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Gender and Spiritual Possession in *The Tale of Genji*

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Directed by Dr. Jon Blandford

Dedication

This thesis could only exist through the endless support I received from others. I would like to thank my mother and my sister for being with me at every step of the way up to now. I would like to thank Mary, Audrie, and Eli for making my time at Bellarmine University truly special. I would like to thank my readers, Dr. Jennifer Barker and Dr. Kendra Sheehan, for providing me much needed insight to both my writing and Japanese history. Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Jon Blandford. Your guidance has been one of the most valuable resources that Bellarmine University has offered. Thank you for both your assistance through this process and for your tireless dedication to the Honors Program.

Introduction

The Tale of Genji is one of the most studied pieces of Japanese literature. Published in Japan during the beginning of the 11th century and considered by many to be the first full-length novel, *The Tale of Genji* has been a point of interest for scholars of history and literature alike. From a western perspective, one of the most surprising facts surrounding the novel is that the writer was, in fact, a woman. Murasaki Shikibu, or Lady Murasaki, wrote *Genji* as a lady-in-waiting in court, and the novel's focus on the aristocratic women of Japan's Heian era (794-1185 CE) reflects this unique perspective. The novel follows the main character, Genji, as he navigates romance in court life. The audience is introduced to a myriad of unique women throughout the novel, each with her own story. One of these stories features a unique example of female empowerment: one of the major female characters, Lady Rokujo, is able to transform into a *yurei*, or vengeful spirit, who seeks revenge on Genji for his flirtatious ways. The ability to become a vengeful spirit gives more power to Lady Rokujo than she would otherwise have in 11th century Japan's traditionally rigid court society. Through this power, Lady Rokujo resists the concubine system of Japanese aristocrats, suggesting a relationship to the feminism of the era. This reversal of the period's power structure makes Lady Rokujo an example of an early feminist character.

Despite the way that she pushes against the polygamist system of the era, Lady Rokujo is not a perfect example of a feminist character. She punishes women more than the man who wronged her, reserving her harshest punishment (death) for the women whom Genji is seeing instead of Genji himself. Lady Rokujo's goal is also not independence but to have Genji's sole attention, complicating the way this work is feminist in a modern sense. Finally, it must be considered that Lady Rokujo does not become a vengeful spirit consciously, and rather is driven

by her subconscious desires (a traditional motivation of spirits of Japan). On one hand, this can speak for the strength of the desires of the aristocratic women of the time for an overthrowing of the oppressive systems of court society. On the other hand, this calls into question how much autonomy Lady Rokujo is granted from a modern feminist standpoint.

The portrayal of women in *The Tale of Genji* is important to consider for many reasons. The work has left a vast cultural mark on Japan, spawning adaptations ranging from kabuki plays to movies to an animated series. Lady Rokujo in particular has been the central focus of several spinoffs that seek to recreate her ghostly tale, and Takeshi Umehara has even claimed that her story is what inspired the uniquely Japanese genre of vengeful spirits that continues to be used in media today. *The Tale of Genji* left a mark on American culture as well. Translated by Arthur Waley in the 1920s, the novel was popular with literary modernists who saw a reflection of their own style in Murasaki's writing. This acceptance by modernists, combined with the intricate characterization and the consistency of the plot, is one of the main reasons why *The Tale of Genji* is considered to be the first novel today (Phillips).

As mentioned earlier, the plot of *The Tale of Genji* revolves around the life of Genji, the son of the Emperor. Genji was born from a low-ranking consort whom the Emperor loved dearly. Because of this love, Genji's mother was scorned by the Emperor's other wives, especially his principal wife, who would not allow Genji to be named heir apparent. Genji's mother dies from harsh treatment from the other wives, and the Emperor eventually responds to the pressure by removing him from the imperial family in an effort to give him a better life. The novel follows Genji as he navigates life as a high-class commoner, feuding with those who drove him out of the royal family at court and romancing the many women whom he meets along the way. Lady Rokujo is introduced in Chapter 4, "The Twilight Beauty," where she is mentioned as if she has

already been established as one of Genji's lovers. While Genji is with the heroine of the chapter, Yugao, Lady Rokujo appears as a living ghost who kills Yugao through a mysterious illness. In Chapter 9, "Heart-to-Heart," Lady Rokujo possesses Genji's principal wife Aoi during childbirth, leading to Aoi's death. Lady Rokujo later dies in Chapter 14, "The Pilgrimage to Sumiyoshi," but she is believed to continue haunting Genji's wives (Murasaki and the Third Princess) in later chapters. Genji himself dies in between Chapter 41 and Chapter 42, with the last twelve chapters focusing on the lives of his descendants. The many women introduced in the novel give particular attention to the rigid lives of 10th century upper-class Japanese women, and at the very least shows a wide range of female personality not seen in many Western works even today.

Because of the complex portrayal of gender relationships in the text, there has been much debate about how *The Tale of Genji* should be read in its relationship to women. Japanese feminist critic Komashaku Kimi claims that the true meaning of *The Tale of Genji* is to warn women about how negative men can be on their lives, stating that "entering into relation with a man, no matter how kind or good he may be, means unhappiness for the woman." Komashaku argues that the unhappy fates of the various women in Genji's life, as well as the emotional and sexual turmoil he imposes on many of the women—mainly his principal wife, Murasaki, when he is first courting her—shows that *Genji* is meant to warn women of men. She also argues that Genji's sudden death after the death of Murasaki suggests that Genji is not the main character of the story and that the real protagonists are instead the women in the tale. She uses the last chapters of the story to support this, pointing to how they focus on the unhappy lives of women through the eyes of Genji's descendants during the seemingly unrelated final chapters—if the

main focus of the story was to show women instead of Genji, then that connects these chapters to the rest of the story.

Royall Tyler directly challenges this view, specifically with the reading of Genji's rape of Murasaki:

What Genji does is outrageous, not to mention implausible outside fiction. Many recent readers have roundly condemned him for it. But does it harm Murasaki? Considering the realities of her life and her prospects, the answer is no, on the contrary... Murasaki would of course be married off in the end, but to a relative nobody. Her beauty and her abundant gifts would go to waste. In contrast Genji treasures them throughout her life. No husband approved by her father could possibly have become Honorary Retired Emperor or made her an Empress's adoptive mother.

Here, Tyler suggests that the rape of Murasaki was benevolent, because it placed her in a favorable situation. This reading of the text heavily relies on the cultural context that Genji and Murasaki would have lived in.

