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CONTENTS

1  Tough Guys, Mateship and Honour: Another Chinese Tradition
   W. J. F. Jenner

35  Chinese Landscape Painting—The Golden Age
    Ch’en Chih-mai

51  China in the Eyes of French Intellectuals
    Jean Chesneaux

65  Lady Murasaki’s Erotic Entertainment: The Early Chapters
    of The Tale of Genji
    Royall Tyler

79  The “Autocratic Heritage” and China’s Political Future:
    A View from a Qing Specialist
    Helen Dunstan

105 The Qotong, the Bayad and the Ögeled
     Čeveng (C. Ž. Žamcarano)
     —translated by I. de Rachewiltz and J. R. Krueger

121 Raw Photographs and Cooked History: Photography’s Ambiguous
    Place in the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
    Julia Adeney Thomas

135 H. A. Giles v. Huang Chengyi: Sino–British Conflict
    over the Mixed Court, 1884–85
    Motono Eiichi
Cover calligraphy  Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman
LADY MURASAKI'S EROTIC ENTERTAINMENT:
THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF THE TALE OF GENJI

Royall Tyler

The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari 源氏物語) may need no introduction, but perhaps a few words about it will be useful at the start. One of the monuments of world literature, Genji was written in the early eleventh century by a lady of the Japanese court known as Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (973–1014?). It was quickly recognised as a classic and came in time to exert a pervasive influence over Japanese literature and art. In the twentieth century, thanks especially to the prewar translation by Arthur Waley,¹ its fame has spread widely in the English-speaking world where, because of Waley’s usage, its author is often known as Lady Murasaki. The tale concerns the life and fortunes of a nobleman called in his youth Genji the Shining (Hikaru Genji 光源氏) and of certain of his descendants.

The Tale of Genji is known not only for the beauty but for the difficulty of its language. Genuinely to read (rather than decipher) its text is beyond someone like me, and that is one reason why I am now translating it in my turn. If I could read Genji better I might be less keen to turn it into English and find out what it says.

As I worked through the tale’s early chapters, I was surprised to find how erotic they are. By “early chapters” I mean the first thirteen, through “Akashi 明石.”² With the fourteenth chapter, “Miotsukushi 濃標,” the tone changes, for by now, Genji’s stature limits his freedom, and his erotic preoccupations may merge with political manoeuvring. Genji’s adventures in the early chapters more commonly have the quality of play, however serious their consequences.

Some passages in these chapters have a gracefully erotic tinge, but others are so explicit that once or twice, when the truth dawned on me, I was even a little shocked. This may sound foolish, since everyone familiar with The Tale of Genji knows that it is full of love affairs. Still, the experience led me to

² The early chapters may not have been written in their present order, one current since at least the twelfth century and probably intended by author. Scholars have proposed that the tale began originally with “Hahakigi 帯木” or with “Wakamurasaki 若紫,” while medieval legend has it that “Suma 須磨” and “Akashi,” the twelfth and thirteenth chapters, were written first. Many authorities believe that “Kiritsubo 桐壺,” a chapter unlike any other, was added only later to tie together what had grown, partly in response to audience demand, into a more consecutive work than the author had foreseen.


Writing in Japanese, voluminous and varied, is more difficult to characterise generally. However, most of it assumes that the reader has direct access to the original, which is not the case for writing in English.


Okada’s *Figures of resistance* is a major work of this school.


Abe Akio, Akiyama Ken, and Imai Gen’e, eds, *Genji monogatari*, 6 vols (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1970–76) (hereafter Shōgakukan): 1, p.329; Seidensticker, p.140. All *Genji* passages quoted in this paper are from my own draft translation, but I have provided the corresponding page number in Edward Seidensticker’s translation so that the reader should have access to the larger context.

Fujii Sadakazu, *Genji monogatari no sbigen to genzai: The Tale of Genji, past and present* (Tokyo: Isagoya Shobo, 1990), p.19. The “orality” of the tale is often argued by deriving *monogatari* from a verb *monogataru*, ‘to tell a tale’. However, as Fujii has shown, this verb did not exist in the Heian period. Fujii has insisted on the written character of the work.


