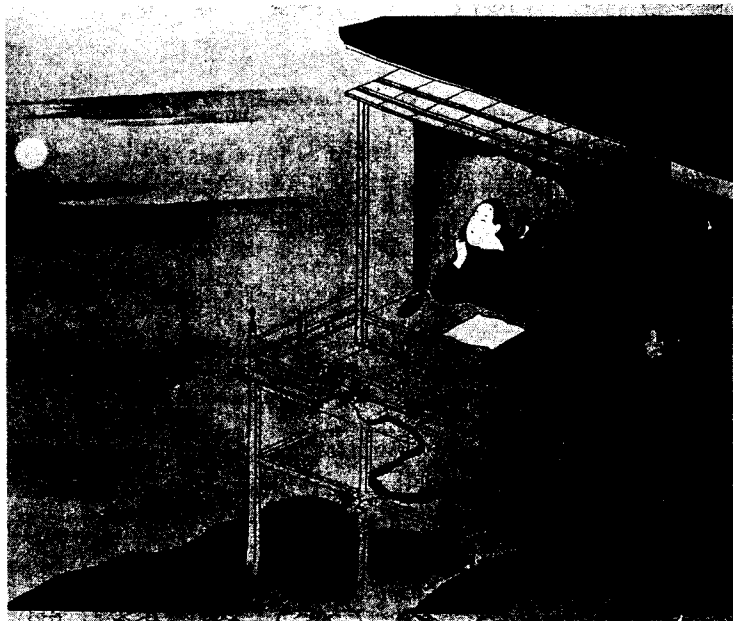


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MURASAKI SHIKIBU: THE LADY OF THE SHINING PRINCE

c. 973	Born
c. 998	Married
1001	Widowed
1005-6	Entered the service of the Empress Shoshi
c. 1010	Completed most of <i>The Tale of Genji</i>
c. 1026	Died

The greatest work of Japanese prose literature, the earliest novel in any language, and one of the great novels of world literature, *The Tale of Genji*, was written by a woman, the Lady Murasaki Shikibu, in the early eleventh century. Even more remarkably, the culture of the Heian Age, to which she belonged—one of the most important periods of Japanese history—was almost totally dominated by women like Murasaki. This situation, nearly unique in the course of Japanese history, resulted from a peculiar constellation of events.

Early Japan was shaped by the older, richer culture of China. In late prehistoric times, elements of Chinese culture, including the fabrication of iron and bronze and the wet cultivation of rice, began to spread to Korea and Japan. By the fifth century A.D. Japan was ruled by a hereditary imperial dynasty, the Yamato. In the following century two important influences were introduced into Japan, both from China. One was the structural notion of central government, with its hierarchies of court ranks; the other was Buddhism. In the early eighth century the Japanese—again on the model of China—built their first capital city, at Nara. Within less than a century the capital was moved to Kyoto, where it remained for more than a thousand years. It was called Heian-kyo, “the capital of peace and tranquility,” and it became a brilliant center of art and culture.

The emperor was the cultural leader of the emerging Japanese

society, the focal point of its empire and its religion, and the central figure of its elaborate court pageantry; but the real political authority of the nation was in the hands of a powerful family, the Fujiwara clan. The Fujiwara ruled not as emperors but as regents, and their influence was exercised through the women of their clan, whom they strategically placed as consorts of the emperor and wives of members of the imperial family. The Fujiwara regents actively encouraged the further development of the rich, patterned society of the court, in which the emperor spent his life performing elaborate rituals and acting as the central figure in the equally elaborate religious festivals designed to assure the continued welfare of the state.

This highly artificial court society reached its zenith in the so-called Heian Age, from the tenth to the twelfth century. The daughters of the Fujiwara, as consorts of successive emperors and wives of other imperial figures, took a leading role. They surrounded themselves with other talented women who vied with one another in learning and religious observance, in poetic composition, and in fine writing.

Earlier Japanese writing had been completely dominated by Chinese influence, and all the serious literature and records of Japan—histories, chronicles, works of geography and law, and official documents—were written in a cumbersome, adapted Chinese script. Further, they were written exclusively by male scholars; women were not considered sufficiently intelligent to learn the Chinese script. Instead, the native Japanese language was relegated to the use of women, in a script called *Kana* that had been developed in the ninth century. It was even called “women’s writing.” Ironically, while the laborious and tedious works of their male contemporaries have virtually disappeared, the works of “women’s writing” survive to depict for us their society and the activities of their lives in letters, diaries, poems, stories, and in *The Tale of Genji*, the masterpiece of the Heian court lady Murasaki Shikibu.

