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## A World of Indirectness

### Notes Toward a Study of Characterization in ‘The Tale of Genji’

*Abstract.* Characters in the early eleventh-century “Tale of Genji” are often represented indirectly, through others’ thoughts, speculations, and sensory impressions. Direct visual descriptions of a character’s physical appearance are relatively rare, but major plot developments result from scenes of *kaimami* (‘peeking through the crack’) when male characters catch a secret glimpse of women. Sensory impressions like sound, smell, and touch are sometimes as important as visual impressions in the courtly society of the Heian period when it was the custom for upper-class women to avoid showing themselves to men. This paper examines the importance of indirectness in the narrative’s representation of characters.

#### 1. *Kewai* 気配

めでたしと思ほししみにける御容貌、いかやうなるをかしさにかとゆかしう  
思ひきこえたまへど、さらにえ見たてまつりたまはぬをねたう思ほす。  
(‘Genji monogatari,’ SNKBZ 21: 375)

He [Genji] longed to know what feature of her beauty had so smitten him [Retired Emperor Suzaku], and he chafed that he could not see her for himself. (‘The Tale of Genji,’ Chapter 17, ‘The Picture Contest’ [‘Eawase’ 総合], trans. Tyler, p. 323)<sup>1</sup>

The woman in question is known to readers of ‘Genji monogatari’ 源氏物語 variously as ‘the former Ise Priestess’ (*zen Saikū* 前齋宮), ‘the Umetsubo Consort’ (Umetsubo no Nyōgo 梅壺女御) or by the sobriquet Aki-

konomu 秋好 ('she who loves the autumn'), the term adopted here. When she left the capital aged fourteen to serve as Ise Priestess (*Saikū* 斎宮), she was given the traditional parting gift of a comb by the emperor at the time, Suzaku 朱雀. As he placed a comb in her hair, he had a clear view of her face. His heart "stirred" by her uncanny beauty, he was moved to tears (Chapter 10, 'Sakaki' 賢木, 'The Green Branch'; trans. Tyler, p. 197 [quoted below]). Suzaku's half-brother Genji 源氏 takes parental responsibility for her when her service in Ise 伊勢 ends and she returns to the capital, some eight years later. In the meantime, Suzaku has become the Retired Emperor. Although Genji guesses his half-brother's feelings for Akikonomu, he decides to send her to serve the new Emperor, Reizei 冷泉. Suzaku is deeply disappointed. In the eight years that have passed, he has never forgotten the single glimpse he had of her face.

The passage quoted above comes in the scene when Genji pays a visit to Suzaku to confirm his feelings for Akikonomu. It is important to understand that although Genji is acting as Akikonomu's parental guardian, he has never actually seen her himself. His assumption that she is very beautiful is based solely on the effect she had on Suzaku when he caught a glimpse of her years earlier. The passage continues by describing the care taken by Akikonomu not to show herself to her foster-father Genji:

いと重りかにて、ゆめにもいはけたる御ふるまひなどのあらばこそ、おのづからほの見えたまふついででもあらめ、心にくき御けはひのみ深さまされば、見たてまつりたまふまに、いとあらまほしと思ひきこえたまへり。  
(SNKBZ 21: 375; emphasis added)

She was too profoundly deliberate in manner to allow any youthful liberty into her deportment, or he would have glimpsed her by now, and what hints he caught of her appearance [*ōn-kewai*] were so unfailingly encouraging that he imagined her to be flawless. (Chapter 17, 'The Picture Contest,' trans. Tyler, p. 323)

This description of Akikonomu's character stresses her reserve and nobility. It might have been possible to catch a glimpse of her if her behavior had been 'childish' (*iwaketaru ōn-furumai*, translated by Royall Tyler as

“youthful liberty”). Instead, she had been very careful in Genji’s presence, which only increased the attraction he felt for her. Genji too imagines her to be “flawless.”

In the Heian 平安 period (794–1185), it was the custom for upper-class women not to show themselves to men. This was not just a matter of simply hiding their faces behind a fan. Men and women were separated by blinds (*misu* 御簾) and two kinds of moveable partitions, standing curtains (*kichō* 几帳) and panelled screens (*byōbu* 屏風).<sup>2</sup> Readers of ‘Genji monogatari’ must learn these customs, which are extremely important to keep in mind when reading the tale. Suzaku sees Akikonomu’s face, but this was an exceptional circumstance. It is Suzaku’s position as Emperor which gives him the rare opportunity of a glimpse during the ‘ceremony of the comb of parting’ (*wakare no kushi no gi* 別れの櫛の儀).