Susan Sontag had already noted that the language of love has been dropped from what Barthes called the “mechanism of power” and from the mechanisms of “interpretation” that she opposed.

Writing in English on *The Tale of Genji* generally confirms Barthes and Sontag. One reader found everywhere in the tale “the social history of elites.” A second was pleased to see revealed in it a “deeply moving ... moral ugliness” and took its message to be “that the extreme physical and psychological vulnerability of the Heian woman augured ill for her happiness.” A third, waxing indignant about the way the text is presented and read nowadays (in modern, punctuated editions), declared that,

In the Heian tale, plot and character, together with syntax, fuse into an all-embracing time-flow which affords the reader an occasion to feel and reflect on his being and non-being in life (which may be at the same time non-life).

Some, like many commentators in the past (for commentaries on *Genji* began to appear less than two centuries after it was written) invoke the didactic. “One seems to sense in *The Tale of Genji* a recurrent didactic impulse,” one wrote; and another, “Even as the *Genji* tale continually reinforces its self-legitimizing manoeuvre, it also takes on a powerfully didactic (even argumentative) cast.”

These are the words of people intent on serious issues. However, *The Tale of Genji* is not necessarily serious that way. It is a *monogatari*, after all.

What does *monogatari* (“tale”) mean? For some, the term confirms the “orality” of the work, with weighty implications for matters of politics and gender. The author of *Genji*, the internal narrator, the intended reader, and those who read such tales aloud to their mistresses, were all women, and this raises interesting possibilities: for example, the idea that, as one writer put it, “In effect, *monogatari* or ‘fiction’ is alternative, even subversive, discourse, that which is excluded from legitimate, written history, and should therefore be read that way.”

Still, one can also approach the matter more lightly, in the spirit of a passage in the “Momiji-no-ga 紅葉賀” chapter. This passage comes near to defining what the word *monogatari* means.

*Genji* is at the residence of the empress (Fujitsubo 藤壺) for an evening
of music-making when in comes the emperor, cradling his little son in his arms. Genji’s emotions are complicated since the emperor is Genji’s father, the empress is Genji’s great love, and the child is in reality Genji’s own.

“I have many children,” [His Majesty] said [to Genji], “but you are the only one I have seen day and night since you were this small. I expect it is the way he reminds me of those days that makes him look so very like you. Perhaps all babies are like that.” He simply doted on his little son. Genji felt himself go pale; terror, humility, joy, and pity coursed through him until he nearly wept. So eerily adorable was the burbling, smiling child that there came to Genji, despite himself, the immodest thought that if this was what he looked like, he must indeed be a treasure.13

The “burbling” child is “making monogatari” (monogatari nado shite物語などして). This is the sort of reason why Fujii Sadakazu藤井定和 defined monogatari as meaning “a prolonged flow of disjointed, nonsensical talk.”14 Fujii went on to suggest that in a work’s title it signals at once modesty (“These are just some pages of nonsense about someone called Genji”) and pride (“Nonsense, yes, but there is more to it than meets the eye”).15 His analysis explains both the unserious reputation of monogatari (that is, of Heian fiction) in their own time and their fascination for such ladies as the eleventh-century author of The Sarashina Diary (Sarashina nikki更級日記),16 for Tamakazura玉藻 in The Tale of Genji itself, and for countless other discerning readers.17

Being at once absorbing and “unserious,” monogatari like The Tale of Genji resemble love and sex. If a good monogatari conveys the seriousness of the unserious, so does erotic experience. No wonder the greatest monogatari of them all is full of it.

