions demanded by court society left women entirely dependent upon men for support. As Suetsumuhana's example demonstrates, a woman who has no man to look after her will soon find that her property and her fortunes have fallen into ruin. Without the freedoms to come and go as one pleases and be seen by those outside one's immediate family, how could any woman be expected to look after her own interests? While some sources of Lady Murasaki's time presented views "that describe women as happy to suffer and be trodden upon, 'Murasaki Shikibu takes the more realistic view that a helpless woman is in a pretty sad position and cannot be expected to enjoy it'" ("Going to Bed" 48).

Women in the novel who have lost male support frequently lament this lack of freedom and the insecure position in which it places them, such as Oigimi after her father's death. To be fair, however, Heian Japan was much more liberal in its treatment of women than most other regions of the world were at this time. Unlike in Europe, Heian women "could own, inherit, and pass on property," nor was there "any unreasonable insistence on purity, virginity, and so on" ("Marriage, Rank and Rape"). In reality, women born low enough to be allowed even relative freedom of movement likely got on quite well in society; however, to high born women the strict social codes were debilitating, as Lady Murasaki depicts.

As the narrative proves, trusting in men for support could be a precarious situation, although few alternatives were available. When entering into a relationship with a man, women often had reason to doubt the depth of his affections and wonder if his interest would persevere or

prove to be a passing whim. Indeed, what makes Genji such a magnificent lover is his refusal to ever abandon a woman once he has taken responsibility for her. The flame of his devotion may flicker, but never in the novel can one argue that it is entirely extinguished, and the same can be said of his support. However, not every woman can expect to attract one so noble as Genji for a lover. In the novel's concluding Uji chapters, Kaoru, Genji's purported youngest son, is shown to be quite fickle in his pursuit of Ukifune, a woman he is drawn to because of her resemblance to his lost love. He clearly fails to value her intimately and is quite unable to believe that she possesses considerable depth of feeling. One rendition has him refer to Ukifune as "a loveable sort of companion... someone not to be taken seriously or [be] offered too excellent a place," while he later attributes the cause of her supposed suicide via drowning to her being "as vague as she was, and as easily swayed, she must have got the idea for what she did simply from having the river nearby" (Shirane 133, *Tale of Genji* 1059). In this last section of the novel, Lady Murasaki shows Genji to be an exceptional courtier indeed in his generosity by contrasting him with the typical gallant lovers of the period.

Perhaps one of the most evident ways Lady Murasaki depicts the trials faced by women in a male dominated society is through her portrayal of the institution of marriage in Heian Japan. One notable critic of Genji's amorous ways, Komashaku Kimi, goes so far as to insist that Lady Murasaki penned her tale "in order to warn all women against marriage" ("Marriage, Rank and Rape"). While such a drastic proposition is surely not without its biases, it is nonetheless true that several married women throughout the tale meet with misfortune as a direct result of their involvement in polygamous relationships. Two noteworthy examples are Genji and Murasaki's own mothers. Although both are merely secondary characters, they fall victim to the same fate shared by many women throughout the tale. Forced to occupy the precarious position of a lesser wife, both the Kiritsubo Intimate and Murasaki's mother are plagued by the jealous retribution of their lovers' principal wives and both consequently suffer a premature death as a result. The narrative makes no attempt to mask the unfortunate women's fates; rather, for example in the case of Murasaki's mother, it specifically attributes the death to the fact that her lover's "wife is a very great lady, and the resulting unpleasantness made her so continually miserable that in the end she died" (*Tale of Genji* 89). The fact that so many of Lady Murasaki's female characters fall victim to this or similar scenarios arising from polygamous marriages cannot simply be disregarded as happenstance but rather should serve as a clear indication that the author was indeed passing judgment on the institutions of her day.

In rare cases dispersed throughout the novel, Lady Murasaki allows her characters to speak for her directly, such as in the passage where Ukifune's mother expresses the view, "I realized when I saw how unhappy *she* [Naka no Kimi, Ukifune's half-sister and lesser wife to Niou] is that the only really worthy, reliable husband is the one who does not divide his affections" (*Tale of Genji* 981). Such subtle yet frequent illustrations as these are peppered throughout the tale. Whether through dialogue or direct example, Lady Murasaki continually reminds the reader of the suffering faced by women whose husband's "divide their affections."

