

## **Rethinking Gender in the *Tale of Genji***

The questions we ask both of the contemporary world, as well as of distant times and places, are perforce animated by concerns and anxieties that belong to our own age. This is reflected in the centrality that we accord today to questions of gender, and in our use of it as an analytic category to help unravel the workings of power, and the particular modes of domination and subordination that shape relationships between men and women. Gender is now seen as a constitutive, and often unacknowledged feature of the ways in which not only literature, philosophy, and history, but even the more “objective” natural sciences have come to be discursively produced.

How we read *The Tale of Genji* is no exception. Today it can no longer be viewed simply as a charming tale of romance in which aristocratic men and women, governed by the “rule of taste,” composed love poetry, played music, and engaged in amorous affairs. In recent academic writings, the focus has shifted to an exploration of how questions of gender are enmeshed in the refined games of courtship and conquest that are central themes in the work.<sup>1</sup>

An inquiry into gender is a distinctly modern undertaking, and it is above all academic feminism that has given it voice by using it as a central category of analysis. Exploring relationships between men and women in *The Tale of*

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<sup>1</sup> See Norma Field, *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Doris Borgen, *A Women's Weapon: Spirit Possession in the Tale of Genji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and the articles in *Genji kenkyū*, 10 vols, Mitamura Masako et al. eds (Tokyo: Kanrin shobō, 1996–2005).

*Genji* has necessarily entailed unveiling the inequality at the heart of gender relations in the text. Rather than adding to this growing body of literature, invaluable as it has been, my approach here, in keeping with the philosophical concerns of this book, is to offer instead a critique of contemporary approaches to the study of gender in the *Genji* by interrogating some of the foundational assumptions that have gone into the making of gender as a category, and of terms that are intimately intertwined with it such as the body, sexuality, desire, agency, masculinity, femininity and so on.

I do so on the grounds that there has been little theorising in academic writing on the *Genji* about how the category gender came to be produced in the first place, and how the debates that brought it into being as an analytical tool occurred within the specific context of the religious and philosophical traditions of the West. If we grant that gender is not only historically, but also culturally variable then as a conceptual category it may need to be stretched and rethought to be of service for explicating non-Western pasts.

My approach then is to begin by examining European debates on gender, and considering some of the core assumptions that have gone into the making of this category. This serves as the necessary backdrop for demonstrating that it is only by rethinking these assumptions within the broader epistemic framework of what one might broadly call the East Asian<sup>2</sup> religious, philosophical, and medical traditions that we can decipher how gender

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<sup>2</sup> By the “East Asian” tradition, I mean the complex nexus of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian ideas that circulated in China, Korea, and Japan in the pre-modern period.

functioned in medieval Japanese texts.<sup>3</sup> By doing so I hope to make visible the cultural variability of gender and to explore how it operates within the specific context of *The Tale of Genji*.

### **A Brief Genealogy of Sex/Gender**

As a conceptual category, widely deployed in feminist writing, the term gender, from the outset, served a political function. It was a response to the biological determinism that was at the heart of the claim that had been made since the 18<sup>th</sup> century that sexual difference was something inscribed on the body, a fact of nature that could not be changed, and hence the reason why women were innately inferior to men. The category “gender” emerged precisely as a way of combating this logic, by arguing that social roles were not necessarily bound to sex; sexual or biological difference did not determine intellectual and other differences. Gender became “a social category imposed on a sexed body.”<sup>4</sup>

The view that sexual difference, grounded in the body, defined what it meant to be man or woman, was a radical departure from conceptions of the body and the sexes that had dominated medieval and Renaissance thought in

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term medieval to refer to works belonging to very different historical periods—from the Heian period texts such as the *Tale of Genji* to works in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods on the grounds that, for all their differences, what gives these texts produced across different time frames a certain coherence is that none of the questions they raise, the issues they problematize, or the resolutions they offer can be properly understood outside of the Buddhist paradigm that frames the discursive possibilities available to them.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “‘Gender’ A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in Joan Wallach Scott ed., *Feminism and History, Oxford Readings in Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 156.

Europe. The body in these earlier periods was not seen as belonging to the sphere of nature, standing in opposition to and separate from the social or cultural realm. Gender boundaries were fluid, and the nature of the sexes was seen as interchangeable and permeable.<sup>5</sup> Until the seventeenth century, what prevailed was the “one sex model,” in which men and women were seen as having essentially the same sexual organs, and what distinguished men from women was merely that men’s genitalia lay on the outside while those of women were inverted.<sup>6</sup>

The belief in the isomorphism of men and women’s anatomy did not, of course, mean that men and women were considered equal, for the assumption was always that the male constituted the normative model of which the female was simply an inferior version. However, what is significant is that neither the body nor its sexual organs were the privileged sites for the justification of particular social arrangements. To be one’s gender, to occupy a particular place within the social order as a man or woman, was itself seen as part of the natural order. Sex did not function as a biological category any more than gender did as a social one.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Carolyn Bynum, “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in Michel Feher, with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part One (New York: Zone Press, 1989), 185-7.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 19-20; 25-62; 63-113; 114-142 and 150-154.

<sup>7</sup> As Laqueur puts it, “Nature [here] is not therefore to culture what sex is to gender, as in modern discussions.” See *Making Sex*, 29.

The developments within European history and science that produced a new understanding of women as constituted through their sex became the starting point for the feminist project of the sixties and seventies, which, while leaving unchallenged the idea that woman was constituted through her sexual attributes, sought nonetheless to question the assumption that her social roles inevitably followed from them. Women, it was assumed, were a self-evident grouping, whose members had been subjected to systematic neglect or vilification on the basis of their sex. Part of the new work undertaken by feminists was the attempt to “retrieve” women who had been silenced and written out of official historical, religious, and philosophical discourses.