Chapter ten describes how Akikonomu completes a long period of purification before she departs for the shrine in Ise where she would serve as Ise Priestess until the next change of reign. It was a custom at court for the reigning emperor to place a ‘comb of parting’ in the hair of the imperial princess who was chosen as Ise Priestess. The emperor could not do this without seeing her face. This is how the scene is described:

斎宮は十四にぞなりたまひける。いとうつくしうおはするさまを、うるはしうしたてたてまつりたまへるぞ、いとゆゆしきまで見えたまふを、帝御心動きて、別れの櫛奉りたまふほど、いとあはれにてしほたれさせたまひぬ。  
(SNKBZ 21: 93)

The High Priestess was fourteen. She was very pretty already, and her mother’s careful grooming had given her a beauty so troubling that His Majesty’s heart was stirred. He shed tears of keen emotion when he set the comb of parting in her hair. (Chapter 10, ‘The Green Branch,’ trans. Tyler, p. 197)

Young virgin women of the imperial family were appointed to the post of chief priestess of the Ise Shrine as well as to the post of High Priestess of the Kamo Shrine (*Kamo Saiin* 賀茂斎院) (Tokoro 2017). The Ise Priestess was sent to serve the Goddess Amaterasu (Amaterasu Ōkami 天照大神) as a substitute for the emperor.

Akikonomu's mother is none other than Genji's former lover Lady Rokujō, known to Japanese readers of 'Genji monogatari' as Rokujō no Miyasundokoro 六条御息所. The term *Miyasundokoro*, which could be literally translated as "Honorable Resting Place," is a term for a consort of an emperor or prince (Cranston 2006, p. 1076). Tyler refers to her as the 'Rokujō Haven' throughout his translation. Rokujō had been married to a prince who was expected to ascend the throne but died before becoming emperor. This happened before the main events narrated in the tale. When she appears in chapter four, 'Yūgao' 夕顔 ("The Twilight Beauty"), Rokujō is already a widow, aged twenty-four, and the mother of a daughter. It is striking that none of the extant manuscripts of the tale contains an account of how Genji first became intimate with her.

From chapter four, 'Yūgao,' to chapter ten, 'Sakaki,' Rokujō is depicted as very jealous, suffering from mental anguish. Genji's wife Aoi (Aoi no Ue 葵上) is killed by her *iki-ryō* 生き霊 ('living spirit'). Much later in the tale, in chapter forty, 'Minori' 御法 ("The Law"), years after Rokujō has died, Genji's wife Murasaki (Murasaki no Ue 紫上) is possessed and killed by the spirit of the deceased Rokujō, a *shiryō* 死霊 ('spirit of the dead').

A very different, gentler side of Rokujō appears in her meetings with Genji after their physical relations have ended, notably in their long exchanges in chapters ten ('Sakaki') and fourteen ('Miotsukushi' 瀟標, "The Pilgrimage to Sumiyoshi"). The latter describes how Genji visits her for one last time just before her death. She begs him to take care of her daughter, warning him not "to look on her with a lover's eye" (*omōshi hito mekasamu* 思ほし人めかさむ; trans. Tyler, p. 293; SNKBZ 21: 311). He agrees to her dying wish by assuming a parental role for her daughter. He later plays an active role in enabling Akikonomu's marriage.

Chapter seventeen, 'The Picture Contest,' describes a competition to decide the winner among the elegant illustrated tales presented to the court. On the surface this is a refined pastime, but underneath it involves a struggle between court ladies for position in Emperor Reizei's rear court

(*kōkyū* 後宮). This episode reflects the heightened political tensions of court life. Akikonomu's side triumphs. This is a political victory for Genji, for by helping her win, he secures the Emperor's love for his adopted daughter. She is later promoted from imperial consort (*nyōgo* 女御) to empress (*chūgū* 中宮).

Another famous competition involving Akikonomu is a poetic competition of ladies on the topic of whether spring and autumn is superior (later referred to as *shunjū yūretsu ronsō* 春秋優劣論争). Lady Murasaki is one of those arguing for the superiority of spring, while Akikonomu argues in favor of autumn. Her sobriquet Akikonomu ('she who loves the autumn') derives from this episode in chapter nineteen, 'Usugumo' 薄雲 ('Wisps of Cloud').