Yet for a theme clearly so central to the narrative, frequent minor examples are far from sufficient and serve merely to underscore the primary example presented to the reader in the episode of Genji's marriage to the Third Princess, Onna San no Miya. Despite enjoying in Murasaki a wife who possesses all the beauty, feminine kindness, and aesthetic skills that a man could ask for, and also in spite of the boundless love he bears for her, Genji nonetheless welcomes the chance to enter into marriage with Emperor Suzaku's youngest daughter and thereby gain further prestige through so lofty an alliance. At this point in the narrative Genji has already

constructed his Rokujo estate, which houses a number of women under his protection. Murasaki, his principal wife and therefore head mistress of Rokujo, has already patiently endured many of his affairs and the further humiliation of being installed under the same roof as his lesser wives and consorts. Jealousy, as a matter of principle, was thought to be beneath a woman, especially when the affairs were with women below her in rank and therefore theoretically beneath her notice. As Tyler asserts in his article detailing the relationship between Genji and Murasaki and how it evolves throughout the novel, “a symptom of [Murasaki’s] predicament in life is that in principle it is beneath her dignity to express such feelings [as jealousy] at all” (“I am I” 438). Although in her youth Murasaki’s temper occasionally flared when presented with such matters, what can she do now but maintain an air of dignified resolve? Alas, her one condolence in life has been the good fortune that Genji never undertook to set a woman above her. Upon learning that he has finally done just that by marrying Onna San no Miya, a woman whose imposing rank cannot but overshadow her, Murasaki does not speak even a word to Genji in protest, knowing that such sentiments would serve only to discredit her.

To Genji’s dismay, he learns that the Third Princess, still very young and childish, is “too dismally dull” (*Tale of Genji* 592). He regrets the sentiments that led him to accept her hand and wishes that he could undo the past, as he sees clearly (despite how she tries to hide it) that this new arrangement distresses his true love, Murasaki. As so many other women learn in the *Genji Monogatari*, “Murasaki bitterly discovers that a woman without family support is helpless against an upper-ranking lady and that a “private” marriage is not, in fact, the same as a court marriage” (Shirane 121). Rank may demand that Onna San no Miya be shown greater respect and consideration than Murasaki, yet to Genji it is all too obvious how far his lady surpasses the princess in charm and character. Eventually, the assault to her dignity and the fear that “age by and by would dull her in his eyes” leads Murasaki to request that Genji allow her to renounce the world and become a nun, which he, out of love for her and a fear of parting, simply cannot allow her to do (*Tale of Genji* 636).

In an ill-mannered attempt to restore harmony to their relationship, Genji begins reminiscing to Murasaki of all the women he has loved in the past, presumably so that she may see how he has favored her above them all. Lost in his reverie of remembrance, Genji erroneously speaks ill of the late Rokujo Haven, remarking how “she made painfully trying company” and that “the way she brooded” over his other affairs “made things very unpleasant” (*Tale of Genji* 646). Considering that this is the same Rokujo Haven who Genji knows to be responsible for the death of his first wife, Aoi, when she was attacked by the Haven’s living spirit in order to teach Genji a lesson, one would think that Genji had learned not to slight her by now. Even Tyler asserts that “when I came to translate Genji’s speech I felt as though he had taken leave of his senses” (“I am I” 468). Surely enough, Genji comes to regret his loose tongue when Murasaki falls ill from spirit possession. Not surprisingly, the possessing spirit is eventually revealed to be that of the Rokujo Haven. In his constant worry over Murasaki, Genji all but abandons the Third Princess, who in his absence proves too weak-willed to spurn the advances of another suitor. The ultimate result of their affair is the birth of Kaoru, whom the world believes to be but whom Genji is painfully aware is *not* his son. Murasaki dies of her illness, and Onna San no Miya, overcome with shame, quickly takes the drastic step of becoming a nun despite her youth. This extreme reaction announces to the entire world that her marriage to Genji was nothing but disastrous.

As this example, which is also debatably the chief parable of the tale, clearly illustrates, far from bringing happiness, the miseries and struggles of polygamous marriage frequently brought nothing but despair to all parties involved. This is the last the reader will see of Genji, as

following Murasaki's death he forsakes the world and devotes himself to religion. Had he contented himself with the considerable number of women whose hearts he had claimed over the years and not undertaken to displace the love who had remained by his side since she was a girl, Genji likely would have avoided all the calamities that befell him. In another world, he and Murasaki may have lived on happily together into ripe old age; instead, misery over his new marriage drives her to death and Genji does not long survive her. With Lady Murasaki painting polygamous marriage in such a negative light, can there be any doubt about her views on the subject?

Yet apparently the matter is not that simple. As in every debate, there is of course another side of the issue to be taken into account. After all, let us not forget that Murasaki herself was once the "other woman" as far as Genji's principal wife at the time, Aoi, is concerned. However, Murasaki's rank was insufficient to cause Aoi any real concerns, and the latter dies before the issue can be properly addressed, leaving Murasaki to take on the role of primary wife until her standing is challenged by Onna San no Miya. In the meantime, Genji undertakes a number of affairs that, although they certainly do not comfort Murasaki, cannot be said to significantly trouble her either. Once or twice she is presented with a rival who may truly be capable of displacing her, but not until Onna San no Miya does the event actually occur. Far from being an undesirable position, one scholar asserts that "Genji compensates, at least in part, for the iniquities and suffering [he] caused his women: he provides patronage and support, and finally builds for them the palatial Rokujo-in... polygamy becomes an arrangement by which the hero can generously provide protection and support to all those lonely and insecure women of the hills who would otherwise be neglected" (Shirane 118). Despite his apparent underestimation of these "women of the hills," Shirane does make an excellent point. While many of the women in question may have been capable of finding support elsewhere, where would one such as Suetsumuhana have been if Genji had not found her and taken her under his wing? Murasaki herself would never have found a home with Genji if he had been inclined to honor Aoi by seeking no other mistresses. While evidently not an ideal situation, polygamous marriage certainly has allowed Genji to offer protection to a significant number of women, certainly doing more good than he would have been able to had he been allowed to take just one. Perhaps then it is not the act of seeking mistresses alone that Lady Murasaki wishes to censure, but rather taking affairs so far as to displace the woman whom Genji owes his truest allegiance is the real crime.