While the project of retrieval was invaluable, it was also fraught with problems. Underpinning much of this work was the assumption that “Woman” was a self-evident and pre-given transcendental category. Feminist debates since the 80s have increasingly engaged in questioning this understanding of “woman” or even of the more capacious, lower case, pluralizing amendment “women,” as a stable category.<sup>8</sup> The destabilization of “women” as a fixed category has had consequences for understanding what we mean by gender. Judith Butler has been a particularly influential voice, claiming that gender “ought not to be conceived as a noun or a

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<sup>8</sup> See for example, Denise Riley, “*Am I that Name?*”: *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 2–5 and Joan Wallach Scott “The Evidence of Experience,” in Gabrielle Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 202.

substantial thing or a static cultural marker,”<sup>9</sup> but rather as “an activity, a becoming,” whereby the repeated iteration of words, acts, and gestures creates the illusion of fixed notions of “an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.”<sup>10</sup> For Butler gender is performative, and the binaries of sex/gender, man/woman, and hetero/homosexuality, are not facts or truths about the world that are made manifest through our actions. Rather it is the other way round: it is through the endless repetition of certain acts that we create the illusion of the stability of gender.

### **Gender, Sex, and Body in *The Tale of Genji***

Many of the debates that I have outlined above are the necessary starting point for considering both the possibilities and limits of applying the category gender to our analysis of *The Tale of Genji*. For all the differences between medieval Europe and Japan, both shared a conception of the cosmos as one in which the human and natural order were integrally linked. This was a world in which men, women, animals, and supernatural beings inhabited a common cosmological order, often intermingling promiscuously with one another; nature was a living presence, yet to be reduced to a passive object, to be given meaning by the Man of Reason. As in medieval Europe, so in pre-modern China and Japan, the natural and the social were not

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse,” in Linda Nicholson ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge 1990, 337.

conceptualised as two distinct categories. Male and female were understood as being at once natural and social, which meant that the distinction of sex and gender, which is premised on the division of the world into these two domains, had little purchase.

However, there were important differences between the two traditions that shaped understandings of the body, woman, and sex. Neither the “one-sex” model that dominated Western understandings of the body until the seventeenth century, nor the sexual dimorphism that informed subsequent understandings of it, are necessarily applicable for interpreting how ‘male’ and ‘female’ came to be constructed in pre-modern China and Japan. As Charlotte Furth argues, classical Chinese medical texts, which formed the basis of Japanese medical theories, conceived of the feminine (*yin*) and masculine (*yang*) principles as complementary aspects of the body, which were seen to interpenetrate both men and women. The ideal body was the androgynous one, which held together both elements, *yin* and *yang*, in perfect balance. In Chinese medicine “...healthy males and females, when seen as a fertile couple, formed the matching *yin yang* opposites of homologous gender.”<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between the body and mind was not the site of troubled debates in the East Asian traditions, in the way that it was in Western thought. In both Daoist and Buddhist thought the two were envisaged as a mind-body

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<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 52.

complex,<sup>12</sup> in which the body was seen as a psychosomatic process, “something done, rather than something one has.”<sup>13</sup> The six sense organs in the Buddhist framework include not only what we would categorize as physical attributes—the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body—but also the mind/consciousness. The body in the East Asian tradition was not mere matter - the heart/mind was integral to its very constitution.

The word in the Japanese medieval lexicon that corresponds to the term “body,” *mi* (身), unlike the word *shintai* (身体), which is used today to signify the physical body, made no distinction between the physical body and what we might call the psychic, social, or cultural body; indeed, *mi* extended beyond the body to signify a self, understood not as an individual subject, or autonomous agent separate from society, but rather as one that was meaningful only as a social being. It is for this reason that one of the most common usages of the term *mi* was to signify a person’s status or standing in the world. There are no words in the medieval lexicon for sex or gender: the term *mi* encapsulates both because the natural and the social domains are, in this schema, inseparable.

There is little evidence within the East Asian tradition to suggest that men or women formed an identifiable group that cohered around the

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed consideration of how the mind and body work together, see Thomas P. Kasulis, “The Body—Japanese Style,” 299–319.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Ames, “The Meaning of the Body in Classical Chinese Philosophy,” in Thomas P. Kasulis, Roger Ames, and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 168.

specificity of their sexual attributes.<sup>14</sup> The terms *onna* (女) and *otoko* (男) in medieval Japanese cannot be conflated with the modern words for woman/women, *josei* (女性) and man/men (男性), which were not coined until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which, as the character *sei* or sex (性) demonstrates, were founded on new biological understandings of men and women as constituted through their sexuality. When medieval texts speak of *onna no mi* (女の身) they mean more than the physical and sexed body that makes for womanhood; both her mental and emotional attributes as well as her relationship to others as a social being are involved in the constitution of what we might call the female body/self.

Mental and affective processes were understood as integral parts of the body's materiality, which meant that "thought" did not function as the other of "feeling" or emotion, and "form" was not the antithesis of "matter." In *The Tale of Genji*, for example, the word *kokoro* refers to both heart and mind; the verb *omou* encapsulates both feeling and thinking,<sup>15</sup> and the word for love, *koi*, makes no distinction between the physical and spiritual aspects of love.

It is therefore not surprising that sex and the body are not associated with sin or shame in *The Tale of Genji*. The text makes no attempt to mask the fact that men are interested in possessing women *sexually*. And yet,

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<sup>14</sup> Tani Barlow makes the same point in "Theorizing Women: Funü, Guojia, Jiating," in Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 266.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, "The Body—Japanese Style," in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, 303.

intriguingly, a striking feature of courtly texts written in Japanese such as *waka* poetry, women's diaries (*nikki*), and *monogatari* or romances of which the *Genji* is an exemplar, is that works in these genres make little mention of the sexual act or describe the physical characteristics of the bodies engaged in sexual pleasures. Unlike Victorian literature, this has little to do with a prudishness that required that ideal relations between respectable men and women be represented as chaste and companionate, and certainly never sexual.