Later, when Emperor Reizei steps down from the throne, Akikonomu asks Genji repeatedly to be allowed to take religious orders so as to be able to devote herself to prayers for her mother's salvation (*bodai* 菩提). When her foster-father Genji hears her wish to take the tonsure, he takes strong measures to prevent this from happening. This occurs in chapter thirty-eight, 'Suzumushi' 鈴虫 ('The Bell Cricket'), a short chapter that Arthur Waley omitted entirely from his translation. The moment when Akikonomu expresses her wish is described as follows: "Her Majesty replied with all her customary youth and composure" (*ito wakō ōdoka naru ōn-kewai nite* いと若うおほどかなる御けはひにて; trans. Tyler, p. 714; SNKBZ 23: 387). The key word in the original is *kewai* けはひ meaning the 'appearance/sense/air' conveyed by something or someone. Dictionaries define it first as the appearance suggested by a 'sound or odor,' then as a 'vague, general impression' or atmosphere 'conveyed to the senses' ('Nihon kokugo daijiten,' vol. 7, p. 262). It thus implies getting an unclear understanding through sensory impressions. Akikonomu tells Genji directly of her desire to take the tonsure, but their conversation is conducted not face to face, but through either a standing curtain (*kichō*) or blinds

(*misu*) that prevent Genji from seeing her. Even at relatively late stage of the narrative, Genji is not able to see her directly.

As this example shows, the world described in the tale is one in which high-ranking men are usually unable to look directly at ladies' faces. Not surprisingly what this means is that the very act of 'seeing' a woman can cause major plot developments, as we will discuss next.

## 2. Plot Devices

### 2.1 Utsusemi

The moment when a female character is seen by a male character can be a key turning point in the plot of a Heian tale. Just as men were not supposed to look directly at the faces of upper-class women, the same was true to a certain extent of women of the middle rank. As a consequence, the narrative provides many different opportunities for its protagonist to catch sight of women. These scenes are generally referred to as *kaimami* 垣間見, "peering through a crack" (Tyler 2002, paragraph 7). Let us examine one of the most famous examples, a scene from chapter three, 'Utsusemi' 空蟬 ('The Cicada Shell').

Genji's interest in women of the middle rank had been aroused by hearing the 'rainy night' tales of three male companions in chapter two, 'Hahakigi' 帚木 ('The Broom Tree'). The same chapter ended with an account of how a directional taboo (*katatagae* 方違へ) results in his spending the night in a house where he has an encounter with a married woman, who is known to readers as Utsusemi 空蟬 (Childs, 1999, pp. 1065–1067). Returning to the house some days later in hope of a second encounter, Genji secretly watches Utsusemi play a game of go 碁 with her stepdaughter, a young woman known by the sobriquet of Nokiba-no-ogi 軒端萩 ("reed at the eaves"; trans. Tyler, p. 48, note 3). The following passage describes how Genji manages to peek inside the room (the boy mentioned is Utsusemi's younger brother, Kogimi 小君):

[...] やをら歩み出でて簾のはさまに入りたまひぬ。この入りつる格子はまだ鎖さねば、隙見ゆるに寄りて西ざまに見通したまへば、この際に立てたる屏風端の方おし畳まれたるに、紛るべき几帳なども、暑ければにや、うちかけて、いとよく見入れらる。(SNKBZ 20: 119)

He slipped in between the blinds. They had not yet secured the shutter through which the boy had entered, and a gap remained. Genji went to it and peered in toward the west. The nearer end of a screen was folded, and the heat probably explained why a curtain that should have blocked his view had been draped over its stand, so that he could see quite well. (Chapter 3, 'The Cicada Shell,' trans. Tyler, p. 48)

Because it is not easy to understand exactly how Genji is able to look inside the room, there have been many attempts to visualize where the characters are located. The most convincing reconstruction is by Hirayama (2001). More general studies on the concept of space (*kūkan* 空間) and Heian villa architecture (*shinden-zukuri* 寝殿造) in 'Genji monogatari' can be found in Ike 1989, Yasuhara 2000, Iwahara 2008, Kim 2008, and Ōta 2010.