As I said earlier, despite the tale’s reputation, vivid eroticism was not exactly what I had expected. My eyes were opened by a well-known passage in the second chapter, “Hahakigi.” Much of this chapter is taken up by the famous “rating women on a rainy night” (amayo no shinasadame雨夜の品定め) section, in which several young men, in Genji’s presence, discuss the merits and shortcomings of women as potential wives. Next, Genji unexpectedly spends a night at a retainer’s house, where he pursues the lady of the house, a woman know to readers as Utsusemi空蝉.18 The passage in question occurs during Genji’s first encounter with her. It is unusually short and strong. Genji has stolen into Utsusemi’s room and carried her off to an adjoining one, but she resists him fiercely. In time, as one translation has it,

...finding that she could no longer think of arguments with which to withstand his importunity, she burst...
into tears; and though he was very sorry for her, he would not gladly have missed the sight. 19

The same passage in another translation reads,

She was weeping. He had his hands full but would not for the world have missed the experience. 20

“Would not gladly have missed the sight” and “would not for the world have missed the experience” correspond to mizaramashikaba kuchiosbikaramashi, which means, “he would have been sorry if he had not miru-ed her.” But what does miru mean? Not “see” (its literal meaning), because Genji and Utsusemi are in the dark. Not “have an (unspecified) experience.” When the issue is a man’s relationship with a woman, miru in The Tale of Genji means “frequent,” “live with,” and so on, and it assumes carnal knowledge. Therefore, in this context miru can only mean, quite bluntly, “have intercourse with.” I did not grasp this for a long time. When I did, I translated the passage this way:

Her genuine horror and revulsion at Genji’s wilfulness shocked him, and her tears touched him. Being the culprit was painful, but he knew that he would have regretted not having had her. 21

Utsusemi refuses to yield in spirit, although she has not been able to withhold her body, and this above all, as the story unfolds, is what makes Genji frantic. Thereafter, she resolutely evades him. Why? Not because she does not want him; the text makes this perfectly clear. She bitterly regrets that she cannot take him as a lover, but she values more her unhappy dignity as the wife of a (to her) contemptible provincial governor. The palpable tension of mutual, frustrated desire (between her and Genji) is the ground of this whole affair, an affair at once touchingly serious and scandalously comical; decorated by shenanigans like Genji turning to Utsusemi’s little brother for sexual relief or his stolen, lamplit view of a beautiful young woman visitor (“her front was bare all the way down to her crimson trouser cord’); and prolonged by Utsusemi’s tears and, later on, by her appealing letters to Genji.

The Tale of Genji is a world neither of languidly elegant wraiths nor of a lecher-hero and his mechanically conquered victims. It is one of warm, familiar desires.

The pleasure of these desires is for the reader. Perhaps the point of all the tale’s brilliantly varied erotic episodes, especially those featuring the youthful Genji, is their effect on the reader. 22 To be cautious about acknowledging them or about conveying them to readers in another language would be not only to veil the character of the tale but to make a mystery of why the scholars of centuries past had to work so hard, and so implausibly, to make the tale look respectable by explaining it as a Buddhist lesson, for example, or as a warning against immoral behaviour. 23

Murasaki Shikibu must have had many things in mind as the tale formed itself beneath her brush; 24 she was well placed to know that there is more to a monogatari than meets the eye. Still, she must have wished to give her

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20 Seidensticker, p.43.
22 Mark Morris observed in general that “The crucial act of voyeurism involved in Genji is that of the reader ….” “New work on Genji monogatari,” p.302.
24 I write as though Murasaki Shikibu is the undoubted author of The Tale of Genji in general and of the passages discussed here in particular, but this is not beyond question. Some scholars doubt that she wrote the whole thing, and the earliest known manuscript of the work belongs only to the early thirteenth century. Still, as the medieval legend of the tale’s origin shows, the weight of opinion and of sentiment has always been for Murasaki Shikibu as sole author.
readers pleasure, since entertainment is no doubt what they sought above all. Who were these readers? The medieval account of how she began writing the tale tells something about them. According to the important Genji commentary Kakaishō 河海抄, completed in the 1360s:

The origin of this tale is explained in various ways. However, when in Anna 2 [969] the Nishinomiya Minister of the Left [Minamoto no Takaakira, 914–82] was sent into exile as Provisional Governor of Dazaifu, Tō [Murasaki] Shikibu, who had been close to him since childhood, was upset; and it was just then that the Kamo Priestess [Princess Senshi, 964–1035] asked Jōtōmon'in [Empress Shōshi, 988–1074] whether she had any unusual story books. Since the Priestess already knew the old tales like Utsuho [monogatari] and Taketori [monogatari], Jōtōmon'in told Shikibu that she must make up a new one. Whether or not this account is literally true, Murasaki Shikibu did indeed write for Shōshi 彰子 since she was a gentlewoman (nyōbō 女房) in Shōshi's service. Moreover, her diary shows that her work caught the interest also of Shōshi's father, the all-powerful Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1027), and that an early portion of it came to the attention of the emperor as well. These are the people, especially Shōshi and other such high-ranking ladies, whom Murasaki Shikibu would have most wished to entertain.