*The Tale of Genji* favours an elliptical mode for alluding to the fact that a relationship has been sexually consummated. Ellipsis here constitutes a particular form of decorum, or reticence, which extends to food as much as it does to sex. We are far removed here from the discourse of sexuality produced in modern societies that, in Michel Foucault's words, "dedicated themselves to speaking of it [sex] ad infinitum, whilst exploiting it as *the* secret."<sup>16</sup>

Rather than isolating sex as a distinct domain of pleasure or shame, *The Tale of Genji* presents us instead with a world where the characters, narrators, and readers alike are all drawn into the pleasures of erotic and affective fulfilment. However, as we shall see in the next section, it is a measure of the degree to which the text is suffused with a Buddhist view of the world that in the end the seductions of worldly desires are illusory, leading inevitably to disillusionment and suffering, and even death and disaster.

### **Gender, Agency, and Buddhism in *The Tale of Genji***

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, Robert Hurley trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 35.

All of Genji's major relationships in the text end badly. His principal wife, Aoi, possessed by the spirit of the high ranking Rokujō Lady whom Genji treats with cavalier disregard, suffers, and meets with an early death. The same is true for Yūgao with whom he has a fleeting affair. Genji's ill conceived marriage to the high ranking Third Princess, who turns out to be a disappointment, results in him neglecting her. This in turn creates the conditions for Kashiwagi's transgressive sexual liaison with her. The attendant pregnancy and Genji's realisation that the father of the child to come is Kashiwagi has disastrous consequences. Kashiwagi, shamed by Genji's unspoken censure, falls ill and dies. The Third Princess rushes to take the tonsure.

Genji, whose irresistible charms are often lauded in the text, is singularly unsuccessful in his romantic undertakings, even with Murasaki, the seemingly stable centre of Genji's affective world, and in the end love brings unhappiness not only for the women he pursues but also for himself. His last days after the death of Murasaki are spent in isolation and despair, and he disappears from the text a broken man, unable to escape from the pain brought about by his worldly attachments.

After Genji's death this pattern of amorous pursuits resulting in disaster is repeated with greater intensity in the Uji chapters. The eldest daughter of the Eighth Prince, Ōigimi, pursued by Kaoru, starves herself to death, refusing to give in to his advances. Her half-sister Ukifune, caught between the affections of Kaoru and Niou, attempts to drown herself, and eventually becomes a nun.

It is not surprising then, given the tragic fates of many of the women in the text, that scholars have focused on the suffering and helplessness of women to explore the nature of gender relations in the *Genji*. Often the fact that the work is written by a woman is taken as confirmation of the fact that underlying the highly aestheticised games of love, what the author seeks to expose is men's thoughtlessness and cruelty towards courtly women in a polygamous world. Despite the many privileges of education and wealth accorded to them, women cannot but suffer, caught as they are in oppressive patriarchal structures that shape gender relations in that society.

Shaped by feminist concerns, the analysis of gender in the *Genji* sees in the text the presence of a consistent voice, that of a female author, who through the plot device of romance, exposes the unequal relations between men and women, which result in women's suffering and oppression. At the same time, the emancipatory project, built into feminism, demands that women be seen as agents, actively fighting oppression. Proof of women's resistance to male desire and the assertion of individual autonomy is found in the figures of Murasaki, who strives to distance herself from Genji by requesting repeatedly that she be allowed to take the tonsure; in Ôigimi, who starves to death rather than give in to Kaoru's advances; in the Rokujô Lady whose angry spirit possesses and kills her rivals; and in Ukifune who is lauded as a woman who chooses her own destiny, achieving independence from men by taking the tonsure, and giving expression to her new found sense of self through her poetry.

Here I would like to propose a very different reading of women's suffering and their response to it by problematizing the conceptual framework of

agency, resistance, and oppression, which takes little account of the broader Buddhist episteme within which questions of suffering are thematized within the text. When we speak of ‘agency’ to consider women’s responses to oppression, what we consistently privilege is *human* agency, which presupposes the supremacy of Man who replaces the gods as the maker of meaning in the world.<sup>17</sup> Gods, now stripped of their role as agents, are explained away as little other than projections of the human mind. Given that in the world of medieval Japanese texts gods, buddhas, men, women, animals, and even material objects alike worked as vibrant actors within a shared cosmological order, granting agency and consciousness only to human beings is little more than an anachronistic ascription of our own world view to an altogether different cosmology.

The unlikely union of Genji with the Akashi Lady when Genji is in exile in Suma is effected not through the personal agency of either of the protagonists but due to the intervention of a number of supernatural agents. In the Akashi chapter, the spirit of Genji’s deceased father appears to him in a dream, and urges him to follow the Sumiyoshi god to Suma. The father of the Akashi Lady also receives a divine message which instructs him to bring Genji from Suma to Akashi. It is the power of the Sumiyoshi god that the texts credits for the miraculous bond between Genji and the Akashi Lady that results in the birth of a daughter who eventually becomes an Empress, thereby securing Genji’s political fortunes, and bringing true a prophecy made when he was born that he would rise to extraordinary heights.

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 331–332.

Modern interpretations of the workings of gender and agency also cannot accommodate a view expressed in medieval Buddhist and literary texts alike that the dramas that unfold in men and women's lives are less the consequences of their own actions performed in present lives, than the mysterious manifestations of karma from previous existences. In the *Genji* many of the amorous entanglements in which women find themselves embroiled are viewed not through the prism of coercion or consent, but rather through the Buddhist notion of *sukuse*, fate or karma, a recurrent term in the text.