Perhaps the most prominent to contemporary readers and certainly most hotly debated portrayal of gender relations within the *Genji Monogatari* is the issue of rape, particularly how it relates to Murasaki's marriage consummation scene. *Genji* scholars appear to be divided and highly opinionated on this topic more than any other. Some, among them Japanese critic Komashaku Kimi, "charge Genji with crimes against women," not the least among them kidnapping and rape ("Marriage, Rank and Rape"). As she argues, "since a woman in a weak position easily surrenders, in such a context rape and seduction are almost the same thing" (Childs 1063). Her colleague, Setouchi Jakucho, who in 1999 released her own translation of the *Genji Monogatari* into modern Japanese, agrees, stating that "Genji's affairs always began with what she calls 'forced sex'... 'It was rape, really'" (Shoji). Certainly Genji's amorous ways have earned him quite a reputation among readers along with the nickname "Playboy of the Eastern World," but can he fairly be charged with rape? ("Playboy").

Royall Tyler, who translated the most recent English edition, thinks not. Using Genji's first night with the orphaned princess Suetsumuhana to support his opinion, Tyler wonders "whether a woman in such a situation *can* properly give her prior consent" ("Marriage, Rank and

Rape”). After all, devoted as she is to the memory of her late father and living in a society where marriage is a matter of parental arrangement, Suetsumuhana is unable to take it upon herself to marry without her father’s approval, which, being dead, he is clearly unable to give. As Tyler sees it, Genji “has no choice but to proceed without her consent,” and so he does (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”). Few people would attempt to argue that Suetsumuhana’s situation is not greatly improved thanks to her relationship with Genji, however much they might object to the initial act that began that relationship.

Tyler goes on to shed light on the fact that manners and societal expectations in Heian Japan forbade women to speak openly on such subjects as sexual intimacy, particularly if they were virgins. Indeed, he holds that it was Murasaki’s incomprehension of Genji’s flirtatious hints that “proves her quality and promises her future greatness as a lady” (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”). “For her to say yes,” Tyler informs us, “would be unworthy of her; for her to say no would place Genji, hence herself, in a very difficult position; and for her to say either would compromise her by showing that she does know what he is talking about. Her utter innocence is what proves her supreme worth” (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”). Indeed, “innocence” (which in reality meant total ignorance of sexual relationships) was insisted upon for women but mattered not at all for men. Virgins or not, men were never kept in the dark about sexual intercourse nor had any reason to feign ignorance on the subject. By denying women knowledge of sexual affairs, Heian society was inherently unjust toward them and crushed all possibilities of women standing on equal footing with men in romantic relationships.

Margaret Childs concurs with Tyler’s assessment that “utter incomprehension toward carnal matters is so obligatory to noblewomen of the day that the author could not have had her ideal heroine behave in any other way” (“Going to Bed” 56). Childs goes on to insist that “it is [Murasaki’s] trust rather than her body that has been violated” when she awakens the following morning and is upset with Genji after reading the poem he left by her bedside, alerting her to the fact that their intimacy the previous night was premeditated; Childs insinuates that Murasaki is upset simply because she feels duped (“Going to Bed” 56). Advancing her own interpretation on the matter of rape in the *Genji Monogatari*, Childs further argues that the “male strategy of ‘making vulnerability tangible’ in order to increase feminine allure is common to depictions of romantic involvement in the literature of the day and cannot be taken to equal sexual violence” (“Going to Bed” 55).

While Tyler and Childs make very persuasive arguments in Genji’s defense, in Japan “*Genji-girai* (‘detestation of Genji’) flourishes” as a result of the crimes he is charged with (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”). There are many who simply cannot forgive Genji for his kidnapping of the young Murasaki and subsequently stealing (supposedly) her innocence. It is important to note, however, that not all Japanese feel this way. Shirane, for one, persists in seeing the romance at the heart of even the most controversial issues touched on in the novel, holding that “Murasaki’s situation must have appeared enviable, and undoubtedly there were many who dreamed of such an opportunity. The idea of a high-ranking courtier offering a grand residence and support to a poor girl or orphan proved to be rich ground for the romance” (117). Just as in the example of Suetsumuhana, readers must keep in mind that in kidnapping and even potentially forcing himself upon Murasaki, Genji was actually protecting her from the harsh life she may well have led at her father’s residence under the care of her jealous step-mother. Furthermore, leading up to the consummation scene the narrative presents more than sufficient evidence that Murasaki is extremely fond of Genji, and although the novel does not depict the scene itself, it is quite unlikely in any case that Murasaki truly intended to spurn his affections, however versed she may

or may not have been in matters of sexual intimacy. While Genji himself may be blameless, the same cannot be said for the society that forced Murasaki into this precarious position by forbidding her knowledge of her suitor's intentions.