Lady Rokujo herself has been a subject of conversation for scholars. One reading that portrays Lady Rokujo as an example of an empowering female character is that of Fumiko Enchi in her novel *Masks*. Enchi argues that "whereas Fujitsubo and Murasaki are women who dissolve their whole beings in the anguish of forgiving men, and thereby create an image of eternal love and beauty in the hearts of the men they love, the Rokujo lady is...one who chafes at her inability to sublimate her strong ego in deference to any man, but who can carry out her will only by forcing it upon others" (52). Here, Enchi is claiming that Rokujo avoids losing her identity and happiness for the sake of men like the other women in the novel, specifically through her

violent actions. She elaborates further on this point, drawing specifically on how Lady Rokujo reverses men's torment of women:

[Murasaki Shikibu] was able to combine women's extreme ego suppression and ancient female shamanism, showing both in opposition to men... Just as there is an archetype of woman as the object of man's eternal love, so there must be an archetype of her as the object of his eternal fear, representing, perhaps, the shadow of his own evil actions. The Rokujo lady is an embodiment of this archetype. (57)

Enchi is arguing that Lady Rokujo's character shows how women can have power over the men that mistreat them, thus creating a more complete picture of women as a whole. This idea that Lady Rokujo is a "shadow" of Genji's "evil actions" suggests that the targeting of women does not lessen the impact of Lady Rokujo as an empowering character. Instead, this would enhance it, as it takes the way that men mistreat women for their own selfishness and turns it against them, causing men pain while using the exact same medium that they had used against women. This reading puts Lady Rokujo squarely in opposition to the sexual hierarchy. However, Enchi's reading of Lady Rokujo seems to ignore the negative aspects of Lady Rokujo's targeting of women. This reading ignores how attacking women instead of the men in control reinforces the mistreatment of women. Enchi does mention Lady Rokujo's lack of control over these attacks, but she focuses on how it shows the power of her emotions instead of the lack of autonomy surrounding these incidents; Enchi says Lady Rokujo's "strongest imprecations can never be translated into deeds, until one day her inner obsession takes bold and unequivocal shape, descending on and abusing the object of her enmity with such ferocity that she is overcome by her own power" (53), suggesting that her lack of control speaks more to her "own power" instead of against it. Overall, Enchi's reading of Lady Rokujo portrays her as more of a purely

empowering character, instead of one complicated by the various details surrounding her spiritual powers.

Some scholars, like Royall Tyler, argue that *The Tale of Genji* should only be judged by the virtues of the time, and that any reading that considers values that may be seen as “modern” is unrealistic. I respectfully disagree. The problems of a certain time period should not be ignored solely because they were the norm. This idea is also ahistorical, as it ignores the women in Heian Japan that were displeased with their situation and wrote about it, such as the author of the 10th century *Gossamer Diary*. The *Gossamer Diary* chronicles a woman wrought with jealousy and boredom because of the loneliness she suffers from the relationship system of Heian aristocrats (Morris). Firsthand accounts like this show that some women of the time did despise the way that women were treated during this time period. *The Tale of Genji* also produces a multitude of stories of women unhappy with their relationships to men, suggesting that dislike of their treatment was quite common. I do agree that considering the culture that *The Tale of Genji* came from is a key part of reading the work, and this thesis will take care to give sufficient historical background. However, this historical reality does not negate the fact that Heian court culture could be something that women like Lady Rokujo would want to rebel against.

Other scholars have spoken about the significance of Lady Rokujo’s spirit transformation (like Umehara Takeshi in his *Umehara Thesis*, which points to Lady Rokujo as the foundation for the vengeful spirit trope), and others still have spoken about Lady Rokujo as a feminist character (like the aforementioned Fumiko Enchi in her novel *Masks*, which labels Lady Rokujo’s arc as an example of female empowerment), but few have analyzed how effective the ability to become a vengeful spirit is at granting Lady Rokujo female autonomy. This reading of

The Tale of Genji gives us insight to the evolution of Japanese feminism and to the roots of a character type that is still popular in Japanese media today.

In the first chapter, I will be discussing the historical context of Heian Japan. This will include an overview of the role of women in Heian Japan as a foundation for further exploration. I will look at the lives of lower class women, including those involved in religious and physical work, in order to provide context for the upper classes that are focused on in *The Tale of Genji*. Building off of this, I will look at the lives and plights of the Heian aristocracy. This will include an explanation of the many expectations placed on women in this position as well as the elaborate polygamy system set up for the upper-class. Finally, I will include some background information for the culture surrounding ghosts and ghost stories in the era in order to show the cultural landscape that Lady Rokujo emerges from.

In my second chapter, I will be analyzing the text itself. First, I will be looking at how *The Tale of Genji* shows the mistreatment of women, specifically through the lens of the Kiritsubo Intimate, in order to show the type of society Lady Rokujo was rebelling against. I will look at Lady Rokujo's attacks against Yugao, Aoi, Murasaki, and the Third Princess. I will be using these instances to show how the power that Lady Rokujo gains from spiritual possession allows her to rebel against the system that oppresses the women in Heian Japan. This analysis will also show how a feminist reading of this power is complicated by her lack of control over these possessions as a living spirit, as well as by the targeting of other women instead of the men like Genji that control this system.

In my conclusion, I will look at why considering Lady Rokujo as an important female character is meaningful. I will point to the lasting effect that Lady Rokujo has had on both the Japanese literary canon and the imagination of the world, showing examples of her influence on

culture from *The Tale of Genji*'s initial reception to today. By outlining how influential both *The Tale of Genji* and Lady Rokujo have been throughout history, I will show how understanding *The Tale of Genji*'s complicated relationship with female empowerment can provide important context to multiple facets of modern culture.

Heian Women and Society

Analyzing Lady Rokujo and the scale in which she rebels against the social chains that bind her cannot be done without looking at the specific context that she exists in. The Heian era of Japan has many crucial differences from the culture of modern day Japan, the context of most *Genji* critics, and especially the culture of modern day America, the context of this thesis. To better understand what influences the female characters of *The Tale of Genji*—and by extension, what influences the supernatural Lady Rokujo—we must first look at how these women were regarded in Heian era Japan.

The large majority of women during this time period were not of the same social status as the main subjects of *The Tale of Genji*. The aristocracy that is so prominently featured in this work “consisted of only the tiniest fraction, around one-thousandth, of the population of Japan at that time... for the remainder of the five million people in Japan a millennium ago, life was radically different, centering primarily on manual and agricultural labor” (Angels 34). Most of the women in Japan at the time held practical jobs. These jobs varied from farming to innkeeping to servant work. The relationships of the lower class were monogamous, in stark contrast to the polygamy of the aristocrats. They were also illiterate, another difference from the upper class, which accounts for the lack of literature written about their lives. Lower class people were looked down upon by the upper class because of these differences. Sei Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*, one of the few pieces of Heian literature that mentions the lives of lower classes, makes it clear that the upper class people saw that there was a strict social dichotomy that should be upheld. In two similar passages, two separate beggar women come to the court where Sei Shonagon presides. In the first instance, the beggar woman becomes overly familiar with the court women, including mimicking “the aristocratic tradition of performing a dance of thanks”

(Angels 44) as well as other behaviors that are inappropriate for interactions between higher and lower classes, causing them to look at her with disgust. The dancing and singing “all reveal her lower status, but she is presumptuous enough to assume that by engaging in these performances, she elevates herself in the eyes of the court ladies... however, because she cannot perform in a way that is authentically aristocratic, all she does is reinforce her status as a commoner” (44). The second passage features another beggar woman, who this time does not try to act outside of her class, which causes the court women to not look down upon her as they did to the first woman. This section shows that the higher classes looked down upon the lower classes when they acted outside of their “place” in society, not because of their actual class distinction, showing the unique situation of those in the lower class. This is further epitomized when Sei writes that an upper class man should slur the name of his lower class lover to make it seem like he has forgotten it, showing that “fraternization between social classes is only tolerable as long it is masked by the pretense of social and personal distance” (Angels 46). This section shows that the upper and lower classes were allowed to intermingle, with one condition: As long as they did not behave “in a way that associates oneself with a difference socioeconomic class, be it either superior or inferior”, as it “is hateful and might invite ridicule” (Angels 46).

