

Invitation to World Literature: The Tale of Genji Video Transcript

Smiley:

How do you be a good man in the world that you live in...and still get laid a lot? That's essentially what Genji is about.

Bryan:

The main character is male, but it was absolutely written to be read by women.

Collis:

It almost feels like a fantasy novel in some ways, right from the very beginning; that makes it I think quite engaging.

Caddeau:

Genji's fascination very much has to do with the fact that it read like gossip.

Miyake:

Gossip is rampant. Everybody knows about everything.

Dalby:

It could be a soap opera.

Collis:

Movie trailer narration would be: "In a world of mystery"—you have curtains fluttering in the wind and sort of shadows against screens, and then: "In a time of peace, a prince will rise." It would say, "Tale of Genji."

Dalby:

When I was 16, growing up in northern Indiana, my father gave me this book, and it just took me to a different universe.

Bryan:

It took me about 10 years to read it. I know it's really strange to say that your favorite book is one that you had a really hard time to get though. But I didn't want it to end because it's so beautiful.

Loong:

It was 1969 and it was a very, very tumultuous time I think in all our lives. We were in the middle of the Vietnam War. So Genji became actually at that time a refuge for me.

Smiley:

2001, after 9/11, I wanted to escape, and for me the classic way of escaping was to read a book.

Keene:

1940 was a genuinely terrible year. Perhaps one of the worst years in the history of mankind. And I hated looking at the newspaper because everything was bad. It seemed that the Nazi armies were unstoppable. And it was only accidentally that I found The Tale of Genji. But once I started reading it, it was for me a kind of refuge, a salvation even. People could live decently; beautifully.

GRAPHIC: WORLD'S FIRST NOVEL

Miyagawa:

As a Japanese-born writer, I take pride in The Tale of Genji for the fact that it's considered the world first novel. And it was written by a woman.

Damrosch:

The Tale of Genji was written 1000 years ago in the Heian Court in Japan by a woman we know today as Murasaki Shikibu. It's an intimate portrayal of a medieval court culture from inside a rich, complex world of a whole series of characters, families, all of whom are related. Everyone is sleeping with their cousin, their stepmother, or they wish they were.

Dalby:

The Tale of Genji, I think most Japanese would agree, is the bedrock of their culture. Everyone knows what it is. It's a bit like Moby Dick in America, for example. Pretty much everybody in school has been forced to read sections of the "Tale of Genji." They were all required to memorize the beginning.

Miyake:

(Reading in Japanese)

Caddeau:

The Tale of Genji is a story spanning three generations over seven decades and involves a cast of, you know, several hundred characters in the course of a thousand pages. And yet what it really is about is Genji.

GRAPHIC: WHO IS GENJI?

Dalby:

The Tale of Genji starts with the birth of this absolute pearl of a child, born to the Emperor and one of lesser concubines. Prince Genji is the Heian ideal of what a man should be.

Damrosch:

(Reading): "Whoever chanced to lay eyes on Genji was smitten by him. After one glimpse of the radiance that attended him, men of every degree wished to offer him a beloved daughter, while the least menial with a sister he thought worthy, entertained the ambition to place her in Genji's service."

Dalby:

He's not a warrior, it's not that he's strong and brave. It's that he's so sensitive and he's a wonderful poet and he's a beautiful dancer.

Miyagawa:

Who will play Prince Genji in a movie today? Brad Pitt because he's so nice to look at.

Shirane:

Murasaki Shikibu the author never describes the facial features. So all we know is he kind of exuded a certain radiance. And also he exuded a beautiful scent, aromatic.

Loong:

Genji was obviously physically very, very beautiful. A metrosexual man. Someone who's simply not afraid to look good.

Bryan:

I think he's fascinating. Although I wouldn't call him a traditional hero, because by today's standards a lot of the things he does are very upsetting.

Dalby:

His big transgression is that he falls in love with his father's favorite concubine, Fujitsubo.

Collis:

This is also the very beginning of the novel. Genji's still very young and he doesn't remember his mother. This passage is setting up his curiosity in Fujitsubo. It's eventually going to turn into romance.

(Reading): "'Do not be unfriendly,' said the emperor to Fujitsubo. 'Sometimes it almost seems to me, too, that you are his mother. Do not think him forward. Be kind to him, your eyes, your expression, you are really so uncommonly like her that you could pass for his mother.' Genji's affection for the new lady grew, and the most ordinary flower or tinted leaf became the occasion for expressing it."

Dalby:

He has a secret affair with her, which results in a child that nobody knows is Genji's.

Keene:

The child is said to be the son not of Genji, but of the Emperor. And eventually this son becomes the next emperor of Japan.

Shirane:

Genji has committed a very serious transgression. By sleeping with his father's closest consulate.

Bryan:

I can't think of anything worse than that for her in her life. It's very, very, very, bad.