When the Fujitsubo lady discovers that she is pregnant after the illicit and transgressive liaison forced on her by Genji, her stepson, she attributes this crisis to a "shocking destiny" (*asamashiki onsukuse*).<sup>18</sup> Her attendant Myôbu also views this situation as a reflection of the "inescapable bond" (*nogaregatakarikeru onsukuse*) between Fujitsubo and Genji.<sup>19</sup> The Rokujô Lady, horrified by the malevolent work done by her spirit (*tama*), which leaves her body to attack her rivals, speaks in despair of actions that are beyond her control. She can only attribute them to the "wretchedness of her fate" (*sukuse no uki koto*). When Genji finds out that the child to be born to his wife, the Third Princess, is the fruit of Kashiwagi's adulterous relationship with her, he realises that this misfortune is linked to his own adulterous relationship, many years earlier, with his father's wife Fujitsubo. He expresses his surprise at the way in which retribution for the betrayal of his

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<sup>18</sup> *Genji monogatari* 1993:177. *Shin nihon koten bungaku taikai*, 19. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.

<sup>19</sup> I draw these examples from Haruo Shirane's *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (Stanford Calif: Stanford University Press) 173.

father and the throne has occurred in his very lifetime rather than in the next, and he wonders whether his burden of sin will, as a consequence, be lessened in lives to come.

When Yūgiri, Genji's son, tries to possess Ochiba no miya sexually, she resists his advances, leading him to wonder whether it is the weakness of their karmic bond from past lives that accounts for her unequivocal rejection of him. Time and time again both men and women in the text read the circumstances that unfold in their lives as the workings of inexplicable causes and contingencies reverberating through past existences rather than primarily as consequences of their own actions as autonomous individuals who are entirely in control of their own destinies.

The modes of understanding that attribute agency to gods, spirits, and buddhas, and grant power to actions performed in past lives for the events that occur in the present are at odds with conceptions of agency which presuppose that the individual, endowed with free will, is the author of her own actions. The imperative to attribute agency to female characters in the text produces celebratory accounts of women who recognize their agency and acts to change their situation in the world. Passivity, in this reading of agency, whilst worthy of sympathy, is a failing given that each individual is responsible even for inaction. However, even passivity is not seen as an irrevocable condition for it assumes the presence of a nascent consciousness, which given the right circumstances, can be awakened such that an individual can finally come into her own and act in her own interest. The moral charge of celebrating agency often takes the form of treating it as conceptually interchangeable with the idea of resistance against relations of power and domination. This means that

acts, particularly religious ones, that work in consonance *with* social conventions rather than *against* them cannot be granted real agency.<sup>20</sup> This has implications for how scholars interpret the act of taking the tonsure in *The Tale of Genji*.

### **Tonsure and Agency**

In medieval times, both men and women, regardless of their status in society, or the circumstances that led to them taking religious vows, shared in the aspiration to become lay nuns or monks at some stage in life, in the hope of retiring from the world of social obligations and preparing for a favourable death. Scholars have singled out nunhood as one of the sites upon which women's response to Buddhism's "misogyny" came to be played out in the medieval period. Some have seen the act of tonsure as an act of resistance to unequal social arrangements: nunhood, in this reading, becomes the space of freedom.<sup>21</sup> Others, working within the same conceptual framework of agency, have claimed precisely the opposite, arguing that the practice of tonsure was proof of women's oppression and subservience, in the face of patriarchal

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<sup>20</sup> I am drawing here on Saba Mahmood's "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16:2 (May 2001): 202–236.

<sup>21</sup> See Barbara Ruch, "The Other Side of Culture," in Kozo Yamamura, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan: Medieval Japan*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 510.

domination and Buddhist misogyny,<sup>22</sup> “a form of death in life.”<sup>23</sup> Or in another manifestation of the idea of the individual as an autonomous being responsible for her actions, nuns are sometimes seen as being complicit with Buddhist ideology, thereby contributing to the subjugation of other women.<sup>24</sup>

If we work within the framework of agency understood as either liberation or subjection, the particular reading that we favour becomes little more than an arbitrary choice. No one would deny that a woman taking the tonsure served a variety of ends, ranging from testing the affections of a lover whose attentions had flagged to withdrawing altogether from a relationship that had gone wrong.<sup>25</sup> Becoming a nun may well have been a consequence of unfortunate social circumstances, but to see these acts solely as manifestations of either empowerment or victimhood reduces medieval players to little more than versions of our own selves. If personhood in

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Ishida Mizumaro, “Bikuni kaidan: ama no tokui na seikaku,” in *Musashino joshi daigaku kiyō* 18 (1978): 1–15; Hosokawa Ryōichi, “Sairinji sōji to ama,” in Ōsumi Kazuo and Nishiguchi Junko, eds., *Shirīzu josei to Bukkyō, Sukui to oshie*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1989), 143–151. For a more nuanced reading of nunhood see Lori Meeks, “Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Life Cycle: Understanding Nunhood in Heian and Kamakura Japan,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 70:1 (June 2010): 1–59.

<sup>23</sup> Norma Field, *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji*, 189.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial*, 53, 78, and 331–332. Also Keller Kimbrough, *Preachers, Poets, Women and the Way: Izumi Shikibu and the Buddhist Literature of Medieval Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2008), 215.