One of the more creative theories put forth in support of a feminine reading argues that the sporadic use of spirit possession within the tale is in actuality a method employed by women to protest against the male hierarchy that oppresses them. As Doris G. Borgen, the woman credited with presenting this theory, affirms, especially within polygamous societies, "it is frequently women who fall victim to spirit possession" (95). As she argues, "the putatively supernatural event of spirit possession momentarily reverses traditional roles and upsets the normal order of values so that victimized women temporarily rule over men" (95). This is a somewhat revolutionary reading on the use of spirit possession within the text, as "traditionally, jealousy has been regarded as the major force behind spirit possession in the *Genji Monogatari*" (Borgen 98). Scholars of the tale have typically held the belief that "competing wives, concubines, and mistresses are prone to fits of jealousy" and have therefore "singled out jealousy as the *only* motivation for spirit possession" (Borgen 99). To be fair to these scholars, jealousy certainly does come to mind as a fairly obvious explanation behind the possessions. After all, there are many examples throughout the tale of wives persecuting their husbands' mistresses out of fits of jealousy, so it stands to reason that the same motivation would be at the source of spirit possession as well. However, Borgen insists that the issue is not that simple, and claims that such a shallow reading results only in "obscur[ing] the complexity of women's rebellious rejection of their assigned role in society" (99).

Within the *Genji Monogatari*, there are three major instances that involve spirit possessions (all resulting in the death of the possessed), as well as a handful of more minor examples. In her article on spirit possession within the tale, Borgen focuses with considerable detail on the latter two instances, the possessions of Aoi and Murasaki by the (in the former case) living and (in the latter) deceased spirit of the Rokujo Haven. The widow of a former crown prince, the Rokujo Haven is, as Genji's father the emperor is continuously reminding him, not a woman to be trifled with. Yet young and fickle as he is, Genji frequently abandons the Haven in favor of chasing after other women who cannot help but be below her in rank (had her husband lived, she would have been empress), thereby provoking her jealousy and contempt. After all, "she clearly expects him sooner or later to acknowledge their relationship publicly: that is, to marry her. However, he does not" (Marriage, Rank and Rape). The first time Rokujo's spirit wreaks havoc on someone's health is just after she is publicly humiliated by Genji's principal wife, Aoi. It is important to note that just because she is the one responsible does not mean that Rokujo is consciously attacking Aoi. The text makes it quite plain that Rokujo wishes to have no part in the affair, and yet the narrative makes it explicitly obvious even to Rokujo herself that she is the aggressor: Rokujo "dreamed repeatedly, on dozing off, that she went to where that lady [Aoi] (as she supposed) lay in her finery, pushed and tugged her about, and flailed at her with a baneful violence strange to her waking self" (*Tale of Genji* 173). Aoi, who is fully pregnant with Genji's child throughout this nightmare, goes into premature labor and dies within days of the delivery.

Borgen, however, insists that Aoi was never the Haven's true target. Rather, she argues that the possession ceased mid-labor when Genji identified the afflicting spirit and that Aoi died from natural causes. The spirit's true goal, according to Borgen, was to vent her "repressed anger at a third party — Genji — and at the polygamous society that allows men to neglect their women with near impunity... the possessing spirit functions to express female grievances" (101). There

is a small amount of textual support for this reading. While lamenting her close association with so damning a scandal, Rokujo muses, “No, she could not remain attached to so cruel a lover” (*Tale of Genji* 173). This citation shows that it is Genji and not Aoi that Rokujo blames for the subconscious actions of her spirit.

Certainly, there is much truth to this interpretation of the possession. It is just as plausible that Rokujo’s vengeance was aimed at Genji through attacking his wife as it is that she attacked Aoi out of jealousy and vengeance for humiliating her in the carriage scene. Yet Bargaen claims the women acted together in order to vent their shared frustrations with Genji. However, never in the text does it lead the reader to believe that Rokujo’s spirit fled Aoi’s body after Genji’s recognition of it and never does it lend the impression that the possession was not responsible for Aoi’s death. In fact, after receiving a message from the Rokujo Haven, whom he had not contacted for some time because of her role in his wife’s death, Genji laments that “he should have seen and heard the cause [of Aoi’s death] so clearly,” which is an explicit statement of the Haven’s guilt (*The Tale of Genji* 179). While Bargaen is likely correct in identifying Genji as the Haven’s true target, she is less convincing in her assertion that the women acted together. After all, Rokujo had just cause to be angry with both of them for different reasons. No matter how one reads the tale, Aoi cannot be called anything but a victim, despite the fact that she may have brought that fate upon herself.

