

The Tale of Genji

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The Tale of Genji, the supreme masterpiece of Japanese literature and one of the central monuments of Japanese civilization, is a psychological novel of immense subtlety and complexity written during the opening years of the eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, a woman of the Japanese court. It employs narrative strategies and rhetorical techniques that not only anticipate but may in some ways go beyond those developed by literary modernism in the twentieth-century West. This is why the first successful readings by Europeans had to wait until European readers had the precedents of Proust and Joyce before them. Yet, like all great works of art, it enriches all who approach it, whatever their level of sophistication and preparation.

After nearly a millennium of intense critical attention in Japan that both reflects and informs the characteristic approaches to literature of each successive age, the present generation continues to make new and exciting discoveries in the text and its related literature. Genji scholarship is one of the most fertile fields of Japanese studies both in Japan and abroad. Much important new English language research has appeared in just the past few years.

The seminar will focus on close reading and discussion of the Seidensticker translation of *The Tale of Genji*. Other translations and critical studies in English and other languages will be explored as well as selections from the original Japanese text and Japanese-language scholarship. Some of the questions to be explored include: Genji and women in the arts in Japan and in Europe, the historic evolution of Genji scholarship, the character and validity of Murasaki Shikibu's defense of fiction, the advantages and limitations of the aristocratic perspective, genre problems posed by Genji, Genji and the nature of classical Japanese civilization, the continuing influence of Genji in medieval, early modern and modern Japan, similarities and differences in the assumptions and values of Murasaki Shikibu and her world and those of the present day, the major religious and spiritual systems and world views that inform Genji, and comparisons and contrasts between Japanese and non-Japanese readings of Genji.

Prerequisites: Completion of third-year Japanese, or an ability to read any language other than English, or instructor's permission. It is most likely that all students will not be able to read all the languages represented in the discussions but all seminar members will be expected to do some of their research in at least two languages: English and Japanese, Chinese, French, or German. Those with a background in literary studies in the latter three languages are particularly encouraged to participate even if they do not know Japanese.

Requirements: Keeping up with the assigned reading, participation in class discussion; developing a research topic; presenting the instructor with a formal, written research proposal by the end of the fifth week; an oral presentation to the class during one of the final meetings, completion of a term paper to be due during examination week.

SAMPLE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. GENJI

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B. Related Materials

(*Works of Special Importance to this Seminar)

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*Hisamatsu, Sen'ichi. Helen Craig McCullough, tr. *The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics*. Tokyo:

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