<sup>25</sup> See Christian Laffin, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 83.

medieval Japan is located in the social, and if it is not imagined as an individual and secular identity, then agency in this context would have to be disentangled from nineteenth-century liberalism, which speaks an altogether different language of choice and self-determination.<sup>26</sup>

Women's tonsure was one socially available model for escaping from the trials of worldly life, as well as engaging in the performance of pious and virtuous deeds that worked not against but rather in conformity with the traditions and practices of medieval society. If we are insistent upon seeing this as a form of resistance, it would have to be, as Sanjay Seth notes in another context, "a very specific sense of 'resistance,' one not closely tied to intentionality, and partly as a consequence of this, lacking heroic connotations."<sup>27</sup>

While it is true that it is as a tragic consequence of Genji's marriage with the high ranking Third Princess that Murasaki expresses her desire to become a nun, her desire to do so is accorded a special place in the *Genji* because she is an exemplar of what is most valued in the Buddhist world, namely a pious disposition that encompasses within itself the widely held aspiration to be born again in one of the Buddha's Paradises. Murasaki is often likened to a bodhisattva, and her garden is associated in the text with the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. In the religious rituals performed in honour of Genji's fortieth year, the ceremonies organised by Murasaki are singled out as comparable to

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<sup>26</sup> As Walter Johnson suggests, "the term 'agency' smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice . . ." See "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (2003): 115.

<sup>27</sup> Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) p.33.

the “true Paradise.” The seriousness of her intent to take religious vows and her initiative in organizing the ceremonies for the recitation of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokke Hakkō*) demonstrate her commitment to the Buddhist Way, which offers the possibility of disengaging from worldly attachments, and preparing for death. In the end she performs an exemplary death.

The aspiration to become a monk or a nun resonated as a profoundly charged affective trope in *The Tale of Genji* precisely because, within the context of a romance narrative, it served to dramatize the tension between the seductive power of affective attachments, and the recognition that they had to be overcome in order to escape the suffering and pain that they inevitably caused. Murasaki’s inability to take the tonsure lies in the fact that Genji will not allow it because as he explains, he cannot imagine a life without her. The text tells us that Murasaki herself cannot bear to imagine the pain she will cause him if she leaves their conjugal life to become a nun. The emotional charge of the scene lies in the way in which the text stages the tension between the bonds of attachment and the profound pain involved in breaking them, and in its use of the two central figures of romance in the text to enact it. To privilege gender alone makes us miss the larger philosophical concerns that are at work in the text, and reduces it to monochromatic representation of Murasaki as a woman who is denied her autonomy by her selfish and self-serving husband Genji.

It is notable that young men, unlike women in the *Genji*, are conspicuous in their failure to take the tonsure. In keeping with the conventions of *waka* and *monogatari*, men are the ones who pursue and initiate amorous affairs, and it is this role that locks them into an inescapable and endless cycle of

attachment to worldly desires that come to be embodied in the women they pursue. Both the taking of the tonsure and the inability to do so carries multiple significations in the *Genji*, and neither is reducible to being seen solely through the prisms of gender and agency, understood in terms of a binary framework of domination and subordination. To do so eviscerates the text of the Buddhist world view that frames the narrative, producing anachronistic readings, which turn the *Genji* into a secular text where piety becomes simply a displacement or metaphor that obscures (when read through the lens of “gender,” “agency,” and “resistance,”) the “truth” of the inequality and injustice of gender relations.

Many of the problems I have raised above are connected with the fact that the *Genji* is often read as a psychological novel, where men and women are treated not as textual figures but as representations of the real. This effect of verisimilitude is produced in no small measure through the changes to the original text effected by its English translations that require consistency of voice and tense, the breakup of long flowing passages into discreet sentences, and the homogenising of multiple narratorial points of view in order to produce intelligibility. I raise this point because defamiliarising the way we read the *Genji* is the first necessary step for understanding the complexity of the workings of gender in the text. If we take the original seriously, we may grant more readily that what is fascinating about the work is precisely the ways in which it works in multiple registers, at once a tale in which we are made profoundly aware of the fact that men’s pursuit of women results in immeasurable suffering, particularly for the women who are the recipients of men’s advances; as a profound Buddhist reflection on the deluded nature of

all attachment; and as a work that seeks to elaborate upon and complicate the conventions and tropes of *waka* love poetry by wedding them with a rich and complex narrative prose. It is to this last aspect of the work that I turn next.

### **Waka poetry, Generic Conventions and Gender in *The Tale of Genji***

*The Tale of Genji* has almost eight hundred poems (*waka*) interspersed within its long prose narrative. How gender is configured within the conventions of *waka* poetry, therefore, has significant bearing on the ways in which amorous relationships play out within the text. *Waka* poetry's dominant themes are nature and love, both of which are expressed through a prescribed repertoire of images and vocabulary. The central figures of love poems are *otoko* (man) and *onna* (woman), who appear in the poems through terms such as *kimi* (you) or *hito* (male or female lover) or *ware* (I). These latter terms are used for both men and women alike. They indicate nothing about the gender, identity, or social status of either the poet or the one who is being addressed.<sup>28</sup>

When a poem is described as being a woman's poem (*onna no uta*), what is at issue is not the sexual or personal identity of the composer of the poem, but rather the particular stylized role or persona to be adopted by the poet that is consonant with woman, not as a real, living being, but rather as a trope or an idea. Even when a poem is marked as anonymous or when there is no

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<sup>28</sup>The capacious term *ware* in *waka* poetry does not correspond to the personal pronoun "I" in the English language, understood as an autonomous, free-standing, individual identity. *Ware* speaks to fluid, multiple selves that often blend into one another, inhabiting as they do the same experiential space. See Lynne Miyake, "The Tosa Diary" in Paul Schalow and Janet Walker eds., *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 63.

headnote that explains the circumstances under which it was composed, it is possible to infer which persona a poet has adopted.