While a few aspects of Heian-period housing are preserved in traditional Japanese-style buildings today, there are also some fundamental differences, which have been discussed extensively in books about architecture. An inner chamber (*moya* 母屋) like this would be separated with blinds (*misu*) from the aisle (*hisashi* 廂). Pairs of upper and lower lattice shutters (*kōshi* 格子)<sup>3</sup> divided the aisle and the veranda (*sunoko* 簀子). Blinds were hung inside the shutters. Two movable items of furniture might also obstruct the view of anyone looking inside: screens consisting of hinged panels (*byōbu*) and curtains mounted on a stand (*kichō*), as mentioned earlier.<sup>4</sup> To visualize this scene, it may be helpful to refer to a pictorial representation. All of the main elements apart from a screen are depicted in an illustration to the scene quoted above in the seventeenth-century manuscript of 'Genji kokagami' 源氏小鏡 ('A Small Mirror of Genji') that is held by the Bavarian State Library (Bayerische Staatsbiblio-

thek) in Munich. Details differ, as the structure of Japanese houses had changed considerably in the intervening centuries.



'Genji kokagami,' vol. 1, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.jap. 14(1, fol. 17'

These obstacles should have made it difficult to catch a glimpse of a woman in the chamber, let alone to have a clear view of her face. However, this episode is set in summer. The passage above contains a careful description of how the curtain has been ‘draped over its stand’ so as to allow the cooler night air to circulate (a detail that is missing in the illustration). An oil lamp has been lit to illuminate the inner chamber. Genji is able to see into the chamber from his hiding place in the dark outside.

As a result, all of the necessary conditions are met for Genji to observe closely the two figures of the women playing go. They are described through Genji’s eyes in a way that contrasts their two personalities: the woman whom Genji has come to see is reserved in her mannerisms, while the other, younger woman seems more open, more relaxed. Here is Tyler’s translation of the two key passages of description. Note how the physical description is also a form of character description. Genji “could see quite well” (*ito yoku mi-ireraru*).

母屋の中柱に側める人やわが心かくるとまづ目とどめたまへば、濃き綾の単襲なめり、何にかあらむ上に着て、頭つき細やかに小さき人のものげなき姿ぞしたる、顔などは、さし向かひたらむ人などにもわざと見ゆまじうもてなしたり。手つき瘦せ瘦せにて、いたうひき隠しためり。(SNKBZ 20: 120)

His first thought was that the one by the central pillar of the chamber, facing away from him, must be she. She seemed to have on two layered, silk twill shifts of a deep red-violet, with some sort of garment over them. Her slender head and slight build left no marked impression, and she was keeping her partner from getting any view of her face. She was also doing her best to conceal her strikingly slim hands. (Chapter 3, ‘The Cicada Shell,’ trans. Tyler, p. 48)

Genji observes Utsusemi first. He is seeing her properly for the first time, as their earlier tryst was in darkness. She is seated with her back toward him, so he can see her only partly from the side. He notes what she is wearing. He notes that she is slightly built, but what strikes him most is the effort she makes to hide her face from her stepdaughter Nokiba-no-

ogi. She is even trying to hide her thin hands from the young woman, who is described in contrasting fashion:

いま一人は東向きにて、残るところなく見ゆ。白き羅の単襲、二藍の小桂だつものないがしろに着なして、紅の腰ひき結へる際まで胸あらはにばうぞくなるもてなしなり。いと白うをかしげにつぶつぶと肥えてそぞろかなる人の、頭つき額つきものあざやかに、まみ、口つきいと愛敬づき、はなやかなる容貌なり。髪はいとふさやかにて、長くはあらねど、下り端、肩のほどきよげに、すべていとねぢけたるところなく、をかしげなる人と見えたり。  
(SNKBZ 20: 120)

Her opponent was facing east, toward Genji, and he could see all of her [*nokoru tokoro naku miyu*]. She had on a pair of sheer white shifts and what seemed to be a violet outer gown, so casually worn that her front was bare all the way down to her scarlet trouser cord—a casual getup to say the least. Tall, very fair-skinned, and nicely rounded, striking in head and forehead and with a delicious mouth and eyes, she made an arresting sight. Her fine, thick hair was not long, but it flowed in handsome sidelocks to her shoulders, and there was in fact nothing about her to wish otherwise. She was a pleasure to look at [*okashige naru hito to mietari*]. No wonder her father was so proud of her, although it occurred to Genji that her manner could do with a little restraint. (Chapter 3, ‘The Cicada Shell,’ trans. Tyler, p. 48)

Genji has a good view of Nokiba-no-ogi, who is facing in his direction. The description suggests that she is more relaxed and extrovert in character. Believing no men to be in the house on this hot summer evening, she is wearing her gown in a very casual fashion (*naigashiro ni kinashite*), leaving it open down to the waist. Genji finds her physically attractive, but he is also shown to be critical of her uninhibited manner, comparing her lack of restraint unfavorably with the more reserved Utsusemi. After the passage quoted above, Genji overhears the younger women speak. Again, he has a negative impression of her for speaking too fast and too much. Later in the same night, Utsusemi manages to escape as Genji enters the chamber, leaving Nokiba-no-ogi behind. Genji lies down next to the sleeping girl. He soon realizes his mistake, but instead of making his excuses and withdrawing, he spends the night with her. Although this turn of events is surprising, it is foreshadowed by the earlier *kaimami*, ‘peeking’ scene.