This wish sometimes comes through in the voice of the ostensible narrator (apparently a woman of about Murasaki Shikibu's own rank), for instance at times when the narrator appeals directly to her audience. An example occurs in the closing lines of the "Wakamurasaki" chapter. This sweetly and outrageously erotic chapter describes Genji's discovery of the little girl, known to readers as Murasaki, whom he will eventually marry. When he first sees her, she seems to be about ten. His interest in her makes her guardians wonder what he really wants her for, and when he at last spends a chaste night with her, the author amusingly ex-

26 The diary, known as Murasaki Shikibu nikki 紫式部日記, survives only in fragmentary form. For a translation, see Richard Bowring, Murasaki Shikibu: her diary and poetic memoirs (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).
27 The appellation "Murasaki Shikibu" is generally assumed to be derived from this fictional "Murasaki," which is itself a nickname rather than a name.
exploits the sexual frustration that he feels on his way home. Soon, he steals her and spends every available night sleeping beside her. The chapter concludes:

A woman may be so querulous and so quick to make an issue of the smallest lapse that the man takes a dislike to her, fearing that whatever he does may unleash bitter reproaches, until an estrangement that neither had wished for becomes a reality; but not so for Genji with his delightful companion. No daughter, by the time she reaches this age, can be as free with her father, sleep so intimately beside him, or rise so blithely with him in the morning as this young lady did with Genji, until Genji himself must have wondered at being able to lavish his affection on so rare a treasure.28

Of this passage one critic gravely wrote:

With Murasaki ... Genji compensates for his transgression [with the empress, Fujitsubo] through his beneficial, almost charitable, concern for the half-orphan girl. At the same time, Genji can, despite the complications caused by his betrayal of the child’s trust in him as a ‘father,’ openly enjoy the incestuous thrill of ‘father—daughter’ love. In this way Genji uses Murasaki to balance his ‘dangerous liaison’ with Murasaki’s aunt by flaunting a relatively harmless version of it.29

Of course it is difficult to discuss the tale without treating the characters as though they were real people, but Genji does not actually “flaunt” anything, since he is a fiction. It is the author who, through her narrator, flaunts his adventures with Murasaki to the reader. (Nor does he betray Murasaki’s “trust in him as a ‘father,’” since he does not violate her, as her grandmother seems to have feared he might.) Instead, thanks to this creature of the imagination, the author prolongs to the last sentence the reader’s pleasure in the prevailing mood of the chapter. Genji’s “wonder” is a provocation to the reader, who by this time is admirably primed for it.

Another sort of appeal can be found in six intriguing passages from the tale’s first thirteen chapters, passages in which one or more men admire Genji’s beauty. No women are present. In four of the passages, and probably in a fifth as well, Genji is casually clothed—en deshabillé, as it were. In one the men see him as a woman, in two they wish he were one, and in a fourth, the watcher imagines himself as a woman. After presenting each in turn, I will draw my conclusion about them from the sixth.

The first occurs in “Hahakigi,” during the “rainy night conversation.” Three young men gathered around Genji have been imagining the ideal woman.

“Oh come now,” thought Genji, “it’s rare enough to find anyone like that among the highborn.” Over soft, layered white robes he had on only a dress cloak, unlaced at the neck, and, lying there in the lamplight against a pillar, he looked so beautiful that one could have wished him a woman. For him, the highest of the high seemed hardly good enough.30

In “Momiji-no-ga,” the setting for a similar moment is Fujitsubo’s residence. Prince Hyōbukyō 兵部卿宮, Fujitsubo’s brother and the father of little Murasaki,31 happens to be there as well.
His Highness received Genji on learning that he was there. Elegant and romantically languorous as His Highness was, Genji speculated privately about the pleasures of his company were he a woman and, having a double reason to feel close to him, engaged him in intent conversation. The Prince, for his part, noted how much more open and easy Genji was than usual, liked his looks a great deal, and, unaware that he was his son-in-law, indulged his roving fancy in the pleasure of imagining him, too, as a woman.32

In both instances the viewer wishes that Genji were a woman, and in the second, steamier one, Genji is looking at his watcher (within the tale) and wishing the same thing.