The Tale of Genji

MURASAKI SHIKIBU

In spite of the fame of *The Tale of Genji*, which was honored in its own time and has been ever since, its author remains stubbornly obscure. In part this is surely because of Murasaki’s own reticence. It was simply not seemly for a lady of the court to flaunt the details of her personal life. For example, we have no portrait of her and no literary description. There was in Heian Japan a tradition of vigorous and realistic portraiture of men, especially of important men, but not of women. Even if women had been depicted, the depictions would not have been realistic. Women were typically swathed in so many layers of clothing that they often literally could not move. Their faces were painted with a dead-white face powder, presumably to conceal their features; their teeth were blackened at the dictate of high fashion. We do not even know Murasaki’s real name. Murasaki is the name of one of the leading characters in her novel and probably was used to refer to the author indirectly. *Shikibu* was a title held by her father, who was Senior Secretary in the imperial Bureau of Ceremonial. Her father, though a member of the great Fujiwara clan, belonged to a lesser branch of the family and never rose to high office. He was a scholar, a poet, and a minor administrative functionary.

Murasaki was probably born in 973 in the provincial capital where her father was posted. We know almost nothing about her youth. In 998 she married Fujiwara no Nobutaka, an associate and distant relative of her father and an older man who already had three wives. In spite of this, Murasaki’s marriage was apparently happy enough, and she had a daughter in 999. Her husband died of an epidemic in 1001.

To fill the emptiness of her widowhood, Murasaki is thought to have begun writing *The Tale of Genji* at some time during the next four or five years. In 1005 or 1006 she entered the service of the court. She may have been selected by the Fujiwara regent Michinaga as tutor and lady-in-waiting to his daughter, the young Empress Shoshi. Murasaki led a rather retiring life at court and seems never to have enjoyed a great court title. But her familiarity with the court and with its people and their manners is reflected in *The Tale of Genji*, which she substantially completed by 1010. She may have departed the court as early as the following year, when

the Empress Shoshi retired to a private residence. We know that Murasaki was, by this time, deeply interested in Buddhism, and had contemplated becoming a Buddhist nun. The date of her death is unknown—it may have been as early as 1014 or as late as 1026, more likely the latter.

In contrast to the sketchy details of Murasaki's biography we have the teeming tapestry of her novel, with its endless details about the life of the court. One critic has called it "a great and sophisticated work of fictional history." *The Tale of Genji* is a rambling, episodic work spanning more than fifty years. Its central theme is the amorous adventures of Genji, "The Shining Prince." He is of noble birth, the son of the emperor. Genji is rich, wise, and witty, but his wit and wisdom are almost entirely expended on planning or concealing seductions and dwelling upon the liaisons of love. Yet this is not an erotic book. Murasaki is a woman of "discriminating and delicate taste, and a deep understanding of the emotions of the human heart. She is interested not in the details of her hero's conquests, but in the subtlest refinements of human intercourse; not in the lovers' embraces, but in their longings and their regrets."¹ And she is interested in the context in which the love affairs take place—the charming entertainments, the solemn ceremonies at shrines and monasteries, the archery and equestrian contests, the contests of poetry, painting, and perfume blending. She tells us of the delicacy of sentiment of the ladies and gentlemen of the court, the nuances of gesture and innuendo, the refinements of costume, rich beyond belief, with each color and fabric and pattern steeped in symbolism.

The modern reader is most affected by the incredible artificiality of this society and the equally incredible triviality of its concerns. There are almost no real intellectual interests. Even the Buddhism that played so prominent a part in the court society tended to be mainly a matter of external forms subscribed to with a bland disregard for the incompatibility of Buddhism with either the imported Confucianism or the native Japanese Shinto cult. Instead of meaningful spiritual or intellectual questions, the courtiers, nobles, and officials of the court were preoccupied with manners, taste, and empty formalism. However, one gains the distinct impression that Murasaki herself is dissatisfied with the emptiness of the court life that she describes so faithfully.

The Tale of Genji is in no sense an autobiographical novel. Yet, in an occasional passage, there is a shadowy reflection of the author and of her concerns. The following excerpt is one such passage. In it Genji makes fun of the romances that the court ladies love to

read. But he is drawn up short by one of the ladies, Tamakazura, "the most avid reader of all," who insists that the romances are really a vehicle for the expression of truth. After a moment's half-ironic reflection, Genji agrees, and suggests that "the two of us set down our story and give them a really interesting one." It is a suggestion too ridiculous and amusing for Tamakazura even to imagine: "She hid her face in her sleeves."