GRAPHIC: SO BRIEFLY RESTS THE DEW

Shirane:

One of the keys that you have to understand is the kind of religious background which is Buddhism and just the belief that all things are impermanent.

Smiley:

A lot of Genji is about how fleeting life is. There are poems, there are reflections that support this idea.

Dalby:

Probably one of the most famous motifs is the ephemeral cherry blossoms and how they scatter and thus it is with relationships. Thus it is with our life. You know that things don't last. And concurrently with that, is the idea that things are beautiful precisely because they don't last.

Shirane:

Every spring, millions of people are flooding to the parks to see the cherry blossoms. And the cherry blossoms have become a metaphor for life.

Caddeau:

The symbol of a dew drop is often used as a poetic imagery to make readers think of evanescence.

Damrosch:

(Reading): "So briefly rests the dew on the hagi. Even now it scatters in the wind. In the haste we make to leave this world of dew, may there be no time between the first and last."

GRAPHIC: HEIAN COURT LIFE

Miyake:

The Tale of Genji is actually used by historians as information as to how the aristocrats lived, what kinds of pleasures they engaged in. It's a wonderful record, in detail.

Miyagawa:

It is set in Heian period, which is about 1000 years ago. And it was a very romantic era.

Dalby:

There is a, an emperor and a very small group of courtiers, centered in the city of Kyoto. And they just have this very aestheticized life. The writing system, the clothing, the buildings.

Miyagawa:

It was a renaissance time; the country was at peace for a period of time so art flourished.

Smiley:

Japanese culture is, you might call it, a paper oriented culture; a culture where pictures and writing are extremely important.

Damrosch:

At times the exchange of letters seems to be more than just a mode of communication actually to be their very point of the affair. Here's an exchange Genji is having with one of his loves as she's written him a private note.

(Reading): "He was not displeased that she should feel deeply enough, in the saddest of seasons to contrive a secret note. So he had the messenger wait, opened the cabinet, where he kept his Chinese paper," (that's the really good paper) "chose the particularly fine sheet, and prepared his brush with great care. The gentlewomen present nudged each other and wondered who the lady could be, for his every gesture was a lover's."

GRAPHIC: THE AUTHOR

Dalby:

At some point this very bright young girl, who later came to be known as Murasaki Shikibu, was writing stories and they began to circulate and they would be copied, and then they would passed on. And people were captivated by her stories.

Miyagawa:

Her father was a provincial governor.

Damrosch:

She was a member of a second-ranking aristocratic family, now working in the service of the empress of Japan.

Dalby:

She was plucked out, you know, of her home with her father and asked to come to court into the salon of one particular empress.

Shirane:

She was probably brought to court because of her brilliance, and because she had started to write. She then was given the kind of circumstances where she could flourish. Murasaki Shikibu had to be a genius because no one wrote anything like The Tale of Genji prior to that, and no one was able to duplicate the feat again.

Dalby:

I returned to Kyoto in order to get a sense of, the Kyoto that Murasaki Shikibu would have known. There is a temple called Ishiyama-dera near Lake Biwa where the legend

has it, that this is where she wrote the "Tale of Genji." There's a little room where, of a doll that looks like Murasaki and also her daughter is coming in and looking over her shoulder, so you can see all these Genji related things at this temple.

One can go and be dressed in the Heian robes that someone like Murasaki would have, would have worn. The white makeup was applied and then I put on this long black wig. Put on many many layers. It took a long time to put each robe on right. But when it was finished, in order to get undressed, you just pulled this one cord, and the whole thing melted off. How quickly one could be undressed, by someone like Genji.

Collis:

People don't know a whole lot about her. It's interesting, because her legacy is really this book.

Loong:

Murasaki was such an inspiration because I think that that was what we ourselves in college at that time wanted to be.

Damrosch:

Virginia Woolf wrote a glowing book review in which she expressed her fascination that medieval Japan was so very cultured at a time when Anglo-Saxon England was a really primitive uncivilized backwater. And she says:

(Reading): "While the Aelfrics and the Aelfreds croaked and coughed in England, this court lady...was sitting down in her silk dress and trousers with pictures before her and the sound of poetry in her ears. She was sitting down about the year 1000 to tell the story of the life and adventures of Prince Genji."

Shirane:

This is the 2000-yen, Tale of Genji bill. I can't think of currency, certainly not in United States that has a author on the bill, not to mention a female author.

GRAPHIC: GENJI'S WOMEN

Shirane:

He's smooth? Uh, yeah, you could say he's smooth. It seems no one is immune to his advances.

Dalby:

Some people think that Genji was something of a literary device because by visiting all of the ladies that he did, this gave Murasaki Shikibu a chance to talk about these different women and their different circumstances and what they were like.