## 2.2 The Old Woman

Before leaving the ‘Utsusemi’ chapter, we should look at a minor character who appears in a single scene, one who represents a class of women below the ‘middle class’ (*naka no shina* 中の品) represented by Utsusemi. This character is an old woman who bumps into Genji as he is being smuggled out of the house by Kogimi. The scene is a comic interlude, but with an element of suspense, for Genji must not be seen by anyone.

As he and the young boy are quietly trying to leave the house, they are noticed by this old lady, apparently on her way to the privy (*kawaya* 廁). Genji and Kogimi are startled when she stops and speaks to them. It is a surprise to readers, too. The passage reads as follow:

戸をやをら押し開くるに、老いたる御達の声にて、「あれは誰そ」とおどろおどろしく問ふ。[...]「夜中に、こはなぞと歩かせたまふ」とさかしがりて、外さまへ来。いと憎くて、「あらず、ここともへ出づるぞ」とて、君を押し出でてたまつるに、[...]「またおはするは誰そ」と問ふ。「民部のおもとなめり。けしうはあらぬおもとの丈だちかな」と言ふ。丈高き人の常に笑はるるを言ふなりけり。[...]「いま、ただ今立ち並びたまひなむ」と言ふ言ふ、我もこの戸より出でて来。[...]「おもとは、今宵は上にやさぶらひたまひつる。一昨日より腹を病みて、いとわりなければ下にはべりつるを、人少ななりとて召ししかば、昨夜参上りしかど、なほえ堪ふまじくなむ」と憂ふ。答へも聞かで、「あな腹々。いま聞こえん」とて過ぎぬるに、かろうじて出でたまふ。(SNKBZ 20: 127-128)

“Who’s that?” an old woman’s voice called as he softly opened the door.

[...]

“Where are you off to in the middle of the night?” She started for the door.

He hated her. “No, no, I’m just going out a little!” He thrust Genji before him.

[...]

“Who’s that with you?” the old woman said. “Ah, it must be Mimbu. You just go up and up, Mimbu, don’t you!” The woman she thought he had with him was always being teased about her height. “And in no time you’ll be just as tall as she is!” she muttered, emerging through the door.

[...]

“Were you waiting on her ladyship yesterday evening?” [...] “I’ve been down in my room with a bad tummyache that started the day before yester-

day, but she called me anyway because she wanted more of us with her, so last night I went after all, and it was too much for me.” Without pausing for an answer, she groaned, “Oh, it hurts, it hurts! I’ll talk to you later!” And off she went. (Chapter 3, ‘The Cicada Shell,’ trans. Tyler, p. 51)

Seeing a tall person with Kogimi, the old woman asks who it is, but then answers her own question, jumping to the conclusion that it is another female servant called Mambu. She tells Kogimi that he will soon be as tall as Mambu, then rushes off, complaining once more of her stomach problems. Genji is fortunate to escape without detection, but the incident is a reminder of the danger of being caught when ‘secretly walking abroad’ at night (*shinobi aruki* 忍び歩き). One of the forces that drives forward the plot of ‘Genji monogatari’ is *kaimami*, but here ‘seeing’ does not involve a stolen glance. Instead, the fact that Genji is seen by the old woman is a reversal of the motif. She looks right at Genji and the boy, causing them a moment of panic. Readers’ suspense ends in comic relief when the woman mistakes Genji for a tall female servant. This incident reminds us that ‘seeing’ can function in many different ways to move forward the plot.