This is because in the *waka* tradition, woman is always positioned as the one who waits and pines for her male lover, while man is the one who visits at night, and departs before dawn. He is the one who initiates the affair, and composes the morning after poem to which his lady is expected to respond. A poet, regardless of his/her biological sex (a category that has no real meaning in this context) can slip seamlessly into the persona of the waiting female or the male who visits.<sup>29</sup> It is through the performative stances adopted by poets that *otoko* and *onna* come into being, albeit provisionally so, within the discursive space of *waka* poetry.

Animals and plants are often metonymically associated with *otoko* and *onna*—morning glory (*asagao*), for example, is the face of a female lover in the morning; the child who is stroked (*nadeshiko*) is at once a flower as well as a girl who is much loved and raised into womanhood by a man, while *ominaeshi* (maidenflower) functions both as flower and “maiden.” Through a thick web of connections the deer is figured as male, while the bush clover, for whom it/he pines, is associatively linked to the female.

*The Tale of Genji*'s extraordinary achievement is to seamlessly blend the form and content of *waka* poetry with a sustained prose narrative, and to make poetry the primary vehicle through which the thoughts and feelings of

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Vieillard-Baron argues that it is the stance that the poet adopts in the composition, rather than his/her biological sex, that renders the work masculine or feminine. See his “Male? Female? Gender confusion in classical poetry (*waka*),” *Cipango—French Journal of Japanese Studies* 2, English selection (2013): 1–23.

the central figures can be given expression. However, it is precisely the strong presence of poetry in the text, and the observance of its codes and conventions, that undoes a reading of the *Genji* as if it were a 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel, where the fictional relations between men and women are more readily amenable to being read as reflections of the workings of gender in the real world.

Following the protocols of *waka* poetry, many of the central figures in *The Tale of Genji* are metonymically associated with flora and fauna drawn from nature. Nature here is not imagined as separate from the social world, which is why the four seasons constitute a rich source for the generation of both poetic and gendered associations. The feelings expressed in *waka* are diffuse and decentred, often echoing the rhythms and patterns observable in nature, and it is for this reason that both seasonal and love poems partake of a shared affective universe shaped by the inevitable passage of time.

For a character in a text to be imbued with a unique personality and psychological makeup the minimum requirement is that she have a name. And yet, the characters in the *Genji* to whom we refer with proper names and to whom as a consequence, we attribute a fixed entity, are in fact identified in the text either through their official ranks or titles, which frequently change with the passage of time, or through their relationships with one another. Often they are known only by the sobriquets they have acquired from a word in a poem by them or one addressed to them. This is the case for many of the female characters in the text such as Yûgao, Oborozukiyo, Hanachirusato, Tamakazura, and Ukifune.

*Waka* poetry in the *Genji* destabilizes the notion that every poetic composition, recitation, or allusion seeks to express individual thoughts and feelings, and that it is the lyrical expression of a unique and singular self, whose emotions are found reflected in nature. Following the established conventions and protocols of poetry allows the figures in the text to give expression to experiences that are not exclusive to them as autonomous individuals, but ones that belong to readers, narrators, and protagonists alike, all of whom inhabit a shared erotic and affective world.

### **Gender as Performance in *The Tale of Genji***

Understanding how gender functions is clearly important in a text such as the *Genji* that accords centrality to relationships between men and women. In considering how gender is produced and how it operates within the text, Judith Butler's work on performativity is particularly pertinent as it allows us to think outside of the binaries of sex as a biological truth and gender as socially constructed, and to treat both as "truth effects" produced through the repeated iteration of performative stances. For as I have argued earlier, the epistemic framework within which texts such as the *Genji* were produced does not conceive of gender as a social category that offers a corrective to the biological truth of sex.

In our own age, masculinity has often been constituted through an emphasis on muscles and physical strength, whilst femininity is made visible through breasts and through the display of flesh. A striking feature of the *Genji* is that of the vast majority of men and women inhabit the text, there are very few whom we can conjure up in their fullness, as people comprised of flesh and bone. Both the physical and psychic attributes that go into the

making of the body often find expression in the robes within which the body is enveloped.<sup>30</sup> Genji is portrayed as an exemplar of beauty and radiance, but it is the casual refinement and elegance of his attire rather than his physical appearance that renders him a person of extraordinary beauty in the text.

Furthermore, there is little to differentiate men and women on the basis of their attire. This is why lovers often exchange and wear each other's robes without any implication that doing so is an act of cross-dressing. The beauty of the face and the physical aspects of the body are not accorded much significance, and are often conveyed cursorily in highly stylized terms. The terms *okashi*, *utsukushi*, *namamekashi*, *rōtashi*, *medetashi*, *natsukashi*, and so on, which appear frequently in the *Genji*, convey a wide range of nuances, signifying different forms of allure: charming, beautiful, appealing, desirable, refined, youthful, and winsomely appealing. These terms, for the most part are used for both men and women alike. One of the most potent markers of refined sensibility in the *Genji* is the ability of both men and women to express their feelings through tears. The image of the courtly aristocrat shedding tears, far from being a sign of effeminacy, maps on to an altogether different aesthetic, which renders the weeping man deeply attractive to both women and men.

If gender difference does not register overtly through the body, clothes, and ideals of beauty, this does not mean that men and women in the text are indistinguishable one from the other, and that their relationships are unmarked by the play of power. However, how gender comes to be coded

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<sup>30</sup> See Rajyashree Pandey, *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair*, Chapters 2 and 3 for a fuller discussion of the connections between the body, robes, eroticism, and gender.

depends on the context in which it is performed. Within the dense social world of the *Genji*, gender, status, age, and a highly aestheticized form of eroticism often crisscross, creating a multitude of possibilities. How gender and status intersect, for example, is open to at least two different readings.

