



## Sexuality in Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–ca. 1020)

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The Heian court life documented in Murasaki's novel is completely devoid of a puritanical denigration of sexuality, both bisexual and homosexual. The courtiers engage in a discreet practice of "night-crawling" in which they make nocturnal visits to a wide range of women, often living in secluded locations. These paramours also can include "virginal" priestesses, wives of close friends or even the wife of one's own father. The approach often required a display of aesthetic sensibility, such as a musical performance or an exchange of provocative poems.

In the famous "rainy night conversation" in chapter two, a group of young men, including a young Genji, exchange stories of memorable encounters. Although claiming to be in search of a flawless example of womanhood gifted with "sensibility and cultivation," they have no hesitation about sampling a wide array of candidates, who are often abandoned along with their offspring. The candidates are judged in terms of their social ranking as well as aesthetic taste, artistic accomplishments, emotional disposition, and even levels of jealousy (total lack of jealousy being deemed a liability). The final judgement is that women "are like bits of driftwood." Many of the women are willing participants in these dalliances. Others are hesitant to respond, fearing negative consequences for their future. A few cases documented in the text qualify as sexual harassment or rape. Understandably Murasaki envied women able to find safe refuge in the life of a Buddhist nun, becoming "free to lose themselves in religion."

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