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### **Seduction or Rape? Sexual Morality in *Genji Monogatari***

*Genji Monogatari* (The Tales of Genji), perhaps Japan's first masterpiece of classic literature, revolves around the irresistible titular character Hikaru Genji and his life and romances within the Japanese imperial court. It was written in the early 1000s by a woman known as Murasaki Shikibu (name of a primary female character, as her true name is unknown) during the Heian period of Japan—an era of prolific cultural development and freedoms for women among the noble class. Though both written by a woman and during a period where noblewomen were granted many liberties, *Genji Monogatari* still reinforces patriarchal expectations of womanhood and sexuality from a modern standpoint. With the lens of a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, Genji's irresistibility comes into question. Is Genji truly so appealing, or are women of Heian era Japan just conditioned to be passengers in their own sexual lives? According to translator Royall Tyler, perhaps these sexual encounters can be deemed as rape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but are ultimately morally just within the canon of *Genji Monogatari* because of the social dynamics present in Heian era Japan.

However, the patriarchal and male-centered dynamics of male-female sexual encounters that author Murasaki details in *Genji Monogatari* clearly indicate that many of Genji's sexual experiences should be considered rape and moreover, are not justified by the time period the text was written. While it is true that what is considered rape by the general public changes between

time and geographic location, it must be noted that those put in situations of sexual violence or coercion do not suddenly start or stop their trauma because of how society views rape. A person who is raped will feel the mental consequences of rape regardless of how other people see it; thus, the question should not be “does Genji’s behavior align with what a certain society considers rape?”, but rather “does Genji manipulate women into sex through enforcing patriarchal societal expectations?” or “does Genji leave any women who he has sex with with trauma?”. The answers to these questions are much better equipped to answer the broader question of morality in the universe of *Genji Monogatari*.

For one, Genji utilizes both abusive and grooming tactics to maintain relationships with women. In the chapter titled “Aoi”, the lady at Rokujou spends a great deal of time expressing her distraught that she had been neglected by Genji. She writes to Genji, “*Intimate with love’s path where dew has soaked my sleeves / I followed too far... now my sad fate is to end / Like a peasant planting fields, my robes soaked in mud*” (Murasaki 191). Instead of providing closure to a woman hurt by his actions, he uses guilt to demand more love of her. He replies, “What do you mean that only your sleeves are damp? Your feelings for me must not be very deep” (Murasaki 192). Although the lady at Rokujou has made it clear that she has feelings for Genji, he completely disregards her thoughts, attempting to evoke guilt from an already suffering woman. This dialogue excellently demonstrates Genji’s abusive habits used against the women he sleeps with. He is not confirming love for one another, he is confirming her loyalty to him—her subservience.

Genji’s predatory behavior is further reinforced by his utilization of manhood and status over his sexual partners, particularly that of Murasaki. Genji’s maleness is used to his advantage when addressing the gap in age between Murasaki and himself. Age gaps are certainly

understood by the noble community in the Heian era as author Murasaki clearly details. Women, on several occasions, are written as embarrassed or humiliated by Genji because of the age gap between them. The lady at Rokujou is described to be, “embarrassed that at the age of twenty-nine she was having an affair with a man seven years younger” (Murasaki 182). Along with the Assistant Handmaid, Naishi no suke, who attempted to flirt with Genji, whom was “displeased” with her behavior, as she was older than he. Though, this stigma is notably absent when Genji pursues a young child. Author Murasaki uses language that very much implies Genji’s understanding that Murasaki is simply that—a young child. Genji calls Murasaki’s companions “little ladies” on several occasions and even remarks to himself about their “childish figures”. This hypocrisy is a tool meant to justify men’s predation on young girls and put women in the passenger’s seat to their own sexual lives, something which Genji uses to his advantage. Alongside his maleness, Genji manipulates Murasaki through status and vulnerability. Author Murasaki writes, “...[Genji] felt confident about their relationship. [Murasaki] was, after all, a motherless child he had taken into his residence, and he was not all that worried that she might grow fretful or resentful the longer he stayed away from her” (Murasaki 205). Here, Genji explicitly acknowledges that both his status as a guardian and Murasaki’s own emotional vulnerability from lacking a mother provides him an advantage to establishing a sexual bond.

With these considerations, it is clear that Genji is an explicitly abusive character who utilizes his status and the features of a patriarchal society to manipulate women and young girls into sexual relationships. There are certainly cases in classic literature where the morality of sexual relationships is ambiguous, however in the case of Hikaru Genji in *Genji Monogatari*, it is simply not the case.

## Works cited

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