The third passage occurs in the “Aoi” chapter. Genji’s wife, Aoi, has died under dramatic circumstances, and he is mourning her when her brother, his friend Tō no Chūjō, comes upon him:

 Genji was leaning on the railing by the west door to his room, gazing out over the frost-withered garden. The wild wind blew, the rain poured down, and his tears, it seemed to him, vied with the rain as he murmured, chin in hand, “Did she turn to rain, to cloud? I shall never know ...” and Tō no Chūjō, gazing at him with his mind as always on sensual pleasures, knew that, were he a woman, his soul when bound for the hereafter would stay with Genji instead. Genji’s state of dress was very casual, and he simply rethreaded the cords of his dress cloak when Tō no Chūjō sat down beside him.

It was a summer cloak, a little darker than his visitor’s, worn over a perfectly plain crimson robe. Tō no Chūjō could hardly keep his eyes off him.33

The example with the most viewers is the fourth, from “Sakaki 祥.” The setting is a party given for Genji by Tō no Chūjō.

One of Tō no Chūjō’s sons, a boy of eight or nine who had only this year begun to frequent the Privy Chamber, sang and played the shō 弦 prettily enough to attract Genji’s delighted attention ... . When the music picked up a little he gave full voice to a very fine rendition of “Takasago.” Genji took a layer from his costume and placed the garment over the boy’s shoulders. Flushed with unaccustomed excitement, his face gave forth a beauty beyond any in the world. His skin through the silk gauze dress cloak and underrobe glowed wondrously, till the ancient scholars watching him from their distance wept.
informal summer robes were made of a black silk gauze thin enough to be transparent.

The many watchers include, nearby, Tō no Chūjō and various other gentlemen and, further off, a gathering of scholars. One of Tō no Chūjō's sons, a boy quite like Utsusemi's little brother, sings the song entitled "Takasago 縳砂," which is a lover's passionate appeal to his beloved. There follows the picture of Genji, excited, flushed, and naked beneath the gossamer veils of his summer robes. The scholars weep with emotion, while Tō no Chūjō gives personal expression to the tribute implied by his son's song.

A fifth, particularly pretty passage is from "Suma," the chapter in which Genji goes into voluntary exile by the sea. Stranded without their women, Genji and his companions become more and more desperate.

One lovely twilight, with the nearby garden in riotous bloom, Genji stepped out onto a gallery that gave him a view of the sea, and such was the supernal grace of his motionless figure that, in that setting, he seemed not of this world. Over soft, white silk twill and violet he had on a dress cloak of deep blue, its sash only very casually tied; and his voice slowly chanting, "I, a disciple of the Buddha Shakuyamuni..." was to their ears more beautiful than any heard before. From boats rowing by at sea came a chorus of singing voices. With a pang he watched them, dim in the distance, like little birds borne on the waters, and sank into a reverie as cries from lines of geese aloft mingled with the creaking of oars, until tears welled forth and he brushed them away with a hand so gracefully pale against the black of his rosary that the young gentlemen pining for their sweethearts at home were all consoled.

Genji's beauty is so like a woman's (although he is not in the least "effeminate") that his companions see him as one. One wonders in passing how far their "consolation" (nagusami 慰め) might in theory have gone, for nagusami can mean something very like the solas ("solace") of the troubadours, and solas was always physical.