The excerpt begins with one of those interminable entertainments that filled the life of the court, this one an equestrian archery contest.

Genji went out to the stands toward midafternoon. All the princes were there, as he had predicted. The equestrian archery was freer and more varied than at the palace. The officers of the guard joined in, and everyone sat entranced through the afternoon. The women may not have understood all the finer points, but the uniforms of even the common guardsmen were magnificent and the horsemanship was complicated and exciting. The grounds were very wide, fronting also on Murasaki's southeast quarter, where young women were watching. There was music and dancing, Chinese polo music and the Korean dragon dance. As night came on, the triumphal music rang out high and wild. The guardsmen were richly rewarded according to their several ranks. It was very late when the assembly dispersed.

Genji spent the night with the lady of the orange blossoms. . . .

They were good friends, he and she, and no more, and they went to separate beds. Genji wondered when they had begun to drift apart. . . . She had let him have her bed and spread quilts for herself outside the curtains. She had in the course of time come to accept such arrangements as proper, and he did not suggest changing them.

The rains of early summer continued without a break, even gloomier than in most years. The ladies at Rokujō amused themselves with illustrated romances. . . . Tamakazura was the most avid reader of all. She quite lost herself in pictures and stories and would spend whole days with them. Several of her young women were well informed in literary matters. She came upon all sorts of interesting and shocking incidents (she could not be sure whether they were true or not), but she found little that resembled her own unfortunate career. . . .

Genji could not help noticing the clutter of pictures and manuscripts. "What a nuisance this all is," he said one day. "Women seem to have been born to be cheerfully deceived. They know perfectly well that in all these old stories there is scarcely a shred of truth, and yet

¹George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 179.

they are captured and made sport of by the whole range of trivialities and go on scribbling them down, quite unaware that in these warm rains their hair is all dank and knotted."

He smiled. "What would we do if there were not these old romances to relieve our boredom? But amid all the fabrication I must admit that I do find real emotions and plausible chains of events. We can be quite aware of the frivolity and the idleness and still be moved. We have to feel a little sorry for a charming princess in the depths of gloom. Sometimes a series of absurd and grotesque incidents which we know to be quite improbable holds our interest, and afterwards we must blush that it was so. Yet even then we can see what it was that held us. Sometimes I stand and listen to the stories they read to my daughter, and I think to myself that there certainly are good talkers in the world. I think that these yarns must come from people much practiced in lying. But perhaps that is not the whole of the story?"

She pushed away her inkstone. "I can see that that would be the view of someone much given to lying himself. For my part, I am convinced of their truthfulness."

He laughed. "I have been rude and unfair to your romances, haven't I. They have set down and preserved happenings from the age of the gods to our own. *The Chronicles of Japan* and the rest are a mere fragment of the whole truth. It is your romances that fill in the details.

"We are not told of things that happened to specific people exactly as they happened; but the beginning is when there are good things and bad things, things that happen in this life which one never tires of seeing and hearing about, things which one cannot bear not to tell of and must pass on for all generations. If the storyteller wishes to speak well, then he chooses the good things; and if he wishes to hold the reader's attention he chooses bad things, extraordinarily bad things. Good things and bad things alike, they are things of this world and no other.

"Writers in other countries approach the matter differently. Old stories in our own are different from new. There are differences in the degree of seriousness. But to dismiss them as lies is itself to depart from the truth. Even in the writ which the Buddha drew from his noble heart are parables, devices for pointing obliquely at the truth. To the ignorant they may seem to operate at cross purposes. The Greater Vehicle is full of them, but the general burden is always the same. The difference between enlightenment and confusion is of about the same order as the difference between the good and the bad in a romance. If one takes the generous view, then nothing is empty and useless."

He now seemed bent on establishing the uses of fiction.

"But tell me: is there in any of your old stories a proper, upright fool like myself?" He came closer. "I doubt that even among the most unworldly of your heroines there is one who manages to be as distant and unnoticing as you are. Suppose the two of us set down our story and give the world a really interesting one."

"I think it very likely that the world will take notice of our curious story even if we do not go to the trouble." She hid her face in her sleeves.