### 2.3 The Safflower Princess (Suetsumuhana) and Others

The rules about of women not being seen by men might seem to hinder narrative development, but in fact, the opposite is true. There are many examples in ‘Genji monogatari’ of plots constructed around the problems faced by men who become involved with women before they are able to see them properly. This is not unheard of in other literary tradition. In medieval European literature, one of the conventions of courtly love is the idea of a man becoming enamoured of a lady he has never seen, as in the case of the Provençal poet Jaufre who falls in love with the countess of Tripoli without ever having seen her (Topsfield 1975, p. 42). In ‘Genji monogatari’ this motif is developed in many different ways, including for comic relief. In chapter six, ‘Suetsumuhana’ 末摘花 (‘The Safflower’), both Genji and his friend Tō-no-Chūjō 頭中将 go to great lengths to woo a

princess whom neither has seen. Only after he makes love with her does Genji happen to see her face in the reflected light of the snow outside.

The sudden sight of a woman is also a plot device in chapter twenty-five, ‘Hotaru’ 螢 (‘The Fireflies’), when Genji releases fireflies in a dark room to reveal a woman’s face to a suitor. In chapter thirty-four, ‘Wakana jō’ 若菜上 (‘Spring Shoots I’), a series of tragic events is triggered when a frightened cat runs out from the chamber of the Third Princess (Onna Sannomiya 女三宮), Genji’s principal wife at the time. The cat’s leash catches on the blinds and raises them, exposing the lady to the gaze of a young nobleman outside, Kashiwagi 柏木, who becomes obsessed with her from this one glimpse.

Space here does not permit detailed analysis of these episodes of visual exposure. Instead, we will look at a particular variation of the theme: when a man’s inability to see a woman leads him to learn more about her through his sense of touch. While this stimulates the imagination of modern readers, it can also be disturbing to our modern sensibilities. An example comes in the fifth chapter, ‘Wakamurasaki’ 若紫 (‘The Young Murasaki’).

## 2.4 ‘Wakamurasaki’ (Chapter 5, ‘The Young Murasaki’)

At this point in the narrative, the young Murasaki is around ten years of age by the traditional system of counting age, or around nine years old by a modern count.<sup>5</sup> Genji sees her for the first time in a classic example of *kaimami*, peering through a gap in the fence of a house where she is staying with her grandmother. However, he is not able to see her face to face for some time. Even though she is still a young girl, it is not proper for her to show herself freely in front of a man.

After the death of her grandmother, Genji pays a visit to the house in the city where she is living. Hearing that a person wearing a formal silk robe (*nōshi* 直衣) has arrived, Murasaki rushes in the room, calling to her nurse: “Shōnagon! Where is the gentleman in the dress cloak? Is father

here?” (trans. Tyler, p. 101). She is taken aback to discover that the man is Genji, and not as she expects, her father, Hyōbukyō no Miya 兵部卿宮 (‘His Highness of War’). Yet even in this situation, they are only able to hear, not see each other. The narration reflects Genji’s perceptions, which are aural, not visual: “Her voice as she approached was very sweet” (*yoriowashitaru ōkoe, ito rōtashi* 寄りおはしたる御声、いとらうたし; trans. Tyler, p. 101; SNKBZ 20: 242). It would seem that a standing curtain separates Genji from the girl. He speaks to her through the curtain, gently encouraging her to approach. Recognizing Genji from a previous visit—by sound rather than sight—she realizes her mistake and demands to be taken back to the inner room to sleep.

[...] 恥づかしかりし人とさすがに聞きなして、あしう言ひてけりと思して、乳母にさし寄りて、「いざかし、ねぶたきに」とのたまへば、[...] (SNKBZ 20: 242–243)

She recognized the voice of the gentleman who had overawed her, and she regretted having spoken. Instead she went straight to her nurse. “Come,” she said, “I am sleepy!” (Chapter 5, ‘The Young Murasaki,’ trans. Tyler, p. 102).

Genji tries hard to win her around, telling her,

「いまさらに、など忍びたまふらむ。この膝の上に大殿籠れよ。いますこし寄りたまへ」 (SNKBZ 20: 243)

“Why are you still hiding from me? Sleep on my lap, then! Do come a little closer!” (Chapter 5, ‘The Young Murasaki,’ trans. Tyler, p. 102)

The nurse encourages her, pushing her forward. The standing curtain still separates Genji from the girl, but he is very close to her now. He puts his hand stealthily under the curtain and touches her hair:

[...] 何心もなくゐるたまへるに、手をさし入れて探りたまへれば、なよよかなる御衣に、髪はつやつやとかかりて、末のふさやかに探りつけられたるほど、いとうつくしう思ひやらる。 (SNKBZ 20: 243)