The sixth passage is from "Akashi." Genji, still in exile, is now staying with the Akashi Monk, a wealthy old man who has taken Buddhist vows but who still lives at home with his wife and daughter. The Akashi Monk's fondest wish is to offer his daughter to Genji, but his courage repeatedly fails him when he actually tries to do so. Meanwhile autumn has come, and Genji's nights are lonelier than ever. He has been drinking for hours with the Akashi Monk, listening to all his host's troubles and ambitions, and by now both the context and the language of the chapter have helped to build up a distinctly, if tastefully,
erotic charge. Finally the old man manages to say what he wishes to say. Genji is very pleased, and his thoughts go straight to the “solace” that awaits him. At that moment, “Genji’s casual demeanour gave him intense allure and a fascination beyond words.”37

Who is present to be moved by the sight of an erotically aroused Genji? The only person in the scene itself is the Akashi Monk, but this talk of “beauty beyond all words” and so on is unmistakably addressed to the reader. The original says only that he looked intensely alluring. To whom? To us. In the other five passages as well, the reactions of the watchers are for us; the watchers are us.38 But who are “we”?

“We” are above all the audience that the author knew or could plausibly imagine: an audience mainly of women, whether a great lady with her gentlewomen around her, reading her the story, or a woman reading alone. By why, then, is it the men in the tale who look at Genji that way? Are these scenes

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38 In the first passage, from “Hahakigi,” “one” (“one could have wished him a woman”) is an artefact of translation since the original specifies no subject and since the only watchers present are Genji’s three friends. “They” is possible as well, but “one” is meant to include the readers who see this scene in their mind’s eye.

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Figure 5
Genji and his companions in ‘exile’ by the sea at Suma (source: Tosa Mitsuyoshi, Genji Monogatari tekagami, Kubosō Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi City)
of homoerotic desire, disguised by figleaf wishes that Genji were a woman or by yearnings for absent girlfriends?

If these were scenes of homoerotic desire, the theme would be followed up elsewhere in the tale; but it is not. Nothing develops the repeated motif of the male watcher stirred by the sight of an informally dressed, languishing or excited Genji. So why is it there?

The tale never describes women watching Genji this way. Gentlewomen may admire him, ladies may languish for him, but we never see him, through a woman's eyes, flushed with excitement, his skin aglow through silk gauze, and so on; we never wish through a woman's wishes to yield to him. Once, yes (at the end of "Sakaki"), we see him "sprawled shamelessly" within a lady's curtains, but the lady, who was with him a moment ago, is now outside the curtains, and we are looking through the wrathful eyes of her father, the Minister of the Right. Were the lady not Oborozukiyo (a nice girl, but not as well brought up as one could wish), we would probably not see even this much, for fear of offending her dignity, hence the dignity of the real ladies in the audience.

In the tale itself, real ladies come nowhere near betraying sexual feelings. An example is the empress, Fujitsubo. Her weakness for Genji is as great as the courage with which she denies it, but when the two are dangerously together, it is certainly not she whose excitement shows. A second example is Murasaki. It is a hallmark of her quality as a young lady and as a worthy wife for Genji that she remains unaware of sex even after she has reached a perfectly suitable age (by the standards then current) for marriage. Genji's gentlemanly attempts to arouse her fail because she has no idea what he is talking about; and when at last he consummates his marriage with her anyway, far from welcoming the event, she is furious.

A third example is the daughter of the Akashi Monk. Perfectly ladylike, she finds Genji attractive but is only embarrassed by his courtship and, when at last he comes to her, does all she can to evade him. Their union, which takes place between sentences, is confirmed by the single line, "Elegantly tall, she had such dignity that he was abashed." Such is her distinction, her natural elevation of manner, that Genji feels that he must surpass himself to meet it, and this is what pleases him so much that she is Murasaki's only real rival.

In short, Murasaki Shikibu could not show her audience a dizzyingly sexy Genji without assuming in the ladies present (perhaps ones far above her in rank) feelings that they could not properly admit to having. No Kamo Priestess or Empress Shoshi would have enjoyed or permitted a direct appeal to her own erotic sensibility. Still, it would have been a shame not to describe Genji meltingly at all; and that is no doubt why, when he looks good enough to eat, we see him through the eyes of a man. Although in real life men, too, might sometimes have felt that way about a man like Genji, in the tale these male watchers seem to be a device at once decorous and titillating to save the reader's dignity and leave her perfectly free to enjoy the view.