Another reality of women in the Heian period was sex work. There were many types of entertainers that offered sexual services during this time period, including “*asobi*, who entertained traveling men at sea or river ports, female members of magician puppeteer troupes called *kugustu* and *shirabyoshi*, who sang and danced in male clothing.” These women “varied in refinement and social class,” making it a complicated position for a culture as focused on acting in the manner befitting your social class as Heian Japan (Goodwin 329). The quantification of these workers as prostitutes in the modern sense is difficult, as Japan had a strong history of a

gift and barter based economy and most of the literature that describes this period of sex trade refers to the exchange of money for sex as a type of gift, and it is difficult to tell the difference between formal sex work and sexual partners that were given gifts. However, there are several surviving instances of anti-sex work discourse during that period, including famous religious stories intended to show the morality of Buddhism. In one of these stories, some *asobi* approach a boat full of both Buddhist monks and sailors to ask for help to achieve salvation. The Buddhist master on the boat tells them to abandon their profession or at least recite the Amida Buddha's name to ask for mercy. The women thank him and do both, giving up their occupation and devoting their lives to prayer. This story is meant to show the monk's moral stoicism compared to the sailors that are excited by the *asobi*, as well as show the correct path for sex workers in the eyes of Buddhism—that is, that they should give up their profession and devote themselves to religion. Overall, this shows that despite the complexity of those that did sex work in Heian Japan, there was some social stigma attached to the position.

Compare these two classes of women to the aristocratic women featured in *The Tale of Genji*. High-class women in 11th century Japan were in a complicated position. In Heian court, men who were born from a mixed-class marriage would never be able to become an emperor, while women had the ability to marry an emperor regardless of birth. This made them more favorable to distinguished families that wanted to advance their rank. Women also had the ability to own property and frequently received inheritances if their class allowed it. Domestic abuse was illegal, which suggests an acknowledgement of female autonomy, although the punishment was lighter than other assaults and uxoricide was legal in the case of a woman's infidelity (Morris). At the same time, women were considered to have "three dependencies... as a maiden to her father, a wife to her husband, [and] a widow to her eldest son (Morris, 205)," something

that dictates that women should be subordinate to the men in her life. Women's lives were dictated by their fathers, and those without fathers in their life were considered helpless. Women were expected to spend most of their time hidden behind a screen, and could usually show their face only to their parents and husband. These women usually had incredibly sedentary lives, more so than the already leisurely lifestyle of Heian noblemen, and would usually spend their time waiting for visits. The expectations of women were highly dependent on their class, with women in court, whose job was to entertain those of even higher status than themselves thus needed greater mobility to provide entertainment and social connection to the people they worked for, having greater freedom than noblewomen of different situation, like the lower wife of a nobleman who was expected to spend her time waiting for him to visit her (Morris). In this way, the lifestyle of upper class women in Heian Japan was dependent on the people that they were associated with instead of the kind of lifestyle they wanted themselves.

Of course, Heian society's largest influence on *The Tale of Genji* is its system of polygamy. This cornerstone of the novel's plot was a huge part of upper-class Japanese society—while lower classes practiced monogamy, aristocratic men were free to take several wives and lovers. This freedom to take other partners was not available to women after they had officially married, making this form of polygamy a very male-centric system. On top of the man's power over the women that comes with this hypocritical system, the man's partners also had their own social hierarchy that dictated their treatment and privileges.

The highest-ranking wife in the hierarchy was the principal wife, who was typically picked for social advancement of the family and not for romantic or sexual reasons. The principal wife was due the highest respect from her husband and the other wives. In almost every case except that of the emperor and the heir apparent, the husband would move into the principal

wife's family's home after marriage. This would allow the principal wife a greater sense of power over the other wives because of this familial support in the home. The main job of the principal wife was to bear her husband a son. She was also in charge of properly training any daughters to ensure that they would marry into good families when they became of age. As these marriages were usually arranged at a young age, any preferences from either the bride or the groom was usually irrelevant (Morris).

Below the principal wife were the secondary wives. Secondary wives were chosen by the man himself, and he could marry any woman for any reason if she and her family agreed. These women would be appropriately provided for by their husband and they had possibility of providing an heir if there was no other, but they could never take the place of the principal wife. Secondary wives would either be visited at their own homes or brought into the husband's house as a public display of the relationship, though the latter option brought the risk of retaliation from the principal wife and her family. As mentioned previously, this retaliation from the principal wife, as well as the other secondary wives, is the reason why Genji's mother dies at the beginning of the novel, showing that this was a real concern in Heian social circles (Morris).

The final level was casual partners without an official marriage. Casual sex was incredibly common with Heian nobility. Neither men nor women were looked down upon for losing their virginity—in fact, people would start to suspect that a woman was possessed if she remained a virgin for too long. These relationships had no attachments, though some may try to take care of these partners, as is the case with Genji and his many flings (Morris).

While women were allowed to be a part of this sexual freedom when unmarried, they were required to stay completely monogamous after an official marriage. This is regardless of what status they held in relationship to the man—even if the man paid little attention to the

woman, ignoring her in favor of his other wives, the woman was still expected to remain completely faithful (Morris).

The way that the man and the other women in this polygamist relationship treated a woman was dependent on the woman's class. For example, if the woman was a secondary wife, the woman could be looked down upon by not only the principal wife, but the other secondary wives as well, all depending on how her class and social status compared to the other women. The amount of attention the man was expected to give was also dependent on this social ranking. As such, even if the man loved a woman of lower status more than his other wives, he was expected to pay her little attention, lest he face the retribution of both his wives and his peers (Morris).

This polygamist system had complicated effects on the women that were a part of it. Most women in this situation did not try to stop their lover from taking on more wives, and instead tried to become the wife that he paid the most attention to (Morris). Being jealous of polygamy was not an alien concept, however. The author of the *Gossamer Diary* reflected about her estranged relationship that "Even in the past—even in those days when he used to brave the rain and storm to visit me—I had never for a moment been at ease, but had always been fretting about some future infidelity" (Haha 209). This jealousy is regarded as foolish, however, as she continues on to say that her desire to be his only wife was "excessive," adding "at the time it had seemed quite reasonable that I should want him to be faithful, but now I could see how unthinkable such a thing really was" (Haha 209). This sort of resignation to polygamy and the possibility of abandonment by a husband they have committed to lead to many anxieties about the future, which lends itself to the psychological and emotional conflicts focused on in *The Tale of Genji*. The many women that are shown in the novel have to deal with the "fear of rumours

and gossip, fear of being abandoned by one's lover, fear for one's children's future, fear of committing oneself to a man as his concubine and then being dismissed, fear that one may incur the hostility of the main's principal wife and be subjected to her persecution," (Morris 240-241) all threats of the era that could leave a woman and her family trapped in an uneasy social position indefinitely because of the power dynamics involved in Heian polygamy. Women were expected to keep the unhappy feelings that they experienced through the polygamy system to themselves—namely with jealousy. It was considered a social taboo to vent about the jealousy they felt and women were expected to not tell others, which could only have exacerbated the pain of the emotion (Morris). The constant tension of knowing that your social, economic, and romantic position could be in jeopardy at any given moment and that you cannot go against it loomed over Heian aristocratic women.

It is in this hierarchy that we place Lady Rokujo. Lady Rokujo was formerly married to a Crown Prince and would have become the Empress if it had not been for her husband's untimely death. As a widow, she is unable to marry again, and resides at the lowest tier in the hierarchy as a casual lover to Genji, though her high birth is supposed to place her above the other women who Genji rendezvous with. This position, where Lady Rokujo so nearly reaches the highest possible status and is then relegated to the lowest rung of the polygamist ladder, is where we can begin to contextualize her fury towards the other women in the novel.

