



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

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Murasaki presents two philosophies of love in which the subject of erotic desire directs attention at the beloved object. Women (and occasionally children) are almost always the targets, and not infrequently victims, of such love. The male lovers in the Heian court vie to acquire largely clandestine relationships, mixing personal gratification and class consciousness with marriage politics. Unlike his male cohorts the idealized character of the “Shining” Genji displays a high level of commitment to the various ladies in his life, and has even found his ideal love (who unfortunately is his stepmother). Although he is ostensibly subject of the novel, a recent translator of the novel, Buddhist nun Jakuchō Setouchi, argues that he is “nothing more than a literary device to carry along and develop the more interesting characters of the women in court.” Thus Murasaki critiques the philosophy of love upheld by Heian men that subjects women to impossible standards of aesthetic and emotional perfection, and even criticizes them for being too perfect. As one frustrated lover laments,

When the colors of a robe do not match the seasons, the flowers of spring and the autumn tints, when they are somehow vague and muddy, then the whole effort is as futile as the dew. So it is with women. It is not easy in this world to find a perfect wife. We are all pursuing the ideal and failing to find it.

A woman’s philosophy of love evolves along with the character of Murasaki, whose love for Genji is repeatedly challenged by his cavalier treatment. She seeks and finds solace in her Buddhist practice prior to her early death. However, Ukifune refuses to play the game of love crafted by the men, building a life on her own within the Buddhist Sangha while still young.

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