In one, gender itself is fixed and stable but varies at its point of intersection with class. A serving woman, for example, has fewer privileges but perhaps also greater freedom because of her class. In this reading, her “womanness” is fixed, but the ways in which it plays out, in social terms, is determined by class. The categories are stable, and one could more or less represent the range of possibilities in a graph, where the vertical line is gender and the horizontal line class; where they intersect gives us a reading/representation of what it was like to be a serving woman, an aristocratic woman of the middling ranks, a woman belonging to the uppermost echelons of court nobility, and so on.

In the second reading, and one that informs my understanding of gender in the *Genji*, gender is performative and not fixed and given, and thus how it is performed—what constitutes being a woman—is itself shaped by class, which again, far from being stable, functions as a dynamic and fluid category. Gender in the *Genji* functions as a kind of script, and it is the specificity of the gendered performance, that is to say, the particularity of the script that is enacted, that gives substance to the categories “male” and “female.”

The anonymous twelfth-century fictional tale *Torikaebaya Monogatari* (The Tale of “If Only I Could Change Them Back”) exemplifies perfectly this idea of gender as something that is not a given but rather a matter of ‘becoming’ through repeated performance. The daughter of the Minister of

the Right, Himegimi, is raised as a boy and takes her place at the court as a man, while her brother Wakagimi, brought up as a girl, enters court as a lady. It is through forms of rigorous self-fashioning, that is to say, through the cultivation of particular emotional dispositions and forms of bodily comportment appropriate to their respective genders, that Himegimi and Wakagimi are able to transform themselves such that they can successfully take on their new gendered roles, regardless of their sexual attributes. “Words designating ‘man’ or ‘woman’ often appear with verbs that imply the mutability or superficiality of that very status.”<sup>31</sup> In the end, *Torikaebaya Monogatari* returns the two siblings to their proper gendered roles, but for much of the text it engages in playful inversions, whose effect is to expose the fictive nature of the fixity of gender as the basis of a stable identity.

It is the possibilities offered by different ways of “doing” gender that the *The Tale of Genji* explores through the many romantic encounters that are at the heart of its narrative. Let us consider, for example, the significance of *déshabillé* in the text. In descriptions of Genji’s clothing, we often find the presence of words such as *shidokenaku*, *uchimidaru*, *azaretaru*, *uchitoketaru*, and *yatsureru*.<sup>32</sup> All these terms convey a sense of casualness, careless ease, languor, and informality that render Genji a particularly erotic

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<sup>31</sup> As Gregory Plugfelder observes, “Words designating ‘man’ or ‘woman’ often appear with verbs that imply the mutability or superficiality of that very status—‘becoming’ (*naru*, *arisonu*), ‘changing into’ (*kawaru*, *kau*), ‘making someone into’ (*nasu*, *torinasu*), ‘imitating’ (*manebu*), ‘behaving as’ (*motenasu*), ‘spending time as’ (*tsugu*), ‘getting used to being’ (*narau*, *narasu*, *tsukainarasu*, *arinaru*), ‘reverting to’ (*narikaeru*, *kaeriaratamu*), and so on.” See Gregory Plugfelder, “Strange Fates: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in *Torikaebaya Monogatari*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 47:3, (Autumn 1992): 355.

<sup>32</sup> See Kawazoe Fusae, “Hikaru Genji noshintai to yosōi o megutte,” *Murasaki* 34:12 (1997): 18–20.

figure in the text. However, the potential of such an attire worn potential to arouse amorous interest is not consistently maintained, and is always contingent on the complex intersections of gender and class. When Genji spies on Utsusemi and Nokiba no Ogi, the latter he observes, is attired in thin white robes covered with a gown worn carelessly. Nokiba no Ogi's casual appearance, while not dissimilar to Genji's, is judged by Genji to be slovenly and somewhat coarse (*hōzoku nari*). This asymmetry could no doubt be readily explained by the fact that Nokiba no Ogi is a woman, and that it is the foundational difference of gender that accounts for his reading of her bodily comportment.

However, Genji's assessment of Nokiba no Ogi is not reducible to the fact that she is a woman and that as a woman she is expected to be modest. Her failure to match her stepmother, Utsusemi, is a result of the fact that she makes no effort to emulate the comportment of highborn ladies and thereby merely confirms the insignificance of her own social stature. Here, status is of greater significance than gender. Gender alone is an inadequate guide for reading the asymmetries that are constitutive of all relationships in the text. For it is perfectly possible, in other contexts, for a noblewoman to evoke feelings of tenderness and desire even if she is dressed, like Genji, in informal garb. Kaoru's intense longing for the First Princess is awakened upon being treated, unexpectedly, to the pleasure of seeing someone of an exalted rank in thin summer robes. Kaoru, who is particularly sensitive to the privileges attendant on the accident of birth, recognizes beauty as something that inheres to the highest born. For Kaoru, the First Princess's light, transparent gown does not bespeak frivolity or carelessness—in someone of such exalted

status, seeing her in informal garb provides an erotic charge both because of the beauty of her form, revealed through her transparent clothes, and perhaps more significantly because he, a commoner, has been treated to the rare sight of a princess of the highest stature in casual attire.

However, status too is far from being a stable criterion for gauging the workings of the politics of desire. After all, not all princesses, however highborn, necessarily live up to men's amorous and erotic expectations. The Third Princess (Onna san no miya) proves to be a great disappointment to Genji despite her impeccable lineage. Kaoru's intense attraction to the First Princess is tied not only to her own noble lineage but also to his intense awareness of his own relatively inferior status. The shifting contexts within which amorous encounters take place are thus always imbricated in a variety of asymmetries and hierarchies, which sometimes work together, and at other times pull in different directions, thereby attesting to the inadequacy of treating either gender or class in isolation, outside of the setting or stage (*bamen*) upon which they are brought into play.