Spirits, Gender, and Lady Rokujo

The world of *The Tale of Genji* mirrors the reality of Heian aristocracy. Despite focusing on the life of a man, the novel looks at the real fears of Heian women through the female characters that Genji interacts with throughout his life. Understanding the way that *The Tale of Genji* portrays the plight of women in its universe plays a key part in understanding Lady Rokujo—a reading of Lady Rokujo as a powerful woman pushing back against an oppressive, sexist culture relies on proof that said culture is actually oppressive and sexist. The portrayal of aristocratic polygamy in *The Tale of Genji* delivers this in spades, illustrating the oppressive culture that it is based off of by showing the effects of the system on women’s emotional and physical well-being. The novel contains countless instances of its world oppressing women, with the most influential case being that of Genji’s own mother, the Kiritsubo Intimate.

The Kiritsubo Intimate and Polygamist Strife

The Tale of Genji opens with a clear case against the polygamy of Japanese aristocrats. The opening paragraph of the novel introduces the audience to Genji’s mother, the Kiritsubo Intimate, while introducing the struggles she faces as an intimate to the Emperor in the same breath. She is introduced as “someone of no very great rank” who “enjoyed exceptional favor,” immediately marking her as an outlier and target in the hierarchical polygamist system (3). We are immediately told that the other women are acutely aware of this: “Those others who had always assumed that pride of place was properly theirs despised her as a dreadful woman, while the lesser Intimates were unhappier still” (3). The other consorts and intimates are introduced as jealous and discontent, leaving no room for the assumption of healthy and functional lives for these women. The jealousy and negativity has an unambiguously negative effect on the Kiritsubo Intimate, with the text stating that “this growing burden of resentment was what affected her

health and obliged her to withdraw in misery to her home” (3). Her position in the sexual hierarchy is explicitly expressed to be negatively affecting her, both emotionally and physically. The reason for this distress is not ignored, either. The paragraph ends by stating that “His Majesty, who could less and less do without her, ignored his critics until his behavior seemed bound to be the talk of all,” showing that the Emperor continues to favor the low-level intimate despite his knowledge that it is ill-advised to do so. The Kiritsubo Intimate is not only belittled by the other consorts—she is knowingly put at risk by the man at the top of the sexual hierarchy. This paints a bleak picture of polygamy in *The Tale of Genji*, all within the first paragraph of the text.

The novel continues to use the Kiritsubo Intimate to demonstrate the way the sexual hierarchy harms women, going as far as to give an explicit judgement of the head of the system itself. As the first paragraph alludes to, the Kiritsubo Intimate’s health deteriorates because of judgement and jealousy of the other consorts, and ultimately, she dies. When the Emperor posthumously raises her rank from intimate to consort, some of the other women realize that she was “impossible actually to dislike” and that “it was His Majesty’s unbecoming penchant for her...that had made some treat her with cold disdain” (6). This remark highlights that the mistreatment was in no way the fault of the Kiritsubo Intimate, and instead was the fault of the Emperor for knowingly going against the strict sexual hierarchy. This makes her fate even more tragic and sympathetic while framing the foundation of the problems of the polygamist culture away from the women and onto the men who are in charge. While this line is delivered in a way that acknowledges that only some of the women realize who is to blame—the line states that the raising of rank “made many resent her further,” with only “the wiser ones” regretting her poor

treatment—it is still an important and clear statement against how men affect women’s lives in the polygamist hierarchy.

The fate of the Kiritsubo Intimate is important for many reasons. It opens the novel with a tragic example of how the sexual hierarchy negatively affected women, which is an effective way to show the tragedy of women’s lives in the culture of the novel. It also stays as a constant reminder of how the hierarchy negatively affects women through Genji himself. Genji is constantly affected by how his mother was poorly treated and by her tragic death throughout the novel. Despite the fact that Genji was the favorite of his father, he was not appointed the heir because of his mother’s low rank: “when His Majesty was to designate the Heir Apparent, he longed to pass over his elder son in favor of his younger, but since the younger lacked support, and since in any case the world at large would never accept such a choice, he desisted for the boy’s sake” (12). Here, the Emperor passes over Genji when appointing an heir because the Kiritsubo Intimate was of low rank and had no prominent male relatives to support Genji in court. The strict sexual hierarchy forbids Genji from becoming the heir apparent, which propels the entire plot of the novel. The entire novel is built off of the fact that the treatment of women is unfair and unjust.

Lady Rokujo’s introduction features many of the same traits as the Kiritsubo Intimate, namely with her struggles with the polygamist system. Lady Rokujo is introduced in the fourth chapter, “The Twilight Beauty,” in an ambiguous and unceremonious fashion. She is first mentioned as if she is already an established character with which the audience is familiar, with the novel merely referencing “the days when Genji was calling secretly at Rokujo [her address; literally “sixth avenue”]” (55). Her first physical appearance is also cryptic, and immediately references a displeasure with her position in the sexual hierarchy. The novel states that:

Meanwhile, after successfully overcoming the reserve of the great lady on Rokujo, he had changed and taken most unfortunately to treating her like any other woman. . . She herself, who suffered excessively from melancholy, feared at the same time that rumors of an affair already embarrassing because of their difference in age would soon be in circulation, and she spent many a bitter night, when he failed to come, despairing over her troubles. (59-60)

While at this point we know very little about Lady Rokujo, this introduces her as someone who is low on the sexual hierarchy because of her age. The fact that she left to despair in loneliness because Genji is busy courting Yugao (the leading woman of the chapter) plays off of the real fates of women in Heian Japan. Much like the Kiritsubo Intimate, Lady Rokujo is struggling with the social politics of the polygamist system. Through the Kiritsubo Intimate's precedent, Lady Rokujo's struggles are legitimized by the tragic and deadly effects of becoming a social outcast.

Yugao and Misplaced Aggression

Lady Rokujo's targeting of Yugao, the heroine of the chapter, is one of the main obstacles to reading Lady Rokujo as a purely empowering character. From her first appearance, Yugao goes against the traditional roles of women during this time. Yugao's shabby residence is what draws Genji to her, as it was "a poor little place," juxtaposed by the beautiful *yugao* (flowers; trans. twilight beauty) that grow on its fence (55). Genji pities the flowers and asks for his confidant to pick some for him, and while he does, one of Yugao's servants delivers a perfumed fan to help support the fragile flowers. When Genji opens the fan, he finds a poem inscribed inside: "At a guess I see that you may indeed be he: the light silver dew brings to clothe in loveliness a twilight beauty flower" (57). With this, Yugao has made the first move,

flirting with Genji in an elusive manner that was typical of the time but atypical for a woman to initiate.

Genji investigates who Yugao might be after receiving the poem. Eventually, his confidant discovers how the women in the residence flock to the window when a carriage comes by in lieu of other things to keep them occupied, with particular excitement if the carriage is suspected to be that of the Security Captain, To no Chujo. Upon hearing this, Genji wonders if the lady of the house is the woman who To no Chujo had spoken about in a previous chapter. In the story told by To no Chujo, he had started seeing a woman to whom he was very attached but did not see often. The fact that he did not attend to her often led to serious problems, as he states:

Once, when I had not seen her for a long time (she was so quiet that I rather took her for granted), my wife, as I found out only later, managed to send her some veiled but extremely unpleasant threats. I had never imagined anything like that, and at heart I had not forgotten her, but she took it hard because she had only silence from me so long. (31-32)

To no Chujo is admitting that his poor treatment of this woman caused her to feel alone in her time of need. While he tries to make amends, he yet again ignores her for a long period of time, and during that period she “vanished without a trace” (32). This woman completely rejects the mistreatment caused by To no Chujo and the polygamist system, even though staying with him would undoubtedly help her both socially and financially, as “she had no parents, which made her life difficult” (31). Later, Yugao’s attendant confirms Genji’s initial suspicion, and Yugao is revealed to be this former mistress of To no Chujo. Yugao had actively rejected the rules of the sexual hierarchy for the good of both herself and her child, despite the fact that doing so would

result in a lower financial quality of life. Here, she presents a powerful alternative to the fate of the Kiritsubo Intimate—the idea that a woman can successfully escape from a toxic situation and survive independently.