The Diary

MURASAKI SHIKIBU

With Murasaki's *Diary* we are on somewhat more solid ground concerning the details of her life than in *The Tale of Genji*. On the other hand, the *Diary* covers only some two years of her life, 1008–10. She had been a member of the empress's household for several years, and the excerpted passage comes near the end of her period of court service. Still, she dwells not so much on the facts of her life as on the reactions of others to her. She conveys very clearly her own increasing melancholy, the spitefulness of many of her female companions, her criticisms of their deportment, and, at the end, her own increasing attraction to Buddhism. We gain a powerful impression of a talented, learned woman who is both bound by the traditions of the court and disillusioned with them.

63. For instance, whenever the Master of Her Majesty's Household Tadanobu arrives with a message for Her Majesty, the senior women are so helpless and childish that they hardly ever come out to greet him, and, when they do, they seem unable to say anything in the least appropriate. It's not that they are at a loss for words, and it's not that they are lacking in intelligence; it's just that they feel so self-conscious and embarrassed that they are afraid of saying something silly, so they refuse to say anything at all and try to make themselves as invisible as possible. Women in other households cannot possibly act in such a manner! Once one has entered this sort of world even the highest born of ladies falls into line, but our women still seem to act as though they were little girls at home. If a woman of a lower rank comes out to

greet him, Major Counselor Tadanobu takes it in very bad grace, so there are even times when he leaves without seeing anyone, either because the right woman has gone home or because those women who are in their rooms refuse to come out. Other nobles, the kind who often visit Her Majesty with messages, seem to have secret understandings with particular women of their choice and retire somewhat crestfallen if they happen to be absent. It is hardly surprising that they take every opportunity they can to complain that the place is moribund.

The women in the High Priestess' household² must obviously look down on us for this. But, even so, it makes little sense to ridicule others by saying: "We are the only ones of note. Everyone else is as good as blind and deaf when it comes to taste." It is very easy to criticize people, but a far more difficult task to keep oneself in check, and it is while one forgets this truth, lauds oneself to the skies, treats everyone else as worthless and generally despises others, that one's true character is often clearly revealed. . . .

I criticize other women like this, but here is one who has managed to survive this far without having achieved anything of note and has nothing to rely on in the future that might afford her the slightest consolation. Yet, perhaps because I still retain the conviction that I am not the kind of person to abandon herself completely to despair, on autumn evenings, when nostalgia is at its most poignant, I go out and sit on the veranda to gaze in reverie. "Is this the moon that used to praise my beauty?" I say to myself, as I conjure up memories of the past. Then, realizing that I am making precisely that mistake which must be avoided, I become uneasy and move inside a little, while still, of course, continuing to fret and worry.

67. I remember how in the cool of the evening I used to play the koto to myself, rather badly; I was always worried lest someone were to hear me and realize that I was just "adding to the sadness of it all." How silly of me, and yet how sad! So now my two kotos, one of thirteen strings and the other of six, stand in a miserable little closet blackened with soot, ready tuned but idle. Through neglect—I forgot, for example, to ask that the bridges be removed on rainy days—they have accumulated the dust and lean there now against a cupboard, their necks jammed between that and a pillar, with a *biwa* standing on either side.³

There is also a pair of large cupboards crammed full to bursting

²Referring to the ladies of another, rival court, that of the High Priestess of the Kamo Shrines.—Ed.

³The *biwa* was a flutelike instrument also popular with the court nobility.—Ed.

point. One is full of old poems and tales that have become the home for countless silverfish that scatter in such an unpleasant manner that no one cares to look at them any more; the other is full of Chinese books which have lain unattended ever since he who carefully collected them passed away. Whenever my loneliness threatens to overwhelm me, I take out one or two of them to look at. But my women gather together behind my back. "It's because she goes on like this that she is so miserable. What kind of lady is it who reads Chinese books?" they whisper. "In the past it was not even the done thing to read sutras!"⁴ "Yes," I feel like replying, "but I've never seen anyone who lived longer just because they obeyed a prohibition!" But that would be inconsiderate of me, for what they say is not unreasonable.

68. Everyone reacts differently. Some are cheerful, open-hearted, and forthcoming; others are born pessimists, amused by nothing, the kind who search through old letters, carry out penances, intone sutras without end, and clack their beads, all of which I find most unseemly. So aware am I of my women's prying eyes that I hesitate to do even those things a woman in my position should allow herself to do. How much more so at court, where I do have many things I wish to say but always think better of it. There would be no point, I tell myself, in explaining to people who would never understand, and as it would only be causing trouble with women who think of nothing but themselves and are always carping, I just keep my thoughts to myself. It is very rare that one finds people of true understanding; for the most part they judge everything by their own standards and ignore everyone else's opinion.