Miyagawa:

The concept of falling in love in Japan at the time was about falling in love with the idea of falling in love. Because they really couldn't see each other, it was very dark—of

course it was before electricity. Prince Genji would go to a woman's house. But there will be a screen that would shield her, so he would talk poetic thoughts to her and if things go well, he was invited in. And usually things went well for Prince Genji.

Dalby:

On many of his forays to meet interesting women, sometimes Genji came up with a dud. For example, the Safflower Lady.

Collis:

(Reading): "Though his face was politely averted, Genji contrived to look obliquely at her. He was hoping that a really good look might show her to be less than irredeemable."

Damrosch:

(Reading): "That was not very kind or very realistic of him. It was his first impression...not at all promising. And the nose, that nose! How it dominated the scene. It was long, pendulous, and red, a frightful nose."

Collis

(Reading): "It now seemed ridiculous that he had worked so hard to see her and yet the visage was such an extraordinary one that he could not immediately take his eyes away."

Keene:

If he paid court to her for three or four days in a row, it was considered that they were married.

Damrosch:

It was a polygamist society where men could have several wives and many mistresses.

Keene:

It was no family life, of the kind that we have in the West. For the most part, the man would be free to come and go.

Damrosch:

Genji is a kind of a Don Juan, or a Casanova figure particularly in the first half of the book. But seen from a woman's perspective. He is a deeply sensitive and thoughtful Casanova figure.

Dalby:

Don Juan loves them and leaves them. Genji loves them and never discards a woman that he has made love to. I mean he takes care of all of them. Which again makes him an ideal man in that sense. Eventually he finds this young girl who reminds him of his forbidden love, and this is Murasaki who is the love of Genji's life.

Damrosch:

Very interesting no one is quite sure whether her heroine took her name or the author Murasaki is known for the name of her heroine.

GRAPHIC: MURASAKI

Damrosch:

(Reading): "The child knelt down. She was charming with rich, un-plucked eyebrows, and hair pushed childishly back from her forehead. How he would like to see her in a few years. And a sudden realization brought him close to tears. The resemblance to Fujitsubo, for whom he yearned, was astonishing."

Bryan:

It is a very pivotal moment of the book, because Genji is about to meet the love of his life, if you could call it that. She's a small child though.

Damrosch:

(Reading): "He wanted more than ever to meet her. She was an elegant child. And she didn't seem at all spoiled. What a delight if he could take her into his house and make her his ideal."

Dalby:

He kidnaps her as a child, brings her into his house and he raises her to be the perfect cultured woman.

Collis:

He decides, you know, this person, you know, is my soulmate and, you know I'm gonna marry her and make her mine at a very young age. I think she's ten. And it is a little bit, quite frankly, creepy. You know, I think that is very alien to modern readers. And it's difficult to overcome, but the fact is she also is in the novel supposed to be his true love and his soulmate.

GRAPHIC: HOW GENJI GETS AROUND

Dalby:

Murasaki Shikibu's audience was basically the women in the court. This is who she wrote for. She even wrote for the empress. But then you can see there's a wonderful scene in her diary with all these ladies sitting around making copies of her stories. The copies then spread to the countryside. There are stories of young girls just waiting to get a hold of the next installment of Genji. There's a famous work called the Sarashina Diary.

Miyagawa:

The author of this memoir just dreamed of reading the next episode to find out who Prince Genji is going to love next.

Keene:

There's no time when nobody was interested in it or they thought it was a second-rate book. It's always had a special place in Japanese hearts.

Dalby:

The Tale of Genji has an interesting history in that it was written in this courtly language that within several centuries very few people could read that anymore.

Keene:

And so a need for a modern translation was felt from the beginning of the 20th Century. And one was made.

Dalby:

An avant-garde Japanese woman poet named Yosano Akiko, did a translation of The Tale of Genji into modern Japanese, so that people could read it. And that was a sensation.

Keene:

The next major translation to modern Japanese, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, perhaps the greatest Japanese novelist of the 20th Century.

Caddeau:

While Japan was at war, his translation was censored because it depicted scenes associated with the tainting of the imperial line.

Shirane:

Genji showed that the imperial line was not the unbroken line that they claimed it was.

Keene:

After the war he made a new translation in which he incorporated all that had been left out. Then in the 1920's, Arthur Waley, who was then working in the British museum, taught himself Japanese, which is no mean feat. And from there, he became interested in The Tale of Genji.

Dalby:

The Waley translation really made a huge impact on the English language reading public. So that's when I think the world discovered Genji.

Damrosch:

Virginia Woolf would speak of going to bed with Waley, which she meant, reading his translation of The Tale of Genji.

GRAPHIC: ALL GOOD THINGS MUST END

Damrosch:

The crisis in Genji's affairs comes when his hostile stepmother discovers his affair with her own sister.