The Tale of Genji is long, and it is never in a hurry. The riches of its early
chapters can be difficult to appreciate properly or even to perceive unless encountered at leisure, in the fullness of the complete text. Still, some passages do lend themselves to being quoted separately, as illustrations of the range of erotic entertainment provided by the author. I will cite two contrasting episodes: Genji's dawn parting from the Rokujō Lady (in the “Yūgao chapter) and a passage of his involvement (in “Momiji-no-ga”) with Gen no Naishi, a witty but hopelessly randy, aging palace lady.

In the “Yūgao chapter, Genji pursues an ill-fated affair with a sweetly shy, low-ranking woman whose manner and mode of life contrast sharply with those of another of his loves, a great lady known to readers as Rokujō (“the lady of Sixth Avenue”). High-strung, demanding, immensely gifted, Rokujō is someone with whom Genji can never feel at ease, yet he continues to find her fascinating, and her high station makes it difficult for him to neglect her entirely. One of his infrequent visits to her provides the occasion for a naughtily pretty scene. After a night with Rokujō, the departing Genji flirts with one of her gentlewomen.

One very misty morning when, in response to insistent urging, the still sleepy Genji was at last taking his leave, though with many sighs, the gentlewoman Chūjō raised a lattice shutter and moved her mistress’s curtain aside as though to say, “My lady, do see him off!” She lifted her head and looked out: there he was, standing before all the colours of the garden as though he did not wish to miss their beauty. No, there was no one like him.

When Genji reached the gallery Chūjō joined him. Silk gauze train neatly tied at her waist over an “aster” layering perfect for the season, she carried herself with delicious grace. Glancing back, he sat her down by the railing at the corner of the building. Her comely deference towards him, the length of her hair—all seemed to him a miracle. “I would not be known as one who flits from flower to flower, yet in passing fain would pluck this lovely bluebell. What do you suggest?” he said, taking her hand; but she, with practised wit, replied, “Your haste to be off before the morning mists are gone betrays how little your heart cares for your flower,”

**Figure 7**
An illustration from the “Utsusemi” chapter: Genji peeping at Utsusemi while she plays go with her stepdaughter, whose “front was bare all the way down to her crimson trouser cord.” This Edo-period picture is more modest than the text (source: Genji Monogatari tekagami, Kyoto National Museum)
so turning his poem to refer to her mistress.

A pretty page boy, handsome in trousers that might have been made for the occasion and that were now wet with dew, wandered out among the flowers and brought a bluebell back for Genji. One would have liked to paint the scene.

Why is Genji, after a night with an attractive though difficult lady, still in the mood to flirt? There are two plausible answers.

The first is that the night might have been disappointing. Murasaki Shikibu certainly knew about this possibility, and in “Wakamurasaki” she used it to comic effect. Having slept through the night beside a little girl who is too young for sexual relations but whom he longs to bring up as his wife (she resembles Fujitsubo and is in fact Fujitsubo’s niece), Genji leaves in a state of frustration.

The sky, thick with fog, was unusually lovely, and all was white with frost: a scene to please the gratified lover, but for Genji not yet quite enough. A lady to whom he had been making clandestine visits lived, so he now remembered, on his way, and he had a man of his knock at her gate. Alas, in an undignified exchange of poems he is rebuffed and must be off again, hastened on his way by the growing light of dawn.

In Rokujō’s case, however, sexual frustration is unlikely. Being the widow of an heir apparent, Rokujō is too great a lady to have any erotic feelings attributed directly to her, but everything about her and her affair with Genji suggests that the one place where they do get on well is in bed. If this is so, Genji’s flirting with her gentlewoman is due to an overflow of erotic excitement after an exceptionally gratifying night. Perhaps this is why, when dawn came, Genji was so sleepy and had such trouble getting up. His flirting with Chūjō is then in effect a tribute to Chūjō’s mistress, and Chūjō is right to take it that way. (As a gentlewoman who sleeps very near her mistress, she is likely to know how successful the night has been.) Moreover, the expansive grace of the concluding lines accords as well with this mood as it does with Rokujō’s own personal distinction. The “bluebells” (asagao 紫苑) are the colour of Chūjō’s “aster” (shion 紫苑) costume and so echo her presence, even as they dissolve her seductiveness into a little page’s charm and the dewy beauty of Rokujō’s garden.

