

Shakespeare and Genji

Peter Milward

It is not uncommonly observed that, as Dante is to Italian and Shakespeare to English, Lady Murasaki is to Japanese. Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Shakespeare's plays are not unworthily set by the side of *Genji Monogatari*. These, however, are just general comparisons capable of being made by those who know nothing of the several authors beyond their literary fame. As for myself, setting aside the comparison with Dante, concerning whom I am unqualified to give an informed opinion, I can state my conviction, after having read and re-read *Genji Monogatari* in its three English translations by Arthur Waley, Edward Seidensticker and Royall Tyler – though not, I have to admit, in the Japanese original – that, for all the vast differences in age and nation, there is a distinct but indefinable Shakespearian quality in the literary genius of Lady Murasaki. I may have described this quality as “indefinable”, and yet I feel the challenge to define it as best I can.

What I first notice in my perusal of these translations of *Genji*, as one who has devoted the past fifty years to Shakespeare's plays, is the impressive number of Shakespearian echoes I find in them, both in the particular phraseology and in the general cast of thought. Limited as I am in my reading of the novel to its English translations, I may be criticized for attributing to the novel what belongs by right to those translations. After all, the translators are all well versed in their English language, and nowadays it is almost impossible to be well versed in English without being familiar, to some extent, with the idiom of Shakespeare. At least, what impresses me about these translations is how well Shakespeare's English is adapted to the task of conveying Lady Murasaki's Japanese to English readers.

Then the first thing I notice about these Shakespearian echoes is a certain

philosophical interest, a certain predilection for metaphysical commonplaces which was a characteristic of sixteenth-century humanism but which is, alas, rarely to be found among Shakespeare scholars today. Unlike most of his fellow dramatists in the Elizabethan age, Shakespeare may have had no university education to qualify him for the appellation of “humanist”, still less of “philosopher”, but he had an instinctive attraction to human philosophy which pervades all his plays and comes to the fore in the two plays of his that deal with the themes of “exile” and “disinheritance”, the comedy of *As You Like It* and the tragedy of *King Lear*. In them what one particularly notices is that kind of philosophy which is to be learnt not so much at a university as in what is aptly termed “the school of adversity”, a school at which the dramatist himself was no mean scholar.

Now such, it seems to me, was precisely the philosophy of Lady Murasaki. The professional philosophy whether in Shakespeare's time or in the age of Genji was an exclusively male preserve, conducted behind the forbidding linguistic defences of Latin in the one case and Chinese in the other. But the more genuinely human philosophy, based on the sound Confucianist principle of *Rongo yomi no Rongo shirazu* – or “It is precisely the experts on the *Analects* who misconstrue the *Analects*, according to the academic propensity of not seeing the wood for the trees” – that is the philosophy I see peeping through every nook and cranny of both Shakespearian drama and *Genji Monogatari*, quite transcending the distinction of male and female. Or rather, whereas the professional philosophy of either period is exclusively and enervatingly male, the more amateur, human philosophy of both Shakespeare and Lady Murasaki is at once universal and female.

On her side, Lady Murasaki, being herself a woman, reveals not a few feminine characteristics in her style and her general interests. The whole emphasis in her long novel is not so much, I would dare to say, on the one male hero, Genji himself, as on the many ladies who are the various objects of what one translator, Edward Seidensticker, charmingly calls his “amative

propensities". Also, as a woman, the lady author frequently comments on the sad plight of the woman, however beautiful and wealthy she may be, in a largely male dominated society. She further betrays a feminine sensitivity to matters of clothing and fragrance, to the changing seasons of the year with the names of trees and flowers, birds and insects, such as one rarely finds among male authors, least of all in England.