The latter instance of spirit possession involving Murasaki’s attack by the Rokujo Haven’s (who by this point in the tale has died) deceased spirit is much more straightforward and makes Murasaki’s innocence in the affair plain. As Bargaen maintains, the text of this passage reveals readily that the spirit has returned because, as she tells Genji, “I had thought I might teach you a proper lesson... I have little enough against this woman” (*Tale of Genji* 654, 655). It is interesting to note that in both cases the Haven’s spirit latches on to a woman who, somewhere in the deepest confines of her being, shares the Haven’s grievances against Genji. In fact, it is likely the case that this emotional connection enables the spirit to take hold and speak through its hostage. However, that does not necessarily equate to the spirit’s exact sentiments being shared by the possessed, as the spirit speaks in this possession at some length about matters solely pertinent to the Rokujo Haven. Yet regardless of whether the spirit acts in perfect accordance with its host against a male oppressor, acts solely of its own volition against both male and female aggressors, or some combination of the two, the case is plain that spirit possession is employed by the Rokujo Haven within the *Genji Monogatari* to express frustrations with the recurrent neglect and ill treatment cast upon her by her treacherous lover, Genji. Although the narrative may not make it as evident as it might, what remains “merely implied, yet certain beyond a doubt, is that men and women will not achieve happiness unless their love relationships are based on equality between the sexes” (Bargaen 127).

While many a lover’s tale within the main frame of the narrative – the life of Genji – may be fraught with turmoil and hardships, perhaps the most dramatic portrayal of gender relations in the Heian period comes at the novel’s end, the section known as the Uji chapters, which take place eight years after Genji’s death. Although Genji may not have always been as dedicated to his ladies as readers may have preferred, this last section of the tale makes it all the more evident that whatever faults he may have had, Genji was indeed a shining example of the ideal courtier. In his place, the narrative offers two of his descendants to fill the void he left: Kaoru, the illegitimate son of another whom Genji nonetheless raised as his own, and Niou, the favorite prince of his mother and father (the reigning emperor and empress) and grandson of Genji in the maternal line. As becomes readily apparent, the two young lovers “split the good qualities of Genji and so also

bring out their lesser selves” (Miner 72). In Kaoru, one can easily see the sensitive side of Genji reflected; all of his deeper ruminations on the fleeting nature of life and religious aspirations shine through in the would-be son he raised, while Niou possesses all of Genji’s more dynamic qualities: his lively spirit, winning accomplishments, endearing charm, and (most importantly) his love of women.

The heart of the Uji narrative begins when Kaoru becomes acquainted with an old prince who has forsaken the world and lives alone with his two daughters in the country. Knowing his time is near, the prince asks Kaoru to look after his daughters when he is gone, a favor which Kaoru readily agrees to undertake. After their father has passed, Kaoru begins making entreaties to the elder daughter, known to readers as Oigimi. However, much as in the case of Suetsumuhana, the sisters have concluded that “in their father’s absence, marriage is too perilous to embark upon at all” (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”). Despite fervent and frequent proposals from Kaoru, the elder princess insists that she could never consider marriage while her younger sister’s future remains uncertain, prompting Kaoru to enlist the aid of Niou in ensuring the younger princess, Naka no Kimi, is advantageously married off. As readers would expect from one so gallant as Niou, the marriage is quickly consummated when he steals into the princess’s room and wins her over. Meanwhile, Kaoru manages to spend the night with Oigimi but fails to make love to her due to her unrelenting hesitations, a fact that clearly illustrates his dissimilarity to Genji and Niou. Unfortunately, the remote province of Uji is a considerable distance from the capital, making it difficult for Niou to visit his new wife as often as he ought. In his absence, the sisters lament that he has abandoned Naka no Kimi after all, and Oigimi is more resolute than ever in believing “that marriage ultimately will mean vulnerability and suffering. The worst of her fears are confirmed by Naka no Kimi’s marriage to Niou” (Shirane 122). Indeed, “her sister’s predicament had left her thinking that relations between husband and wife must be the bleakest the world has to offer” (“Virgin Territory”). Yet in the face of Kaoru’s undying determination, Oigimi sees no method of escaping the desolation of married life apart from ending her own existence. She therefore determines that, “I, at least, shall not languish in any such misery. I shall die before I am too deep in sin” (*Tale of Genji* 898). True to her word, Oigimi persists in refusing all nourishment and soon withers away.

This episode of the *Genji Monogatari* certainly goes a long way in advancing the belief that Lady Murasaki wrote her novel at least in part to draw attention to the unfortunate fates of women in the male dominated world of the Heian era; indeed, it may even offer some support to Komashaku Kimi’s radical assertion that Murasaki penned the tale in order to warn women against marriage. As Valerie Henitiuk maintains, Oigimi is thoroughly “unable to conceive of wedlock as a desirable or even imaginable option” because “accepting such support [from Kaoru] would place her completely at the mercy of a patriarchy that is more than a little misogynous... the resistance she manifests can be viewed as a conscious attempt to retain her autonomy and sense of self” (“Virgin Territory”). Shirane even goes so far as to assert that “Oigimi has inherited the memory of Murasaki’s tragedy,” a view that Henitiuk supports, declaring that “the sufferings of these women [Murasaki and Onna San no Miya] at the hands of their insensitive, egocentric men paint a clear picture of what Oigimi herself can expect” (Shirane 121, “Virgin Territory”). In the face of Kaoru’s “stubbornly persistent” attempts to win her over, Oigimi’s “only means of fighting back is by doing away with her corporeal self... [her] behavior actually demonstrates a powerfully subversive response to male invasion and attempted appropriation of the self” (“Virgin Territory”).