69. So I seem to be misunderstood, and they think that I am shy. There have been times when I have been forced to sit in their company, and on such occasions I have tried to avoid their petty criticisms, not because I am particularly shy but because I consider it all so distasteful; as a result, I am now known as somewhat of a dullard.

"Well, we never expected this!" they all say. "No one liked her. They all said she was pretentious, awkward, difficult to approach, prickly, too fond of her tales, haughty, prone to versifying, disdainful, cantankerous, and scornful. But when you meet her, she is strangely meek, a completely different person altogether!"

How embarrassing! Do they really look upon me as such a dull thing, I wonder? But I am what I am and so act accordingly. Her Majesty too has often remarked that she had thought I was not the kind of person with whom she could ever relax, but that now I have become closer to her than any of the others. I am so perversely

⁴Sutras were Buddhist scriptures.—Ed.

standoffish; if only I can avoid putting off those for whom I have genuine respect. . . .

71. There is a woman called Saemon no Naishi, who, for some strange reason, took a dislike to me, I cannot think why. I heard all sorts of malicious rumors about myself.

His Majesty was listening to someone reading the *Tale of Genji* aloud. "She must have read the Chronicles of Japan!" he said. "She seems very learned." Saemon no Naishi heard this and apparently jumped to conclusions, spreading it abroad among the senior courtiers that I was flaunting my learning. She gave me the nickname Our Lady of the Chronicles. How utterly ridiculous! Would I, who hesitate to reveal my learning in front of my women at home, ever think of doing so at court?

When my brother, Secretary at the Ministry of Ceremonial, was a young boy learning the Chinese classics, I was in the habit of listening to him and I became unusually proficient at understanding those passages which he found too difficult to grasp. Father, a most learned man, was always regretting the fact: "Just my luck!" he would say. "What a pity she was not born a man!" But then gradually I realized that people were saying, "It's bad enough when a man flaunts his learning; she will come to no good," and ever since then I have avoided writing even the simplest character. My handwriting is appalling. And as for those classics, or whatever they are called, that I used to read, I gave them up entirely. Still I kept on hearing these malicious remarks. Worried what people would think if they heard such rumors, I pretended to be unable to read even the inscriptions on the screens. Then Her Majesty asked me to read to her here and there from the Collected Works of Po Chü-i,⁵ and, because she evinced a desire to know more about such things, we carefully chose a time when other women would not be present and, amateur that I was, I read with her the two books of Po Chü-i's New Ballads in secret; we started the summer before last. I hid this fact from the others, as did Her Majesty, but somehow His Excellency and the Emperor got wind of it and they had some beautiful copies made of various Chinese books, which His Excellency then presented to Her Majesty. That gossip Saemon no Naishi could never have found out that Her Majesty had actually asked me to study with her, for, if she had, I would never have heard the last of it. Ah what a prattling, tiresome world it is!

72. Now I shall be absolutely frank. I care little for what others say.

⁵Po Chü-i (772-846) was a Chinese poet of the T'ang dynasty whose works were very popular in Heian Japan.—Ed.

I have decided to put my trust in Amitābha⁶ and immerse myself in reading sutras. You might expect me to have no compunction in becoming a nun, for I have lost what little attachment I retained for the trials and pains that life has to offer, and yet still I hesitate; even if I were to commit myself to turning my back on the world, there might still be moments of irresolution before he came for me, trailing clouds of glory. The time too is ripe. If I get much older my eyesight will surely weaken to the point that I shall be unable to read the sutras, and my spirits will fail. It may seem that I am merely going through the motions of being a true believer, but I assure you that I can think of little else at the present moment. But then someone with as much to atone for as myself may not qualify for salvation; there are so many things that serve to remind one of the transgressions of a former existence. Ah the wretchedness of it all!

A Historical Appraisal

IVAN MORRIS

Given the scanty facts we have about Murasaki's life, how can we put together even a biographical sketch? The answer is to take those few facts we do have and extrapolate from them and from passages in her two most important books, the *Diary* and *The Tale of Genji*—in short, to find the author in her work.

This is a nearly irresistible temptation when dealing with the author of one of the world's greatest literary works, and many scholars have done it. One of the most successful was Ivan Morris, from whose *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* the following passage is taken.

'Pretty yet shy, shrinking from sight, unsociable, fond of old tales, conceited, so wrapped up in poetry that other people hardly exist, spitefully looking down on the whole world—such is the unpleasant opinion that people have of me. Yet when they come to know me they say that I am strangely gentle, quite unlike what they had been led to

⁶Amitābha (or Amida) was a Buddhist deity.—Ed.

believe. I know that people look down on me like some old outcast, but I have become accustomed to all this, and tell myself, "My nature is as it is."