Genji's affair with Yugao is coy and passionate, but also cut tragically short. She is the victim of the first case of spiritual possession in the novel. The scene begins with Genji remarking how he feels guilty for ignoring Lady Rokujo for a secluded getaway with Yugao. In the next paragraph, the supernatural event occurs, stating:

Late in the evening [Genji] dozed off to see a beautiful woman seated by his pillow. She said, "You are a wonder to me, but you do not care to visit me: no, you bring a tedious creature here and lavish yourself upon her. It is hateful of you and very wrong." She began shaking the woman beside him awake. (67)

Here, he does not recognize the woman, but the dialogue, previous mention of Lady Rokujo, and future supernatural events all suggest that Lady Rokujo has somehow projected herself into Genji and Yugao's hideaway. When Genji wakes up, he is "aware of a heavy, menacing presence," with Yugao "shivering violently" and "soaked with perspiration" while seeming to be unconscious (67). Because Genji has taken Yugao to a place where they could be free from prying eyes, there are very few people around to help. When Genji finally gets light in the room, he sees "at her pillow, before the apparition vanished, the woman in his dreams" (68). Yugao is cold and breathless. While Genji and the few people in the secluded estate try to revive her, Yugao is dead.

In this instance, the message that Lady Rokujo sends is clear: the *laissez-faire* attitude men have towards the women they are involved with is not something that will be tolerated. The

possession of Yugao leaves Genji depressed and physically unwell—Genji even remarks that the time he had with Yugao “seems in the end to have shortened [his] life as well” (74). He is able to recover, allowing Lady Rokujo to enact her revenge without ending his life (and in turn, their relationship). It also removes someone from her romantic competition, allowing her to take back some of the attention that she feels owed by force. Lady Rokujo does take back control in a system that has so far been built on denying it.

However, this instance of spiritual possession is more complex than Lady Rokujo simply reclaiming her time. Much like the women who targeted the Kiritsubo Intimate, Lady Rokujo’s mistreatment of a woman also exacerbating the problems of the system that she is in part acting against. Targeting women instead of the men who are in power does not directly solve the problems of female mistreatment and raises the anxieties and fears that are created by the polygamist system.

Furthermore, targeting Yugao specifically makes it difficult to read Lady Rokujo’s actions as revolutionary. As Yugao has also rebelled against the sexual hierarchy by directly leaving it when mistreated, Lady Rokujo’s actions do not seem as effective or as sympathetic. The fact that both women carry such a strong message about valuing and caring for the women you are involved with gives this section a coherent lesson. Comparing the two messages separately, however, shows two different results of the same situation: One, a tragic tale of bittersweet love lost, and the other, a tale of crazed vengeance that goes too far. The spiritual possession only makes Yugao’s actions seem more rational and commendable, while Lady Rokujo’s actions only seem more extreme. Targeting another woman who was previously in her same situation dilutes the impact of her message to both Genji and the audience.

Aoi, Revenge, and Unconscious Acts

Lady Rokujo's grievances with the social system are legitimized when her backstory is revealed in Chapter 6, "Heart-To-Heart," in a way that goes deeper than the mere jealousy featured in "The Twilight Beauty." The chapter opens with an explicit acknowledgement of the disparity between her past position and the way she is currently treated: The now-retired Emperor tells Genji "His Late Highness thought very highly of her and showed her every attention, and I find it intolerable that you should treat her as casually as you might any other woman," adding "never cause a woman to suffer humiliation... Treat each with tact and avoid provoking her anger" (165). This establishes that Lady Rokujo could have been at the top of the social hierarchy, and that she went from being adored by the future Emperor to being mistreated by Genji is a cruel twist of fate. Genji heeds this warning only in part: "...he guiltily redoubled his attentions towards her, but he still showed no sign of acknowledging their tie openly. She herself remained constantly constrained by shame over the discrepancy between their ages... she still suffered acutely from his relative indifference toward her" (166). The juxtaposition between the revelation of Lady Rokujo's past and the continued unhappiness she feels in her relationship with Genji makes Lady Rokujo more sympathetic as well as more justified in her retaliation.

The chapter continues to emphasize the disparity between women at different ends of the polygamist system by retelling her past. Lady Rokujo's prior relationship is brought up again at the end of the chapter, after she causes the death of Genji's principal wife, Aoi:

How would His Eminence take it, when the rumor spread? He and the late Heir Apparent, among all the brothers, had been especially close, and he had gladly agreed when the Heir Apparent begged him to look after the present Ise Priestess. He had also pressed the Priestess's mother often to stay on at court, although she had rejected even that for fear of the consequences; and now to her astonishment she found herself caught in love's toils

like any girl and certain in the end to have her name bandied about invidiously. Such were the thoughts that whirled through her mind, leaving her as unwell as ever. (180)

Lady Rokujo had previously gone as far as to avoid sitting on court to avoid the drama that came along with it, only to end up involved in a fight for a man's attention so intense it resulted in death. This stark change from her previous life as the wife of the Heir Apparent to her current life shows how living without the respect that she was accustomed to has affected her. This is a bleak picture of the transition her life has taken, and the way that thinking about it makes her more "unwell" shows how much she regrets how her life has turned out.

This more sympathetic side of Lady Rokujo is shown throughout the chapter, emphasized by the principal conflict that she has with Aoi. Genji is paying even less attention to Lady Rokujo than usual, as Aoi is pregnant. To distract herself from the unhappiness that comes with such a development, Lady Rokujo goes outside to watch a parade in which Genji is appearing. Shortly after her arrival, Aoi and her attendants come to the parade and forcefully remove Lady Rokujo from her viewing spot. Such a removal is already disrespectful, but Aoi's people fan the flames by calling out Lady Rokujo specifically. Despite the fact that "her people said nothing about who she was," Aoi's entourage "of course knew her," remarking "'Take no such nonsense from the likes of them! The much be counting on protection from his lordship the Commander [Genji]!'" (167). The confrontation results in a lost view, damaged property, and a completely humiliated Lady Rokujo: "With her shaft benches broken and her carriage shafts now resting willy-nilly on the wheel hubs of other carriages, she looked so ridiculous that she rued her folly and wondered helplessly why she had ever come" (167). To add further insult to injury, Genji does not acknowledge her presence at the parade, despite going against code and smiling at other women in the crowd. Lady Rokujo goes home defeated, writing "'One fugitive glimpse as of a

face reflected in a hallowed stream/Tells me with new cruelty that I matter not at all!” (168).

Facing both animosity from Aoi and cold indifference from Genji, Lady Rokujo is portrayed as an innocent victim of the mistreatment from others.