While the text does make it quite clear that Oigimi’s suicide is brought on by Kaoru’s

incessant harassment, not all *Genji* scholars are convinced that the affair had to end in tragedy. After all, Oigimi herself admits that “I cannot really object to this gentleman’s looks or manner... If [he] were anyone ordinary, I might well after all these years feel like accepting him, but he is so overwhelming, so daunting in his glory, that he only makes me hopelessly shy” (*Tale of Genji* 877). Henitiuk concedes that “Oigimi does not reject this particular suitor because of any particular flaw in himself, but rather because the entire gender relations and marriage system of the time is corrupt and hostile to women” (“Virgin Territory”). Komashaku Kimi concurs, insisting that “entering into relations with a man, no matter how kind or good he may be, means unhappiness for the woman,” and certainly no critic can justly accuse Kaoru of being unkind or uncompassionate (“Virgin Territory”). Despite being given the perfect opportunity to wed himself to Oigimi on the night he manages to spend alone with her, Kaoru does not seize the opportunity. Even he admits “how silly it was of him... to remain so slow to act on his ardent desires” especially when he is well aware that “in so horribly lonely a house a lustful man would find nothing to stand in his way” (*Tale of Genji* 874, 875). Henitiuk also remarks on how “Oigimi is unusually fortunate, in that her admirer is unwilling actually to force himself upon her” (“Virgin Territory”).

Royall Tyler, however, disagrees. In keeping with his earlier opinions as to the matter of rape in the *Genji Monogatari*, Tyler holds that, like Suetsumuhana, Oigimi’s opposition to the marriage stems chiefly from the fact that “she has no one to tell her to do so” (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”). After all, marriages were traditionally arranged by the father, and thus Oigimi feels that it would be inappropriate for her to decide on the matter herself. Although aware of the fact that her father likely intended the union between them, out of shyness and modesty (and likely somewhat due to the societal convention that forbade women from betraying knowledge of carnal affairs) Oigimi cannot presume as to accept a lord as distinguished as Kaoru. Honestly, does the *Genji Monogatari* offer even one example of a woman ever readily saying yes? As Tyler affirms:

Unlike any other man in the tale, [Kaoru] insists on refraining from making love to Oigimi until she herself allows him to do so. At first one smiles with approval, as many readers have done in centuries past; but then one begins to understand his ghastly mistake. He is out of touch with reality. If he had acted decisively during that night, regardless of Oigimi’s local feelings on the subject, he would have committed himself to her and her to him. He would have taken the decision out of her hands, and she would not have died. Far from it: considering how deeply he and she actually felt about each other, they might really have lived happily ever after. (“Marriage, Rank and Rape”)

Although Henitiuk and Komashaku Kimi would likely reply that Oigimi could have lived if Kaoru had just left her in peace, readers must keep in mind the fate of a woman left with no male support in the world. Furthermore, one wonders why, if she was so opposed to the institution of marriage and convinced that it brought only misery, did she wish for her sister to marry and have Kaoru seek out a suitor for her? The reality is that Oigimi was well aware of the destitution that befell even the highest born woman without some form of male support. While she was willing to descend herself into the meager existence of a mountain rustic, she could not bear the thought of such a lifestyle for her beloved sister. Readers need look no further than to the example of Suetsumuhana (another princess who falls into poverty with the death of her father, whose residence is quickly overgrown with weeds, is abandoned by her gentlewomen, and living so utterly impoverished, sunken in loneliness and despair, that not even thieves take notice of her dwelling, assuming it to be an abandoned ruin) to understand exactly what kind of dire straights

Oigimi and her sister would have found themselves in without Kaoru's continued patronage. Suetsumuhana suffered all these injustices and many more before Genji rescued her, and her residence was in the city. One can easily imagine how much more hopeless the Uji princesses' plight would have been living as they did isolated in the distant mountains. Kaoru is certainly not at fault for wishing to spare Oigimi such a horrific fate. What Henitiuk and Komashaku Kimi fail to realize is that the true aggressor is the society that utterly denies women the possibility of providing for themselves and thus prevents true independence from being a feasible option for women.