This is one of the few parts of her diary in which Murasaki turns her acute power of description towards herself. It is a revealing passage. She was what would nowadays be labelled as an introvert and, typically, she was convinced that people misunderstood her. The diary suggests that Murasaki got little pleasure from the casual social relations, the gossip, and the badinage that occupied most of the other ladies at court. She had the reputation of being virtuous (an unusual one in her circle), and we have reason to believe that she was something of a prude. . . .

To what extent does Murasaki's life provide a clue to her character? Our fund of facts about Japan's first and greatest novelist is soon exhausted. She was born in the seventies of the tenth century into a minor, though very literary, branch of the Fujiwara family. From her earliest youth she lived in a cultured atmosphere among people well versed in the classics, whose pastime it was to compose elegant, if not very original, verses in Chinese. Her father, Tametoki, was an ambitious and fairly successful official, who started his career as a student of literature preparing for what roughly corresponds to a D.Lit. degree. He had slowly worked his way up the government hierarchy, largely thanks to the influence of his kinsman, the all-powerful Michinaga, to whom he regularly sent appeals in the form of stereotyped Chinese poetry. Tametoki's grandfather was a poet of some note and he in turn was the great-grandson of Fuyutsugu, an illustrious statesman and *littérateur*, who had greatly contributed to establishing the fortunes of the Fujiwara family in the early part of the preceding century. In short, Murasaki had the advantage of belonging to a family with a long tradition of scholarly and artistic interests.

Tametoki had great ambitions for his eldest son and made sure that he had all the benefits of a classical education. A knowledge of Chinese history and literature was essential for any worth-while political career, and in Murasaki's diary father and son are described poring over Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Historical Records*. For women this type of study was far from being an asset. Many of the court ladies had a smattering of classical knowledge, but anything more serious might label a woman as being unconventional and, worse still, a blue-stocking. This prejudice did not deter Murasaki, and we find her profiting from her brother's studies to learn what she could herself. Tametoki does not appear to have prevented his daughter from indulging in these odd pursuits, but it is doubtful whether he encouraged her. On one unfortunate occasion (mentioned in the diary)

he observed his two children at their lessons and realized that Murasaki was more adept at memorizing Chinese characters than her brother. This inspired the well-known lament, 'If only you were a boy, how happy I should be!' Nobunori, the brother in question, entered government service with a post in the Ministry of Ceremonial (where his father had also served); later he was attached to his father's staff in the province of Echigo, where he died in about 1013 at an early age. Like most well-bred young men of his time he wrote conventional poetry.

We know little about Murasaki's youth. It seems likely that a good deal of her time was devoted to reading and study; for she became familiar with the standard Chinese and Buddhist classics and was also widely read in the literature of her own country. This may well have deterred potential suitors. In any case she was not betrothed until about twenty, an advanced age for girls of her time. It was of course a *mariage de convenance*: her husband was a kinsman and appears to have been considerably older.

It did not last long. In 1001 (the first fairly definite date in Murasaki's life) her husband died, probably in an epidemic. . . .

For five years after her husband's death Murasaki lived at home in retirement, and it was almost certainly during this period that she began work on her novel. In 1004 her father's poems finally produced the desired effect and he was appointed governor of the province of Echizen, some eighty miles from the capital. Shortly thereafter he arranged for his daughter to enter court as maid-of-honour to Michinaga's daughter, the nineteen-year-old consort of the young Emperor Ichijō. Murasaki began her diary in 1008 and kept it for about two years. It gives a vivid picture of her life at court, but does not help us to fix any accurate chronology; for the Heian diary was an impressionistic literary form rather than a systematic record of events.

Ichijō died in 1011 at the age of thirty-one and was succeeded by his first cousin. The Empress, accompanied by her suite (in which Murasaki was presumably included), moved to one of the 'detached palaces' and embarked on her sixty-year period of staid retirement. In the same year Murasaki's father was made governor of the large northern province of Echigo. His son joined him there, but died after a couple of years. . . .

During all this time we know absolutely nothing about the life of Murasaki Shikibu. There is little factual basis for the traditional view that she became a nun in 1015 and died in 1031. On the other hand, there is some evidence that she continued in the service of the Empress Dowager; for *Tales of Glory*, in an entry dated the eighth month of 1025, speaks of 'Echigo no Ben, daughter of Murasaki

Shikibu, a lady-in-waiting at court'. Six years later, however, Murasaki's name is conspicuously absent from a list of ladies who are mentioned as having travelled in the Empress Dowager's suite on a flower-viewing expedition. It is probable, then, though by no means certain, that Murasaki either died or retired into the seclusion of a convent at some time between 1025 and 1031 at the age of about fifty.