Despite the fact that the confrontation at the parade was caused by the attendants of Aoi and not directly from Aoi herself, this situation could not have happened without some initiation from Aoi: as Genji remarks, “She cannot really have meant this to happen, but I suppose she sees so little reason why the two of them should think warmly of each other that those men of hers then took it on themselves to act as they did” (169). This is a reversal of Lady Rokujo and Yugao’s dynamic, as well as a parallel to the situation of the Kiritsubo Intimate, with Lady Rokujo now becoming the victim of cruelty of another woman in the polygamist system. This sets up Lady Rokujo’s following actions as more sympathetic, as there is a clear injustice she is responding to instead of the general jealousy of the Yugao possession.

The Aoi possession itself introduces a concept that complicates the reading of Lady Rokujo’s spirit possession as a means of gained agency: Lady Rokujo is not actually in control of the possession when she does it. When Aoi becomes possessed, the people around her start looking for people to blame, and Lady Rokujo becomes a suspect. Lady Rokujo, however, does not know that she is the real *ikiryo*, or living spirit, who is haunting Aoi: “The Haven [Lady Rokujo] heard that some were calling it her own living phantom...but on reflection she found in herself only her own misery and no desire at all to see the lady harmed” (173). Lady Rokujo goes on to reflect that “a soul wandering in distress, as souls were said to do, might well act in this manner,” and that after her confrontation at the parade “she knew that her mind, which had then drifted briefly from her, was now indeed beyond her control; and perhaps this was why she dreamed repeatedly, on dozing off, that she went to where that lady (as she supposed) lay in her

finery, pushed and tugged her about, and flailed at her with a baneful violence strange to her waking self” (173). She comes to the conclusion that she should “not remain attached to so cruel a lover” who can create so much misery inside of her, acknowledging that there is a high chance that the spirit haunting Aoi is her own (173). She also reveals that she wants to stop the possessions for her own good, as “time after time she felt that she was not herself and that to her horror she had wandered away from her own body, until she saw that even if she were wrong, the world so unwillingly speaks well of anyone that the rumor of it would be embroidered upon everywhere with glee and she would, she knew, be talked of far and wide” (173). This reaction to the rumor shows that not only does Lady Rokujo not consciously control the spiritual possession—she wants to actively stop them both for the well-being of Aoi and herself. The idea of being an *ikiryo* also has a clearly negative affect on her mental state:

Curiously she still felt unlike herself, and her clothing reeked of poppy seeds [from the exorcism]. To allay [sic] her misgivings she tried washing her hair and changing, but the smell lingered until she came to look on herself with horror and of course to mourn inwardly (for the matter was hardly one she could discuss) what others must be saying about her. As she did so, she sank into ever more disturbed states of mind. (175)

The way that her spiritual powers cause her harm in this way makes it clear that Lady Rokujo is not in control in these instances, and that the whole experience is something she does not want. This complicates the way that the possessions can be seen as a form of empowerment for Lady Rokujo at this stage, as she does not consent to the things that are supposedly empowering her.

Much like the other aspects surrounding Lady Rokujo in this chapter, this does make her seem like a more sympathetic character. As she cannot help her actions as an *ikiryo*, Lady Rokujo can be seen as an innocent victim instead of a crazed woman driven to murder. While

this does not stop her from facing repercussions in the novel—Genji discovers that Lady Rokujo was the spirit who killed Aoi, and “despite himself he did not think that he could ever feel the same about the Haven [Lady Rokujo] again” (179)—it does soften any possible judgement from the audience. The events of this chapter can be seen as pure tragedy, with Lady Rokujo as a victim of the politics of the aristocratic polygamist system.

At the same time, this imbalanced relationship between Lady Rokujo and her ability to possess others takes away some of her autonomy. She is, quite literally, not in control. This complicates a reading of Lady Rokujo as an early feminist character, as any possible revolutionary actions in this instance are not actually done consciously. These unconscious actions could speak to the power of her soul’s desire to change her lot in the oppressive system. However, it is important to remember that the act of becoming a living spirit is also hurting *herself*, which challenges the idea that this instance of possession is helping Lady Rokujo advance or improve her life.

Murasaki, the Third Princess, and Regained Control

It is only after her death that Lady Rokujo gains the most power. Far after her relatively uneventful death, Genji has a conversation with his favorite wife, Murasaki, about his relationship with Lady Rokujo:

“...she made painfully trying company. I agree that she had reason to be angry with me, but the way she brooded so interminably over the matter...made things very unpleasant. There was something so daunting about her that I could never enjoy with her the daily intimacies of life; I could never drop my guard, lest informality invite her contempt, and so she and I soon drifted apart... I expect that by now, in the afterworld, she has come to

think better of me. Casual amusements always risk grave and painful consequences.”

(646)

Genji is both controlling the narrative and besmirching Lady Rokujo's name, fates she feared during Aoi's possession. He relegates her to a “casual amusement” and portrays himself as the one in the right, so much so that he can comfortably assume that she has completely forgiven him after her death. Soon after, Murasaki falls ill. When they exorcize Murasaki, they discover that it is Lady Rokujo who has possessed her—this time as a *yurei*, or a ghost. Lady Rokujo blames the cruel way Genji has regarded her after her death, saying “For months you have cruelly chastised me and caused me such pain that I thought I might teach you a proper lesson” (654). This is an element of premeditation that is unseen in Lady Rokujo's previous possessions, where her spiritual form only speaks of the emotional pain that she feels instead of the act of possession itself. It is fitting that Lady Rokujo is using this new autonomy to take back control of her narrative through Murasaki, who would later become the author's namesake. Lady Rokujo continues, saying “I had hoped...that you might at least be forgiving toward the dead and come to my defense when others maligned me, and this is why, since I have this shocking appearance, things have come to this at last. I have little enough against this woman, but *you* are strongly guarded. I feel far away and cannot approach you, and even your voice reaches me only faintly” (655). Lady Rokujo is attempting to get direct revenge for the first time in the novel. While she falls short and possesses Murasaki instead, this marks a change in Lady Rokujo's relationship to both the sexual hierarchy and her own power. Murasaki recovers, but Lady Rokujo goes on to possess another wife of Genji, the Third Princess. During this, she says “Take *that*, then!...You thought you were ever so clever getting the last one [Murasaki] back, which was so annoying that I just kept lying in wait. Now I can go” (682). The comment of lying in wait again implies a

sense of direct control unlike the more indirect actions of Lady Rokujo's *ikiryo* state. These possessions do not directly kill Murasaki or the Third Princess, but they do show how Lady Rokujo has gained more autonomy through her death. Lady Rokujo is now directly in control of her spiritual powers and has the ability to dictate how she uses them.

Lady Rokujo and Female Empowerment

An important influence on Lady Rokujo being read as an empowering character is how sympathetic her character is. The amount of sympathy that Lady Rokujo garners in the novel changes throughout chapters, with the Yugao incident making her seem like an attacker and the Aoi incident making her seem more like a victim. The reason a sympathetic portrayal of Lady Rokujo matters is because it is what endears her to the audience. Murasaki Shikibu's audience was the other women in court who would have related to many of the struggles that *The Tale of Genji* portrays. By focusing on the instances where Lady Rokujo is a victim rather than a perpetrator, the audience would be able to see Lady Rokujo as a character who could be looked up to and admired. If Lady Rokujo was purely portrayed as a violent woman who attacked Genji's other lovers—similar to her initial portrayal—she would not be as easily seen as a character who could set an empowering example for those women who are unhappy with their lot in life. Sympathy makes this violence more palatable, and the later instances use this to Lady Rokujo's advantage. The most attention she is given in the novel is during the Aoi incident, which strongly portrays her as a victim of the system. While her last appearance is as a violent spirit who is very much in control, the context of Genji's crude behavior towards her memory after her suffering makes Lady Rokujo's actions seem more vindicated. Overall, the novel usually portrays Lady Rokujo as more sympathetic and relatable to the audience.