Despite the fact that Henitiuk accuses Kaoru of being "stubbornly persistent," readers may have cause to lament the fact that Kaoru was not more "ruthless" (as Henitiuk accuses Genji and Niou of being) in his pursuit of the princess. After all, Genji may not always have been as delicate as one might wish in such matters, but none of his women were ever driven to suicide either. Had Kaoru resolved to go through with the marriage and subsequently persisted in showing Oigimi the same devotion he had lavished on her for years when their relationship remained platonic, it is unlikely that Oigimi would have gone through with her suicide; in truth, as Tyler says, she may have grown to be quite happy. Alas, on this point the reader can never be fully certain, as no matter how devoted Kaoru proved in the past, the novel is filled with examples of men who do eventually go astray. Yet regardless of what might have been, the scene as it unfolds leaves readers longing for Genji, the true romantic courtier whose involvement in the Uji chapters would certainly have elicited a more favorable result. As it is, however, the tale of Uji is far from over.

Devastated by the death of Oigimi, Kaoru begins pursuing her unrecognized (and thus much lower in rank) half-sister, Ukifune. Unfortunately for Kaoru, Niou takes an interest in the late prince's illegitimate daughter as well. Destined to succumb to a fate little more appealing than that suffered by Oigimi herself, Ukifune attempts to drown herself in the river but is taken from its banks by a monk. Ukifune implores him to give her holy orders, and thus she becomes a nun. Just as in Kaoru's pursuit of Oigimi and the unfortunate conclusion that was the result, Genji's absence from the tale makes it ever more apparent that "the division of romantic qualities, happily unified in the hero of the Rokujo-in, diminishes the stature of both male figures and eventually destroys the very notion of the romantic hero. In the end, the heroine can accept neither" (Shirane 132). Alas, Genji's absence from the concluding chapters of the tale turn the romance "anti-romantic" by "playing against expectations established in the reader by earlier romantic methods and conventions" (Shirane 120).

It may well be that the Uji chapters are Lady Murasaki's way of revealing the even more unhappy fates that befell women who were pursued by lover's less possessed of the tact and skill for romance that Genji himself enjoyed. It is at the least certainly evident that she wished to lift her hero even higher by contrasting him with his own descendants, who despite having the honor and advantage of either his parentage or his blood are incapable of being his equals in greatness. Henitiuk goes so far as to insist that "the literature of the Heian period offers a plethora of stories of women who have accepted the male's offer of marriage, and their various strategies for dealing with the often emotionally devastating results of that choice. With Oigimi [and hence with Ukifune], Murasaki Shikibu now sheds light on the implications of taking the drastic step of actually refusing the male" ("Virgin Territory"). It is, however, most interesting to note that in order to share this example, the author had to first remove the shining prince Genji from the narrative. It is as though even Lady Murasaki herself takes it for granted that no woman, least of all a woman without a husband, could be capable of successfully refusing Genji. As for the

woman who dares to refuse the male, one ends up dead and the other, after failing in her suicide attempt, takes shelter in religion. Evidently, refusing the male was hardly a more attractive option than putting up with his affairs. If Lady Murasaki is decisively advancing a critique on the societal and marital practices of her time, then clearly women had little to no outlet for their suffering.

However, in today's culture, so vastly different than the one in which Lady Murasaki lived and set her novel, readers must take care not to make too grand assumptions about a world so far removed from their own in both temporal space and traditional values. While gender relations are certainly a major focus of the *Genji Monogatari*, the fact that so many of the women's tales are steeped in misfortune could be due to a set of culturally encoded emotional responses that associate love with sadness and calamity. It is a widely accepted fact that one of the *Genji Monogatari's* most central themes is *mono no aware*, a Japanese term which resists translation but has been summarized as "the impermanence of things" or "remembrance of things past." Essentially, the term refers to the fleeting nature of life and the tender nostalgia that accompanies certain moments. Such moments (not least among them the death of a loved one) are recurrent throughout Murasaki's tale and may well have been an end in and of themselves, since enduring heartbreak frequently prompts the characters to recall life's fleeting nature and grants the tale greater poignancy.

Furthermore, as Childs notes, most especially in the far Eastern countries of Asia such as China, Japan, India, and Korea, love has for centuries been regarded as a negative emotion in that it is most often evoked both in culture and in literature by feelings of "infatuation, unrequited love, attachment, remote concern, nostalgia, compassion, tenderness/pity, sorrow/love, [and] sorrow/pity" (Childs 1060). In other words, Lady Murasaki may have been inclined to condemn her heroines to such tragic fates out of a desire not necessarily to protest societal practices so much as to evoke a more emotional, powerful response from her readers and thus give the tale more depth and classical romantic characteristics. Happy endings simply were not in style for the Heian Era romance. This same cultural association between love and sadness is the reason that within the tale Genji and other male characters are so frequently drawn to women out of feelings of pity, such as Genji is with Suetsumuhana. In fact, Japanese love stories in particular have for centuries been known to make a strong connection between sexual love and death. This fact is readily apparent in one of the *Genji Monogatari's* most poignant and certainly shortest lived parables - that of Genji's love affair with the tragic Yugao. One of the first women Genji ever falls for and subsequently woos, Yugao falls victim to spirit possession and dies in the very same chapter in which she is introduced after spending an entire night and day hidden away with Genji making love. The fragility of her character and the incredibly short space of time she features in the narrative serve only to strengthen her place in Genji's and readers' hearts, as Yugao's tale has always been celebrated as one of the most romantic the novel has to offer. Perhaps this relationship between love and death/sadness more than any other single factor goes a long way in defending Genji and the other men in the tale from the *Genji-girai* and accusations of crimes against women that have recently risen so strongly against them.