However, Genji’s parting from Murasaki and his parting from Rokujō have one thing in common, even if his feelings on each occasion are different. They openly hint at the erotic quality of a night about which nothing can be said directly because of the dignity of the partner involved. (Murasaki, a prince’s daughter, is Genji’s future wife; Genji speaks very politely to her.) In short, both partings confirm at once a lady’s (the reader’s) receptiveness to erotic scenes and her reluctance to be identified personally with erotic feelings.

Presumably no lady respected by Murasaki Shikibu need have felt personally compromised by the Gen no Naishi episode. Although Gen no Naishi is in her fifties and is endowed with many qualities, she seems never really to think about anything but sex.
There was an aging Assistant Mistress of Personal Staff, a lady of impeccable birth, witty, distinguished, and widely respected, who for all that was intensely coquettish, and Genji was curious to know why, when a woman may no doubt be light in her ways, she should be so thoroughly dissolute even in her declining years. He was shocked, on jokingly testing the waters, to find that for her his proposition was not incongruous in the least, but the adventure still amused him enough to pursue it, although to her great chagrin he kept his distance for fear of starting gossip about his liaison with an old woman.

Once she was combing His Majesty's hair, and when she was done, His Majesty called for a maid of the wardrobe and went out, leaving her and Genji alone in the room. More prettily got up than usual, she had a graceful bearing and lovely hair, and her costume was assertively brilliant—all of which, to Genji's distaste, betrayed her refusal to show her age; yet he could not resist tugging at the end of her train to see how she would respond. From behind a heavily decorated fan she shot back at him a languid glance from dark-rimmed, sunken eyes set amid nests of wrinkles.

No one her age, thought Genji, should carry that fan. Offering his in exchange, he took the fan and examined it. On paper red enough to set his face aglow, he saw painted in gold a picture of tall trees. On one side, in a style now passe but not undistinguished, were casually written the words, "Old is the grass beneath the trees."

"Old is the grass beneath the trees at Ōaraki: no steed crops it, no one comes to mow it": the poem appears in the Kokinshu (905). The words on the fan are a shameless declaration that the fan's owner is hungry for a man.

This is all very well, he thought, but what a horrid idea! And with a smile he remarked "What we have here, I see, is 'The trees in summer'."

"The trees [at Ōaraki] in summer" offer especially welcoming shade, according to a poem cited by an early Genji commentary.

He felt so odd merely talking to her that he feared to be seen, but no such concern crossed her mind.

"Come to me, and your fine steed shall have from me a feast: grasses I have mown for him, late though the season be," she said with shameless archness.

He answered, "He who pushes through the brush might face there a challenge, for other steeds, it seems, find welcome beneath your trees. It is a bit of a risk ..." he went on, and rose to go.

Catching his sleeve, she cried out through dramatic tears, "Never in my life have I been made to feel so wretched! Oh the shame of it, after all these years!"

"I shall be in touch later," Genji replied. "There are other things, you see ..." He broke free and continued on his way, but she clung to him, angrily bewailing the treachery of time."


The point needs no emphasis: this scene between Genji and Gen no Naishi (like the others) is broad comedy, and all their talk of grasses, trees, steeds, and so on is zestfully obscene. It is amusing to imagine a Kamo Priestess or an Empress Shōshi enjoying it. Considering the tale’s success, one cannot accuse them of favouring only delicate colours and faint perfumes.

Moreover, if the men of Murasaki Shikibu’s world pretended not to read frivolous books like *The Tale of Genji*, they seem not to have minded their wives and daughters reading them. According to a famous passage of Murasaki Shikibu’s diary, Fujiwara no Michinaga even rummaged through her room and made off with a manuscript of the tale. Why? Apparently not to read it himself: he gave it to his second daughter, Kenshi 妃子 (994–1027), whom he would soon marry to Emperor Sanjō 三条 (r.1011–16). No doubt his keeness to entertain Kenshi included educating her a little in matters of love and arousing her enough (in consonance with good manners) to make her a warm and willing partner for her future husband. Success could mean the birth of a future emperor.