### **Gender and Language**

My final example of the instability of gender is drawn from the assumed link between gender and language in classical and medieval Japanese texts. Japanese culture, by the tenth century, operated through two languages, Chinese and Japanese. Chinese was the official written language of the court, and all public, formal, political, and intellectual activities, which were conceived of as the exclusive domain of men, were expressed through this medium. Japanese became the language of women, and came to be linked to the private, domestic, and affective spheres of courtly life. And yet, these two

languages did not function in literary texts as watertight or self-contained mediums.

One of the most striking examples of forms of linguistic/gender crossing is to be found in the diary, *Tosa nikki* (ca. 935), written by the middle ranking courtier and poet Ki no Tsurayuki. In the very opening lines to the text, Tsurayuki declares his intention to write this diary in a female voice to see what she can do with a form that is said to be the exclusive domain of men. As Thomas Harper puts it, “he will be both male and female, he will be both at once, and he will be so with words - which he can do because the boundaries of his two languages coincide so precisely with the boundaries of the two sexes.”<sup>33</sup>

By writing it in *hiragana*, the vernacular phonetic script, Tsurayuki’s text is marked feminine. The use of *kanbun* expressions, and its adherence to the protocols of diaries written in Chinese, noting with exactitude the month and year of each entry, renders it masculine. This seamless journeying between two linguistic modes in which “both languages resound simultaneously,”<sup>34</sup> is inextricably tied to the intermingling of both male and female voices, which are themselves produced through language. What Tsurayuki’s text effects is a breakdown of both Chinese and Japanese, and male and female, such that they become porous, permeable, and indissolubly linked entities.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Harper, “Bilingualism as Bisexualism,” unpublished paper.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Lynne Miyake, “The Tosa Diary: In the Interstices of Gender and Criticism,” 41-73.

While, it is undeniably the case that women were expected to write in Japanese, in the woman's hand (*onnade*), and could not blatantly trespass into what was considered male terrain - *The Tale of Genji* is after all written in hiragana – we need to consider the significance of the fact that Murasaki Shikibu's writings are punctuated with an attempt both to display and disavow her knowledge of Chinese. In her diary *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, she goes out of her way to record that her father regrets that she is not a man, given that she is very much better than her brother in learning Chinese, even though her knowledge has been acquired merely by eavesdropping on his lessons. And that as lady-in-waiting to the empress, she secretly teaches her mistress how to read Chinese poems.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, she works the theme of the assumed mismatch between gender and language into a famous scene in *The Tale of Genji* where, of a rainy night, a group of men appraise different types of women. One of the young noblemen speaks of a former ladylove, the daughter of a Chinese scholar who was once his teacher. She, he tells his listeners, was so accomplished in Chinese herself that she wrote beautifully in the language, and even helped him with his Chinese lessons. On one occasion, she informs him that she cannot meet him as she has caught a cold, and that having drunk a medicinal preparation made of garlic, she suffers from bad breath. Her explanation for why she is indisposed is delivered in a language that, as strongly as her breath, reeks of Chinese. Needless to say, the young man is turned off and the scene

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982: 139.

ends with one of his friends commenting that in women knowledge of the Chinese Classics is not an attractive quality.<sup>37</sup>

It is not clear who is the object of ridicule here – the man who is intimidated by a woman who excels in Chinese, or the woman who, oblivious of the divisions of language/gender, performs in Chinese. The construction of courtly women's gender rested upon the maintenance of a clear distinction between Chinese and Japanese. By bringing to life women such as herself who were in fact learned in Chinese, Murasaki Shikibu's work has the effect of demonstrating the performative nature of gender, and exposing the fictive nature of the assumed isomorphism of gender and language.

### **Concluding remarks**

I have argued that for gender to be useful as an analytical category for understanding a text such as *The Tale of Genji*, it has to be dissociated from many of our contemporary assumptions about the body, sex, man, woman, justice, equality, individualism, agency and so on. Gender difference is undoubtedly central to the generation of romance in the text, but difference is constituted not through man and woman understood as fixed and stable categories, defined by their bodies, but rather through the stylized performative modes that often follow the conventions of Japanese love poetry.

That gender and status intersect in the text is undoubtedly true, but how the two come to be aligned does not map onto a stable grid for what it means to inhabit a particular gender, and to occupy a particular status within society

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<sup>37</sup> Genji monogatari, 1993: 57-58. *Shin nihon koten bungaku taikei*, 19. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.

is itself unstable and subject to change. Page girls, nurses, ladies-in-waiting, and so on all belong to the serving classes, but their status within courtly society varies greatly. Their performance of gender, likewise, is by no means uniform, producing a multiplicity of ways of being “woman.”

Analyses of the working of gender in the *Genji* have focused primarily on the unequal relationships between men and women, to demonstrate how men’s actions cause pain and suffering to the women with whom they establish amorous liaisons. This in turn has led to the imperative to find within the text instances of female agency, where women strive to establish their own autonomy, and offer resistance to unjust social arrangements.

However, as I have argued, if we attend to the broader religious and philosophic context within which the work is located, we see that the text, while being acutely sensitive to the pain and suffering caused by amorous entanglements, does not conceptualize relations between men and women through the language of social justice or human agency, but through an altogether different idiom that belongs to a Buddhist view of the world. Agency here is not the provenance solely of humans. Gods, buddhas, bodhisattvas, as much as actions from previous existences shape how romantic relations are forged and undone. Amorous attachments inevitably produce pain and misery, and it is the women in the *Genji* who suffer the most. However, unlike the men who fail spectacularly to do so, they are the ones who are able to renounce worldly life, which is the precondition for overcoming pain and suffering in the Buddhist world-view. It is a measure of the *Genji*’s extraordinary power that it communicates in equal measure both the seductive nature of love, as well as the illusory nature of its pleasures.

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