The little girl sat down innocently, and he reached under the blind to touch her. He felt a delicious abundance when his hand came to the end of her tresses, which spilled richly [*tsuyatsuya to*] over her soft clothing, and he

imagined the beauty of her hair [*ito utsukushū omoiwararu*]. (Chapter 5, 'The Young Murasaki,' trans. Tyler, p. 102)

One of the main criteria for women's charms in this period was the beauty of their hair. Genji cannot see Murasaki's hair, but he can feel it and thus mentally 'see' what it is like. His next action is startling:

手をとらへたまへれば、うたて、例ならぬ人のかく近づきたまへるは恐ろしうて、「寝なむといふものを」とて強ひて引き入りたまふにつきてすべり入りて、[...] (SNKBZ 20: 243)

Next he took her hand, at which she bridled to have a stranger so close [*utate, rei naranu hito no, kaku chikazuki-tamaeru wa, osoroshūte*] and drew back [*shiite hiki-iri-tamau*], complaining to Shōnagon, "But I want to go to sleep!"

He slipped straight in after her [*suberi-irite*]. (Chapter 5, 'The Young Murasaki,' trans. Tyler, p. 102)

He continues to hold her by the hand as he enters the chamber. It is only at this point that he meets her face-to-face for the first time. Murasaki is still a child, too young to be the object of Genji's sexual attention. The scene is described in a way that suggests an intimate encounter, without actually being one.

As readers of the 'Tale' are already aware, Murasaki is niece to Fujitsubo 藤壺, Genji's stepmother and the object of his secret and forbidden love. The reason Genji is drawn so strongly to Murasaki is because of her striking resemblance to Fujitsubo. As a child, Genji was permitted behind the blinds of the women's quarters of the palace, where he saw Fujitsubo for the first time. However, from the time he became an adult, Genji was seldom able to meet her or see her. It is only after the account of his discovery of Murasaki that readers witness an illicit encounter between Genji and Fujitsubo, not their first, but the first to be described in the tale. The chapter thus has two important plot developments: the discovery of the young Murasaki and the secret encounter with Fujitsubo, one that results in her conceiving Genji's child. As far as readers are told in the tale, Genji and Fujitsubo do not meet many times in all, even including encounters

that are only hinted at. It is likely that the encounter described in the tenth chapter ('Sakaki'), which takes place five to seven years after the events related in 'Wakamurasaki,' is the last time they secretly meet. The account is unusually dramatic. Let us look at it in detail.

## 2.5 'Sakaki' (Chapter 10, 'The Green Branch')

Genji visits Fujitsubo without prior notice and forces himself on her. His passionate pleas fail to move her, and she refuses to speak to him. In great mental anguish, Fujitsubo suffers physical collapse. When she is overcome by sudden chest pains, her ladies rush to her side. Genji finds himself unable to leave when he should, without being detected. The ladies force him into a smaller room, a 'retreat' (*nurigome* 塗籠), where he hides all night, unbeknownst to Fujitsubo. In the morning she feels slightly better and enters the 'day sitting room' (*hiru no omashi* 昼の御座). She is left with only a few gentlewomen in attendance when the other women looking after her leave. Quietly opening the door of the retreat, Genji creeps forward to the gap between two screens. To his astonishment and delight, he can see Fujitsubo by day: "The joy of so rare a sight started tears from his eyes" (*mezurashiku ureshiki ni mo, namida ochite mi-tatematsuritamau* めづらしくうれしきにも、涙落ちて見たてまつりたまふ; trans. Tyler, p. 203; SNKBZ 21: 109).

After a miserable night spent in the cramped room, Genji weeps with happiness at an unaccustomed sight: the unimpeded view in daylight of the woman he loves. 'Tama no ogushi' 玉の小櫛 ('The Jeweled Comb,' 1799), an Edo-period commentary by the scholar Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801), explains why Genji finds the sight of Fujitsubo so special (*mezurashiki* めづらしき): he would not have seen her face on the night before when they made love ('Genji monogatari tama no ogushi,' p. 406). Just as modern readers need to be aware of Heian customs regarding prohibitions on ladies being seen, it seems from Norinaga's comment that Edo readers also needed to be reminded that courtly love trysts

in the Heian period occurred at night, with the lovers unable to see each other clearly.

Her “inexpressible beauty” (*imijū rōtage nari* いみじうらうたげなり; trans. Tyler, p. 203; SNKBZ 21: 109) is also focalized through Genji. Many years ago, he had been struck on first seeing the young Murasaki by her resemblance to Fujitsubo. Now the opposite occurs, he is surprised by how much Fujitsubo resembles his wife Murasaki, whose face he now knows well.