While we have few facts about Murasaki's life, the diary and *The Tale of Genji* do provide ample evidence about her knowledge and her experience of the world. Even the most cursory reading of the novel will suggest how intimately she was acquainted with the aristocratic life of her time, not only at court, but in town mansions and in remoter houses beyond the limits of the capital. Murasaki had keenly observed how different kinds of men and women spoke and behaved, and she had tried to enter into their feelings and to know why they acted as they did. She was sensitive to the natural surroundings in which these people lived and to the subtle effects that these surroundings had on them. Possibly she deserved her reputation for being virtuous (though Michinaga, for one, doubted it); but this did not prevent her from being keenly interested in love between men and women and in all the conflicting emotions and other complexities that it involved. Indeed many people have regarded her novel as primarily a study of the varied manifestations of sexual and romantic love. . . .

We know from the diary that Murasaki's interest in Chinese literature was no youthful whim. Her husband was a specialist in the subject and at his death he appears to have left a substantial Chinese library. Murasaki mentions that she would occasionally read some of the volumes to while away the long days when she was on leave from court and living at her father's house. Since Chinese studies were socially taboo for her sex, Murasaki's maids expressed dismay, mingled with dire forebodings, when they observed their mistress at this unorthodox pastime: 'My women gather round me and say, "Madam, if you go on like this, there won't be much happiness in store for you. Why should you read books in Chinese characters? In the old days they wouldn't even let women read the sutras."' . . .

At court Murasaki was at great pains to hide her knowledge of the foreign classics; and fear that the other ladies would find out about her interests (as of course they did) seems to have become a sort of complex. The young empress was also eager to explore these illicit realms, and Murasaki mentions that for some years she has clandestinely been teaching her mistress parts of Po Chü-i's collected works when no one else was present.

If Murasaki had a fair knowledge of Chinese literature—or rather,

of that somewhat scattered selection of Chinese literature that circulated in Heian Kyō—she was well versed in the writing of her own country, and we can assume that she was familiar with the principal Japanese works until her time. The diary tells us that when *The Tale of Genji* was read to Emperor Ichijō he commented, 'The person who wrote this must have been reading *The Chronicles of Japan* and is surely very learned'. The Emperor's remark was no doubt well intentioned, but it was responsible for Murasaki's acquiring the nickname of 'the lady of the Chronicles' (*Nihongi no tsubone*), which she so greatly resented.

Apart from historical works and official court annals, Murasaki was well acquainted with the wealth of Japanese poetry beginning with the vast *Manyō Shū* anthology (*The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*) compiled in the eighth century. She was widely read in the vernacular *kanabun* literature, which had developed so brilliantly during the first two centuries of the Heian period—the diaries, the travel records, and the miscellaneous jottings, of which only a small portion has survived to the present day. Above all, she must have used her long leisure hours at home to steep herself in those voluminous tales or romances known as *monogatari*, the form in which she was to establish her own name.

Murasaki's diary throws considerable light on her knowledge of Buddhism and on her attitude to religion. Her writing shows that she knew a great deal about the intricate Buddhist ceremonial, its hierarchy, and its monastic orders; and we have evidence that she was familiar, not only with the official writings of Tendai (the sect with which she was mainly associated), but with the names, and to some extent the contents, of the other principal scriptures that were known in Japan. Above all, she shows herself to have been imbued with the underlying spirit of Buddhism common to all the sects—the sense of universal impermanence. This is reflected in the thoughts and words of her principal characters; and in the diary itself we find a direct and moving affirmation of faith:

'All the things of this world are sad and tiresome. But from now on I shall fear nothing. Whatever others may do or say, I shall recite my prayers tirelessly to Amida Buddha. And when in my mind the things of this world have come to assume no more importance or stability than the vanishing dew, then I shall exert all my efforts to become a wise and holy person.' . . .

Finally, what were the circumstances under which Murasaki wrote her novel? . . .

We know from references in the diary that at least part of the book was being circulated at court in 1008. In describing a party given to

celebrate the birth of the Empress' first child, Murasaki mentions this incident: "Well, now," said the Captain of the Outer Palace Guards, "I expect that little Murasaki must be about here somewhere." "There's no one here like Genji," thought I to myself, "so what should Murasaki be doing in this place?" . . .

