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[1] My son was easily convinced: *there* were his "saracens." See Hans Debrunner, *Africans in Europe*: "saracens," "black saracens," "moors," "tawny moors," "blackamoors").

## MURASAKI SHIKIBU: MEDIEVAL JAPANESE FEMINIST

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Heian Japan (794-1185) represents the height of medieval Japanese culture. It is interesting that the elaborately fashioned love "biographies" that stand at the heart of medieval Japanese courtly literature parallel the great courtly romance tales of medieval Europe. For example, in both Japanese and European romances love relationships mirror the fealty and protection patterns of feudalism. Other Japanese topoi are also familiar to Western readers—the inherent nobility of the lovers, their idealized beauty, and the secret, often adulterous love which necessitates covert communications.[1]

I have found it particularly fruitful to compare two medieval texts, both authored by women, both about romantic love, and both often called "the first novel": Murasaki's *Genji Monogatari*[2] (first half of the eleventh century) and Marie de France's *Lais*[3] (second half of the twelfth century). *Genji Monogatari* (1090 pages in the English translation) relates the amorous career of the courtly ideal, Genji, the Shining Prince. The romance begins with his first love affair with his stepmother Lady Fujitsubo (whom the emperor has married because she resembles Genji's mother) and ends with the adultery of his young wife Onna San-no-miya. In between these two milestones are his relationships with two wives and a long series of ladies. Critics have commented that the various romantic interludes seem like separate episodes and amount to independent short stories within the main theme of the novel.[4] In much the same way, Marie's *Lais*, although twelve separate tales, form a unified, collective consideration of love that qualifies as a medieval "novel." No one, however, agrees on what Murasaki's or Marie's concept of love is.

In Japanese and European medieval cultures, the popularity of vernacular romance provided a venue for female expression. In the Heian period a monogatari was, among other things, Japanese prose fiction, as opposed to classical literary forms written in Chinese. Not the first author of tsukur monogatari, "fabricated tales," Murasaki is certainly the most famous. In the same way, Marie makes a point in her "Prologue" of proclaiming her use of the vernacular to present her Breton Lais.

Of special concern to Murasaki and Marie is the validation of women's writing. Interestingly, both are known to us only by pseudonym. "Murasaki" is in fact the name of Genji's child-love which tradition has attached to the author. Although we have the "Murasaki's" diary and accounts of her in court, her given name has remained a conjecture because high born women were not "named."[5] In the same way, "Marie de France" is a sixteenth century coinage by Claude Fauchet from the epilogue of the *Fables*.

Despite their own textual namelessness, both created romances of amazing self-reflexivity. Murasaki intrudes her distinctly female narrator into the romance in a number of ways. First, she repeatedly reacts to the characters and their deeds like a proper court lady observing the action. She empathizes with, but does not always imitate, their actions: "Such a difficult, constricted life as a woman was required to live...Like the mute prince who was always appearing in sad parables, a woman should be sensitive but silent" (699). Second, she inserts literary criticism. But this is criticism with a twist, for she presents male characters discussing female texts and the gendered responses of both male and female readers. The most famous example is the "Fireflies" chapter in which Genji, himself a great poet, critiques the romance and its effects on a female readership. Marie's "Chaitivel" offers an apt parallel, for in this *lai*, the male would-be-lover criticizes the female author and convinces her to change her tale from a female-centered text, "The Four Sorrows" to a male text, "The Unhappy One."[6]

Murasaki's *Genji* is but one of several female-authored texts available from Heian Japan which illustrate that Eastern and Western female authors, writing in a medieval courtly tradition, which elevates yet restricts the feminine, use similar strategies to validate their distinctly feminist approaches to literature.

1 See Miner, Earl, *Principles of Classical Japanese Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).

2 Shikibu, Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Edward G. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf: 1991) [Complete text]; Shikibu, Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. and Abridged Edward G. Seidensticker, (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990) [twelve Chapters from the early portions of the novel].

3 *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, (London: Penguin Books, 1987); *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Durham, N. C.: Labyrinth Press, 1978).

4 For critical readings of *Genji*, see Cranston, Edwin, "Murasaki's Art of Fiction," *Japan Quarterly* 18 (1971): 207-213; Eoyang, Eugene, "The World of Genji: Perspectives on the Genji Monogatari," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 31 (1982): 44-75; Field, Norma, *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987); Inge, M. Thomas, "Lady Murasaki and the Craft of Fiction," *South Atlantic Review* 55 (1990): 8-14; Shirane, Haruo, *The Bridge of Dreams. A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987).

5 See Bowring, Richard, *Murasaki Shikibu, Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs: A Translation and Study* (Princeton: Princeton, UP, 1982).

6 Faust, Diane M., "Women Narrators in the Lais of Marie de France," *Stanford French and Italian Studies* 58 (1985): 17-27; Freeman, Michelle A., "Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: The Implications for a Feminine Translation," *PMLA* 99 (1984): 860-83; Nichols, Stephen G., "Working Late: Marie de France and the Value of Poetry," 7-16 in Guggenheim, Michel, ed., *Women in French Literature* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1988).