Despite the way that Lady Rokujo's situation is seen as sympathetic, her actions against women make it challenging to read her as an early feminist character. Lady Rokujo's spiritual possession is solely done on the women who surround Genji instead of Genji himself, despite the fact that he is at the root of all of her social problems. Even in the case of Aoi, where the targeted woman did have a direct negative influence on her quality of life, Genji had instigated the situation by ignoring Lady Rokujo and exacerbating the loneliness that she felt. Despite this, Genji himself is never a direct victim of her spiritual possession. Though the Murasaki incident reveals that Lady Rokujo is not capable of physically possessing Genji, thus explaining why she had not done so before, the limiting nature of this power has troubling social implications. The fact men in this society are impervious to even the retaliation of a supernatural woman seems to suggest that the only way women can gain power is through the manipulation and abuse of other women, just as Lady Rokujo does to cause secondhand emotional pain to Genji. The way this pits women against women makes Lady Rokujo more problematic as a female role-model.

Genji, Lady Rokujo, and Legacy

Understanding *The Tale of Genji*'s unique relationship to early feminist characters opens up a new way to understand the work—something especially important to consider when looking at *The Tale of Genji*'s incredible legacy. The novel has had consistent popularity since its conception in the beginning of the 11th century, resulting in a degree of long-term influence unrivaled by most western literature. This impact on society can be felt through its vast readership, multiple adaptations, and unexpected influences on modern popular culture. *The Tale of Genji* has influenced multiple points of culture throughout global history, and understanding the source material and its relationship to female empowerment can help us understand how faithfully those influenced by *Genji* have carried on the spirit of the work.

Despite the fact that *The Tale of Genji* predates the printing press and was difficult to circulate, the novel was immediately highly regarded among its contemporary audience. Primary sources like *The Sarashina Diary* tell modern *Genji* scholars that the work was well known and highly admired. Written at some time in the 11th century, *The Sarashina Diary* follows its author, the daughter of Sugawara no Takasue, throughout her life. A frequent topic in the diary is the author's desire to read *The Tale of Genji* in full, as she has only heard selected stories read from the novel. The author writes "when there was nothing to do by day or at night, one tale or another was told me by my elder sister or stepmother, and I heard several chapters about the shining Prince Genji. My longing for such stories increased, but how could they recite them all from memory? (3)." This passage shows how *Genji* spread throughout Japan in an era without mass media—through the use of oral storytelling. Copies of *The Tale of Genji* were also available, as the diary reveals, though they were difficult to acquire: The author later receives "more than fifty volumes of [The Tale of Genji] put in a case," which then makes her remark that

“To be a Queen were nothing compared to this!” (19). These first-hand accounts of how Murasaki Shikibu’s Heian audience received her work shows how prized the novel is, even from its inception.

The Tale of Genji was spread during this initial reception through the oral storytelling mentioned in *The Sarashina Diary*. Author Akikio Hirota elaborates on how those in Heian society would retell *The Tale of Genji*: “In the Heian period...the *Genji* and other romances were often told or read aloud to an aristocratic woman, while she and her ladies-in-waiting had open before them scroll illustrations of the story. Early *Genji* performances may be thought of as illustrated readings. The *Genji monogatari emaki* (The Tale of Genji Picture [Scrolls]) have visually enhanced the appeals of *The Tale of Genji* from the Heian period on” (29). Hirota continues, stating that “Reciting aloud was a common method of transmission of the *Genji* and other fictions, not only when a lady was too young to be able to read, but also when a group of literate adults shared hand-copied manuscripts of tales, rare and priceless commodities that were hard to obtain in the eleventh century...For people outside the capital and for lower-ranking people, books were almost impossible to acquire” (30). Oral and pictorial strategies were used to spread *The Tale of Genji* in this age where copies of the novel were highly limited. This millennium-old method of spreading *The Tale of Genji* speaks to the novel’s longevity and its fervent popularity.

The Tale of Genji continued to thrive after its initial reception, partially to the credit of Japanese poets who regarded the work as a valuable resource for allusion: “The Mikohidari poetry family... promoted the use of the *Genji* as an important source or poetic allusion in the early thirteenth century,” which then “helped turn *The Tale of Genji* into a literary classic recognized less as a *monogatari* (or narrative fiction) than as a source for diction for waka

(classical poetry), a fundamentally aristocratic form and the most prestigious native literary genre” (Shirane 2-3). This elevated *The Tale of Genji* away from its status as a story to a resource for writing poetry, much like the western treatment of classical Greek and Roman mythology. This succeeds in preserving *The Tale of Genji*’s importance as well as spreading its influence, but in turn, it places more importance on the more superficial aspects of the novel than the narrative itself. This shift away from the character and narrative-based focus seen in the immediate response to *Genji* and separates the appreciation of the novel from the plots and characters that respond to the society they were created in. *The Tale of Genji* continued to be popular as a cultural signifier in the years to come. As the novel moved out from the aristocracy and to the common people, the idea of *The Tale of Genji* became more and more important than the narrative itself:

Most commoner audiences of [the Edo period] did not read even such heavily annotated editions of the original, relying instead on *Genji* digests produced mainly by haikai (popular linked verse) poets or printed vernacular translation, both with many illustrations; or they discovered the *Genji* through *no* [theatre], puppet plays... and *ukiyo-e* [paintings]. Sometimes they knew the *Genji* only through the *Genji* incense game signs (*Genji-ko*)... or the *Genji* names used by courtesans in the pleasure quarters. It was often not *The Tale of Genji* as text that these commoner and samurai audiences were familiar with so much as its iconic representations—that is, *The Tale of Genji* as cultural sign or index of cultural sophistication. (Shirane 4)

Much like during its shift from story to allusion resource, *Genji* had become both incredibly influential and incredibly separated from its original narrative, this time by becoming a symbol for a certain time and social status.

One important part of this period of adaptation is the previously mentioned *Genji no* (or *noh*) plays. *The Tale of Genji* inspired numerous *no* plays, with nine plays currently in the *no* canon (Yamanaka). Multiple plays include Lady Rokujo, with the most famous being *Aoi no Ue*, or Lady Aoi. This play retells the story of Lady Rokujo's possession of Aoi, with Aoi's possessed state represented by an ominous empty kimono. *Aoi no Ue* is the first *Genji no* play to appear in the historical record, suggesting that the story of Lady Rokujo is what started the wave of *Genji* adaptations in the form (Yamanaka).

Focus was brought back to the original text in the 19th century, during the western movement to recognize the importance of literature and the concept of the novel. During this period, *Genji* was "recanonicalized as a novel," and several Japanese scholars praised it because it "realistically portrayed contemporary manners and human feelings" (Shirane 6). *The Tale of Genji* was translated into modern Japanese in the early 20th century, elevating it to the modern literary canon and bringing the attention to the importance of its narrative. After this, *The Tale of Genji* became accessible to those who wished to read it, allowing those that did not know Heian Japanese to read the original story instead of relying on adaptations and allusions. The focus was able to move from *The Tale of Genji*'s relationship to the idea of the Heian period and the social class that comes with it to narrative itself.