(Reads): "Genji feared discovery... But as usual, danger only spurred him to pursue his visits in deep secrecy. His Excellency of course knew nothing about this when one night, just before dawn, rain suddenly came pelting down and thunder roared, alarming his son's and the Empress Mother's staff. People were everywhere."

So Genji's trapped inside the curtain bed, with this young woman, Oborozukiyo. And then her father comes in to see how she's done in the storm.

(Reading): "He peered past the curtain and saw, sprawled shamelessly within it, a young man who only now stealthily covered his face and moved to hide. ... In a blind fury he strode off towards the main house."

Genji's goose is cooked.

Collis:

This is somebody who's part of the imperial household and he has no business having any sort of sexual relationship with and, you know, he does it anyway because he's Genji.

Dalby:

Genji's been caught, in flagrante delicto, and he can't, he can't deny it.

Shirane:

Kokiden who's his stepmother basically casts him out.

Collis:

And it's actually really funny because I think the actual distance he ends up being exiled is something like thirty miles. So it's really not that far but, you know in sort of Heian Japan it was when you weren't in the court, I mean that was it. The world was over.

GRAPHIC: PICTURING GENJI

Shirane:

This is a replica of The Tale of Genji scrolls, written we think about a century or so after The Tale of Genji. It's the earliest text we have. It's really the earliest and perhaps the best, illustration of The Tale of Genji.

Loong:

In art history when you depend on a say a very good knowledge of the Bible to understand Western paintings. In Japanese art, Genji was absolutely the most important book to read.

Dalby:

I think that you can say that The Tale of Genji really does epitomize something that truly is the heart of the Japanese aesthetic that permeates this society that you can see even today. And this particular work of literature is its bedrock.

Shirane:

It's prevalent in pop culture. Manga comic books, films, anime. In any pastry shop, you'll find Genji pastries.

Caddeau:

This is the first cinematic adaptation; 1952. The animated version came out in 1987.

Shirane:

Manga comic culture is a huge part of both teenage boys and girls, culture in Japan. This is a comic; means "Fleeting Dreams." No one under the age of 40 hasn't read this.

Miyake:

What I have in my hands is probably a small fraction of the Genji manga that's available. There's one that is considered soft porn of sorts. A lot of sweaty sex.

GRAPHIC: GENJI'S RETURN

Loong:

I would have thought when I read the book that after he came back from exile he would be a changed person, and he really wasn't. And he continued pretty much the same way.

Collis:

When Genji returns from exile he has matured and in some ways he is wiser. But at the same time he still is not exactly, I would say a reticent person and he does have a number of other affairs even though his true love, Murasaki is right there waiting for him. And it really hurts her. She's sort of so anguished and torn without him and she sees what he's doing to her that she kind of wastes away.

Keene:

One can't get away from certain things. When you're born, you know you're going to die. There's no way of avoiding that, and The Tale of Genji faces that squarely.

Dalby:

This is a scene in the tale where Genji's great love Murasaki is on her deathbed. She's just been visited by the empress, and then Genji comes to visit her.

(Reading): "Isn't this splendid? I imagine her majesty's visit has done wonders for you. How pleased he was, at what was in fact, no improvement at all. And how desolate he must soon be. Gazing at the two of them, each somehow more beautiful than the other. Genji wished he might have them 1000 years, just as they were. But of course time runs against these wishes. That is a great, sad truth."

Caddeau:

(Reading): "The shining Genji was dead and there was no one quite like him."

That is the opening line of chapter forty-two, which stuns readers because chapter forty-one ends with Genji alive. And the story has been very much about Genji this entire time.

Keene:

Genji cannot go on forever. And therefore, Prince Genji dies 2/3 of the way through the work.

Collis:

Suddenly it's like you're driving your car on the highway and, you know, a wheel falls off. You have no clue as a reader what direction the novel's going to take cause it's such a drastic event.

Damrosch:

And then the whole story starts all over again at a new and deeper level in the next generation.

Collis:

And it really is a "what's going to happen in this world" without Genji. That's where the book really becomes fascinating.

Damrosch:

With the next generation, the kids, the women, the lives get all the more complicated, all the more vivid, all the more remarkable.

GRAPHIC: READING GENJI

Keene:

I didn't think that I was worthy of studying something as difficult as Japanese. I did begin it however in 1941, and I had no particular motive except I wanted some way to associate myself with the world of The Tale of Genji.

Loong:

Genji was so important to me, the way it made me look at things, the way it made me behave, and even to the point where anyone I was seriously dating had to read Genji.

Dalby:

Genji is the book that I would take to a desert island.

Caddeau:

It clearly is an amazing vehicle for escape.

Smiley:

Yes, it's heavy and it's big and it's long. It has lots of pages but it pulls you through it, because it's fascinating.

GRAPHIC: THE TALE OF GENJI

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