There is some uncertainty about how to visualize what happens next. Fujitsubo seems to be sitting behind a hanging curtain (*michō* 御帳). In his impatience to embrace her, he is caught up in the curtain, taking hold of the hem of her robe. When he asks her to look at him, she refuses, and tries to escape. She sheds the robe she is wearing, but Genji has taken hold of her long hair:

御衣をすべしおきてみざり退きたまふに、心にもあらず、御髪の取り添へられたりければ、いと心憂く、宿世のほど思し知られていみじと思したり。  
(SNKBZ 21: 110–111)

She slipped off her dress robe to escape, only to discover with horror that he had accidentally caught her hair as well, and with a sinking heart she knew the force of her fate. (Chapter 10, ‘The Green Branch,’ trans. Tyler, pp. 203–204)

### 3. Conclusion

The physical description of female figures in ‘Genji monogatari’ is rare, but when it does occur, it is of significance, either as a form of characterization, as we saw in the case of Utsusemi and Nokiba-no-ogi, or as a significant event in the plot, triggering further developments, as we saw with Murasaki and Fujitsubo. In the medieval Western tradition, the ‘head to toe’ physical depiction of characters (*efficio*) was a technique inherited from classical rhetoric, and could be enjoyed for its own sake, without necessarily being essential to the story. We see this in the Prologue to Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales,’ for example, where the pilgrims, male and

female, are described at considerable length, with details not only about their dress and physical appearance, but also about their individual speech patterns and mannerisms. Passages like the scene of the go game show that Murasaki Shikibu was able to describe characters in detail.

In ‘Genji monogatari’ the descriptions tend not to be free-standing rhetorical exercises, but instead are woven into the narrative. A noteworthy example is the extended comparison of women to flowers in chapter twenty-eight, ‘Nowaki’ 野分 (‘The Typhoon’). Storm damage to Genji’s residence Rokujōin 六条院 allows his son Yūgiri 夕霧 to see for the first time Murasaki and other ladies who live there. He mentally compares one to cherry blossoms, another to kerria roses (*yamabuki* 山吹), and a third to wisteria (SNKBZ 22: 265–284; trans. Tyler, pp. 488–495). Direct descriptions like this seldom occur in the narrative portions of the tale (*ji no bun* 地の文) or in characters’ thoughts or spoken words.

The scene with Suzaku and Genji concerning Akikonomu is an example of another form of indirectness. As we saw, Genji arranges for her to enter the service of Emperor Reizei even though he knows that Suzaku has feelings for her. When Genji visits Suzaku in order to see his reaction to losing Akikonomu, he makes no reference to what has happened. This reluctance to speak directly about matters on one’s mind is sometimes described as a Japanese trait, but it is striking how the narrative makes use of this convention in structuring episodes and in depicting the changes in the characters’ feelings. What are we to make of the scene where Genji reaches under the standing curtain to take Murasaki’s hand or the passage where he reaches through the hanging curtain and grasps Fujitsubo by her hair? Such vividly described scenes appeal to readers’ imagination by tactile rather than visual means. Male characters are able to sense the beauty of women who are unseen, hidden behind the screens. A sense of indirect beauty permeates the artistic world of the ‘Tale of Genji.’

In a world of negative elements, where ‘not seeing’ is the norm and where feelings are often not expressed directly, the tale gives prominence

to key moments when characters see or are seen, or when one character speculates about what another is feeling. These moments are what drive along the plot.

## Notes

- 1 All block quotes below are from the SNKBZ edition of 'Genji monogatari' and Tyler's translation respectively. All English translations of chapter titles have been cited from Tyler's 'The Tale of Genji' (2001).
- 2 See the 'General Glossary' in Tyler's 'The Tale of Genji' (pp. 1149, 1151) for definitions of 'standing curtain' ("A trailing curtain on a moveable stand") and 'screen.' See also the illustration below.
- 3 See long entry under 'lattice shutter' in the 'General Glossary' in Tyler's translation, p. 1144.
- 4 In addition to the references given in the text and the illustration from 'Genji kokagami' 源氏小鏡, see also Tyler's 'The Tale of Genji,' p. 1024, for the illustration 'Inside the Main House.'
- 5 See the chronological charts (*toshidate* 年立) in Nakano 1995, p. 42.

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### Abbreviations

SNKBZ Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū 新編日本古典文学全集

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