Yet despite the fact that love stories were inclined to be tragic, it is nonetheless evident that Lady Murasaki was keenly aware of gender roles within her society. As a child, so she writes in her diary, "her father lamented the fact that she was not a boy because then, with her mind, she could have become a great scholar, but the field of serious Chinese learning was barred to women in the Heian age" (Maki 484). Although she quite unexpectedly learned to read and write in Chinese by sitting in on her brother's lessons, Lady Murasaki was obliged to write her tale in

phonetic Japanese *kana*, the proper written language for women. Her novel is evidence that Lady Murasaki was much more intelligent, gifted, and capable of undertaking serious studies than her society allowed her to be. Yet ever bound by the strict cultural parameters of her time, she never would have imagined being so indelicate as to make the societal implications and rebellion against the treatment of women within the *Genji Monogatari* plain, if indeed she intended any. Her devoted acquiescence to the manners of her day and the expectations they entailed regarding a high-born woman's behavior mean that readers can never know for sure to what degree she meant her work to be read as political commentary on the institutions of the Heian court.

Whether or not the many implications offered by the novel on the sad fates of women that resulted from an unfair role in society and the miseries brought upon them by polygamous marriage were intended by the author, the ever evolving nature of fiction grants readers every license to find in the *Genji Monogatari's* fifty-four chapters and many leading ladies a classical depiction of the universal struggle that once was (and may still be) an inherent part of being a woman. However modern or unorthodox such a reading may be of this timeless novel, it is not without extensive textual support and has consequently become the topic of many scholarly discussions and debates. The use of foreshadowing employed by the author in the famous "rainy night conversation" to alert the reader of the impending arrival of many of the novel's heroines, Lady Murasaki's overall depiction of the lives and conditions of being a woman within the tale, her subtle yet recurrent condemnation of polygamous marriage, innovative use of spirit possession as a woman's weapon in protesting male dominance and neglect, and the final lesson she confides to her readers in the events that unfold at Uji all support the theory that Lady Murasaki did indeed weave her novel out of the individual tales of many women, the hero Genji serving as the thread that bound them all together to create a tapestry of what it was to be a woman living under the oppressive institution of polygamous marriage in a male dominated society. After all, the *Genji Monogatari* is a novel written by a woman for the women of her court. From the moment of its conception, it was intended as feminine literature, making it only just and sensible that it should covertly address feminine grievances of the day. Even if nothing else about the tale is certain, it can be safely asserted that "the narrative is at least as much about the hero's women and the process by which they attain social success and fulfillment against unlikely odds" or else fall victim to the prejudices of their society as it is about Genji himself (Shirane 119).

Works Cited

- Bargen, Doris G. "Spirit Possession in the Context of Dramatic Expressions of Gender Conflict: The Aoi Episode of The Genji Monogatari." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48.1. (June 1988): 95-130. JSTOR Web. 2 August 2012.
- Childs, Margaret H. "The Value of Vulnerability: Sexual Coercion and the Nature of Love in Japanese Court Literature." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58.4. (Nov. 1999): 1059-1079. JSTOR Web. 2 August 2012.
- Henitiuk, Valerie. "Going to Bed with Waley: How Murasaki Shikibu Does and Does Not Become World Literature." *Comparative Literature Studies* 45.1. (2008): 40-61. JSTOR Web. 19 August 2012.
- Henitiuk, Valerie. "Virgin Territory: Murasaki Shikibu's Oigimi Resists the Male." *Agora* 18 August 2012. Web. <<http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/agora/Articles.cfm@ArticleNo=150.html>>.
- Maki, J. M. "Lady Murasaki and the Genji Monogatari." *Monumenta Nipponica* 3.2. (Jul. 1940): 480-503. JSTOR Web. 2 August 2012.
- Miner, Earl. "The Heroine: Identity, Recurrence, Destiny." *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji* Andrew Pekarik, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- "Playboy of the Eastern World." *The Economist* 18 Aug. 2008. 18 August 2012. Web. <www.economist.com/node/12811335>.
- Shirane, Haruo. "The Uji Chapters and the Denial of the Romance." *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji* Andrew Pekarik, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- Shoji, Kaori. "Setouchi Jakucho Takes Japan Back 1,000 Years." *The New York Times* 23 Jan. 1999. 18 August 2012. Web. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/23/style/23iht-nun.t.html?pagewanted=all>>.
- Tyler, Royall. "'I am I': Genji and Murasaki." *Monumenta Nipponica* 54.4. (Winter 1999): 435-480. JSTOR Web. 2 August 2012.
- Tyler, Royall. "Marriage, Rank and Rape in The Tale of Genji." *Intersections* 18 August 2012. Web. <<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue7/tyler.html>>.
- Tyler, Royall. *The Tale of Genji*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.