The expanding of *The Tale of Genji*'s readership allowed for the novel to inspire several new novels. Novels inspired by *The Tale of Genji* include Fumiko Enchi's *Masks* as well as Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters* and *The Bridge of Dreams*. The first Japanese winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Yasunari Kawabata, points to *The Tale of Genji* as the "highest pinnacle of Japanese literature" and a major influence on his work (Kawabata). The wide breadth

of literature influenced by *Genji* speaks to how important understanding *Genji* is if one aims to understand the larger sphere of Japanese literature.

The novel influenced literature outside of Japan, as well. *The Tale of Genji* was translated by Author Waley in the early 1920s and was quickly accepted by other literary modernists. The novel was frequently compared to other foreign works that were popular at the time, with Waley even saying that "many passages could be inserted in M. Proust's next volume without anybody noticing the intrusion" (Phillips). Virginia Woolf was a fervent fan of the novel, giving a positive review of Waley's translation and even mentioning *The Tale of Genji* in *A Room of One's Own*: "If you consider any great figure of the past, like Sappho, like the Lady Murasaki, like Emily Bronte, you will find that she is an inheritor as well as an originator, and has come into existence because women have come to have the habit of writing naturally" (104). Scholar Catherine Nelson-McDermott claims that Woolf "seems to have read and been influenced by [Waley's] translations," arguing that *The Tale of Genji* influenced Woolf's later works (59). Nelson-McDermott points to the similarities of Woolf and Murasaki, such as their use of a more poetic approach to novel writing and their focus on women, as well as her well-documented love of the novel in order to show that Woolf could have been influenced by Murasaki's work. Regardless, these similarities between *The Tale of Genji* and the modernist literary movement is thought to be one of the main reasons why the novel is thought of as the first of its genre: Because *The Tale of Genji* resembled the style of writing that was popular when it was translated into English, it was readily accepted as the first novel (Phillips). Combined with the psychological and emotional focus of *The Tale of Genji* that is rarely seen in other early works, this similarity helped propel the novel to its status as what many literary scholars consider to be the first novel.

Some scholars believe that *The Tale of Genji* continues to influence a surprising part of popular culture today: Japanese Horror. Japanese scholar Takeshi Umehara points to *The Tale of Genji*'s Lady Rokujo as the template for the popular genre of vengeful spirit stories. He points to *The Tale of Genji* as one of the best examples of the vengeful spirit in literature and presents the theory that *The Tale of Genji* "is none other than the recitation of a series of acts of vengeance performed by the spirit, first of the living, and then of the dead [Lady Rokujo]" (18). Later works that utilize the vengeful spirit character, therefore, are playing off of the example set by *The Tale of Genji*. The idea that Lady Rokujo is one of the major influences of the trope of the vengeful spirit in modern Japanese horror is supported by Lady Rokujo's role in various popular *no* plays. One example of this influence is seen in the film *Onibaba*, which features the use of a famous *no* mask to portray demon qualities:

To visually portray the demon, Shindo chose a traditional *hannya* mask, one of the most popular and recognizable masks in the [*no*] repertoire... the *hannya* mask represents the demon of female jealousy, depicting a woman so consumed by that emotion that she loses her humanity. (Petty 122)

This mask is an important part of *Aoi no ue*, the previously mentioned adaptation of Lady Rokujo's possession of Aoi, and helped cement the association between the image of the *hannya* mask and female spirits consumed and warped by jealousy (Petty 122). Here, Lady Rokujo has helped create this image of what a vengeful spirit is, both in *no* drama and in cinema.

The popularity of horror that uses this vengeful female spirit character has ballooned to the global scale in recent history. Japanese horror movies that feature vengeful female spirits like *Ring* have become household names, sparking the creation of western adaptations—in this case, *The Ring*. If *The Tale of Genji*'s Lady Rokujo cemented the idea of what the vengeful female

spirit is, then it is interesting to look at how closely these more modern films follow the precedent set by Lady Rokujo and her rebellion against Heian society. For this, I will be looking at the *Ring* series and its multiple adaptations. In the 1998 Japanese version of *Ring*, the plot follows various characters as they are exposed to a VHS tape that kills them in seven days. As the plot progresses, the characters discover that the deadly tape was created by Sadako Yamamura. Yamamura's mother was a psychic who was ostracized by the media as a fraud and inevitably kills herself. Because of this trauma, Yamamura becomes a vengeful spirit that enacts revenge through the VHS tape. This adaptation has a hint of Lady Rokujo's societal rebellion, as Yamamura is also trying to take revenge on society. However, this does not carry the same message against gender-based oppression that Lady Rokujo originally has, as the focus is more on society in general rather than women's issues (Nakata). The western adaptation, *The Ring*, has less in common with *The Tale of Genji* and Lady Rokujo; Instead of Sadako Yamamura, the vengeful spirit of the film is Samara Morgan, whose rage is caused by her death at the hands of her mother. This moves the focus of story away from a vengeful spirit raging against society to a vengeful spirit raging against a single person, lessening the connection between the spirit from *The Ring* and Lady Rokujo (Verbinski). The novel series that sparked the multiple adaptations, also titled *Ring*, has a stronger connection to Lady Rokujo's version of the vengeful spirit. The novel's plot is similar to the Japanese film adaptation, but contains more allusions to the gendered violence that faced Yamamura: The novel series has Yamamura as a victim of rape, and has her death be caused because of it. This puts this version of *Ring* and Yamamura closer to *The Tale of Genji* and Lady Rokujo, as both have the vengeful spirit state be caused by gendered issues (Suzuki). The varying degrees of connection to the original cause of Lady Rokujo's spirit state between the novel, Japanese film, and western film adaptations of *Ring* seems to suggest

that the closer the adaptation is to the original story, the closer it is to the original idea of the vengeful spirit rebelling against a sexist society.

The Tale of Genji has a recent resurgence in western popular culture through the 2016 video game *Overwatch*. The video game a character named Genji, a member of a powerful family who “lived a life of luxury and privilege” as well as a “playboy lifestyle,” while other characters in the universe “resented his father for coddling and protecting him” (Blizzard Entertainment). Eventually, he is forced to leave the family. However, these comparisons are where the similarities between the two characters end—Genji from *Overwatch* is the victim of a murder attempt instead of being formally exiled like Genji from *The Tale of Genji*, and the science fiction action following the plot of the game is vastly different from the novel. The video game’s gimmick of using a few characters to represent specific countries—for example, the United States is represented by a cowboy and a super soldier—as well as the association of iconic Japanese tropes like ninjas and cyborgs with the *Overwatch* version of Genji suggest that *The Tale of Genji* is being used as a cultural signifier rather than a deeper adaptation. This focus on what *The Tale of Genji* is associated with harkens back to the period in history where *The Tale of Genji* was used for poetic allusions and names in the pleasure quarters—though instead of being used as a signifier for Heian nobility and high-class culture, it is being used as a signifier for Japan as a whole. This use of *The Tale of Genji* suggests that modern western culture is shifting towards a more surface-level understanding of the novel, creating an interesting parallel between the west’s present and Japan’s past.

These various places where *The Tale of Genji* has influenced global history and culture show how it is important to understand the narrative of *The Tale of Genji*, including its relationship to female empowerment. Understanding the novel allows one to get a deeper insight

into countless different subjects. This knowledge can also allow one to identify ways that works that have been influenced by *Genji* are going against the novel's messages about the treatment of women, much like ironic use of *The Tale of Genji*'s as a tool to shape women in Japanese history. When looking at the history of the novel, history of Japan, or trends in popular culture, consider that they are built off of the foundation of *The Tale of Genji*, Lady Rokujo, and their complicated relationship with female empowerment.

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