



Woman in Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–ca. 1020)

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Despite the prominence of Prince Genji in the title of Murasaki's novel, this is essentially a work by a woman, for women, and about women. Murasaki seems to imply that the true meaning of love, life and death lies with woman rather than man, just as the wisest of men, Socrates, learned the mysteries of love and immortality from a more wise and experienced woman, Diotima of Mantinea. The men who appear in the story are not praised or appreciated for their political power or mastery of court intrigue, but rather serve as opportunities for or challenges to the lives of the many women who populate the convoluted court environment.

Just as women in this period excelled at literary work using their own simplified script—*onnade* or “women's hand”—they also inhabited and shaped their own subculture within which men were occasional visitors or intruders. Due to the practice of marriage politics, women were key players in a Heian version of a game of thrones. Those outside the imperial line could only gain power by aligning young, beautiful, and aesthetically steeped women from their family with men in the line of succession to the throne. Thus Pygmalsians flourished everywhere: “when it comes to the genuine object, something of such undeniable value that a man wants to have it always with him—the perfection of the form announces that it is from the hand of a master.” Yet at the end of his life even the Shining Genji finds himself undergoing a gender-bending reincarnation, lingering among Murasaki's grieving women who survive on memories of their deceased mistress. He also recognizes the bitter irony that his former child bride disdained as a “shallow little creature” excels him in her devout Buddhist practice.

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