Some of the events in the novel seem to have been taken from things that actually happened at court in 1013 and 1017, but this cannot be accepted as positive evidence. The only other reliable date occurs in the *Sarashina Diary*.⁷ I quote the passage at some length, since it gives a good idea of the impression that Murasaki's book made on one young girl at the time, and also of how hard it was to come by a copy:

'I read *Waka Murasaki* and a few of the other [early] books in *The Tale of Genji*, and I longed to see the later parts. . . . But we were still new to the capital and it was not easy to find copies. I was burning with impatience and curiosity, and in my prayers I used to say, "Let me see the whole!" When my parents went to the Kōryū Temple for a retreat, this was the only thing I asked for. Yet all my hopes were in vain.

'I was feeling most dejected about it when one day I called on an aunt of mine who had come up from the country. She received me very affectionately and showed the greatest interest in me. "What a pretty girl you've grown up to be!" said she. Then, as I was leaving, she asked, "What would you like as a present? I am sure you don't want anything too practical. I'd like to give you something that you will really enjoy."

'And so it was that she presented me with fifty-odd volumes of *The Tale of Genji* in a special case, together with [numerous other *monogatari*]. Oh, how happy I was when I came home with all these books in a bag! In the past I had only been able to have an occasional flurried look at parts of *The Tale of Genji*. Now I had it all in front of me and I could lie undisturbed behind my screen, taking the books out one by one and enjoying them to my heart's content. I wouldn't have changed places with the Empress herself.'

Since *The Tale of Genji* consists of fifty-four books, this would seem to be fairly good evidence that most of the novel, if not all, was completed and in circulation by 1022, the date to which this passage refers. It seems plausible that Murasaki started writing shortly after her husband's death when she was living at home, say in about 1002, and that she continued with occasional interruptions during her long period of service at court until about 1020, when she had completed some fifty books.

⁷This was another contemporary diary, that of a thirteen-year-old girl, also preserved, like Murasaki's.—ED.

Review and Study Questions

1. How does Murasaki's writing reflect her society? How does it reflect her own private life?
2. What was the status of women in Heian Japan?
3. How did Murasaki's devout Buddhism affect her outlook on life?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The standard English translation of *The Tale of Genji* was done by Arthur Waley in 1935. See *The Tale of Genji: A Novel in Six Parts* by Lady Murasaki, tr. Arthur Waley (New York: Modern Library, 1960). It was the first English translation of the work and had come to be regarded as a classic of English literature. But it is limited in several serious ways. Waley was arbitrary and often followed his personal views rather than the text. He sometimes mistranslated passages or simply ignored sections of the text that he did not agree with. A better translation is Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, tr. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Knopf, 1976), excerpted for this chapter. This stays much closer to the text and picks up its fundamental ironic undertones. Marian Ury, reviewing the book in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 37 (1977), 201, insists that this is the first true representation of the *Genji* in English. The best edition of the *Diary* is that excerpted for this chapter, Richard Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs, A Translation and Study* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). There is an older edition of the *Diary*, among other works in *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*, tr. Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Doi, intro. Amy Lowell (Tokyo: Kenkusha, 1935). This work, however, is somewhat inferior to Bowring's and has much less substantial editorial apparatus and notes.

The best interpretive work on Murasaki and her works is Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Knopf, 1964), excerpted for this chapter. There are also several specialized studies that are useful for various aspects of her life and work. Two are in *Medieval Japan: Essays in Institutional History*, ed. John W. Hall and Jeffrey P. Mass (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974): G. Cameron Hurst III, "The Structure of the Heian Court: Some Thoughts on the Nature of 'Familial Authority' in Heian Japan," and John W. Hall, "Kyoto as Historical Background." Another useful study is William H. McCullough, "Japanese Marriage Institutions in the Heian Period," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 27 (1967), 103–67. Another is *Ukifune: Love in The Tale of Genji*, ed. Andrew Pekarik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Among the historical studies of Murasaki's period, one of the best is George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958). Another is Robert Karl Reischauer, *Early Japanese History (c. 40 B.C.—A.D. 1167), Part A* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press and Oxford University Press, 1937). Especially recommended is the brief and readable Jonathan Norton Leonard, *Early Japan* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968), a volume in the "Great Ages of Man" series. A respected general history that can be recommended is by Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan: The Story of a Nation*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1974), the great American interpreter of things Japanese.

There are no full-scale biographies of Murasaki in English or in any other western language and only two in Japanese, both of them roundly criticized by western scholars.