On the other hand, these are all characteristics which Murasaki interestingly shares with Shakespeare, who may be called the least male of all the poets and authors of his time, and whose literary genius may even be described as "androgynous". Thus in all his dramas he pays more attention to his heroines than to his heroes – to Juliet rather than Romeo, to Rosalind rather than Orlando, to Portia rather than Bassanio, and as I would go on to say, to Desdemona rather than Othello, to Cordelia rather than King Lear, and above all to Cleopatra rather than Antony. Yet only in two of these plays, the first and the last to be mentioned, does the name of the heroine appear in the title beside that of the hero. What is more, Shakespeare not only shows a preference for these heroines, in spite of being himself male – in contrast to Lady Murasaki, to whom such a preference may be thought to have come naturally – but he does so precisely because he is male and also because, far more than his Japanese counterpart, he is writing in a literary and cultural tradition that has for long given prominence to the ideal Lady.

This prominence which we notice in almost all Shakespeare's plays is to be explained not, I think, by the domination of so many notable women in the age of the Renaissance, not the least of whom was Queen Elizabeth herself (who may well have served in the dramatist's mind as the contemporary model for Cleopatra), but by the emergence during the preceding mediaeval period of the ideal figure of the Lady. This ideal we find at the heart of knightly chivalry and the literary convention of courtly love – as not at the heart of Japanese *bushido* – with such ladies as Queen Guinevere in the more secular Arthurian romances and the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, in the religious hymns and sermons of the age. So what we also

find in the plays of Shakespeare is a portrayal of the ideal heroine – in contrast to a few, such as Gertrude and Cressida, who are presented in a more realistic, and cynical, manner – in terms of "grace", echoing the angel's greeting of the Virgin Mary as "full of grace".

At the same time, like Lady Murasaki, Shakespeare evinces a delicate sympathy with the plight of woman in a male dominated society. This is to be seen not only in his exclamation (in Hamlet's notorious words), "Frailty, thy name is woman!" – for Hamlet is less than sympathetic with either of the women, his mother Gertrude or his lover Ophelia, to whom his words apply – but also in his lamentation, with Viola in *Twelfth Night*, "How easy is it for the proper-false/ In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!/ Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we!/ For such as we are made of, such we be." Later on, in her response to the Duke's commonplace observation, "For women are as roses, whose fair flower/ Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour," Viola comments, "And so they are, alas that they are so,/ To die, even when they to perfection grow!" Here it may be noted how in each of her comments Viola uses the lamenting exclamation of "Alas!" with reference to the plight of women in the world. This very lamentation, in a fallen world dominated by men, is no small part of Shakespeare's philosophy as formed in the above-mentioned "school of adversity".

This condition may in turn be derived from the curse pronounced by God on Eve in the Book of Genesis, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception. In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." In a sense, what Shakespeare seems to show – and Lady Murasaki would no doubt have agreed with him – is that it is out of sorrow, as mother of sorrows, and out of the male domination over her, that the Lady comes to stand out so prominently in his later, Jacobean plays. It is as if, once he has escaped from the all too dominating influence of Queen Elizabeth, he concentrates more than ever before on the ideal portrayals of his heroines, from the tragic figures of Desdemona and Cordelia, to the tragi-comic figures of Marina and Miranda

– those two heroines whose names together look back to the mediaeval titles of the Virgin Mother as *Virgo veneranda* and *Mater admirabilis*. As for Lady Murasaki, as her novel progresses, we find her significantly turning from the many and varied amours of Genji to the one ideal heroine, her own namesake, the other Lady Murasaki.

Now I have to turn from the humanist, and feminist, philosophy of both Shakespeare and Lady Murasaki to the related subject of religious superstition which they share in common. In this respect, too, Shakespeare looks back with longing nostalgia to the Catholic tradition of the Middle Ages, now alas exiled under Queen Elizabeth in what he dares to call in one of his sonnets “these last (times) so bad”, and now condemned by the triumphant Protestant party as charged with superstition. Even or especially the mediaeval devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was condemned by the Protestants as superstitious for what they termed “Mariolatry” – namely, the adoration due to God alone which was now being paid to Mary. It was natural, of course, for them to go further and to condemn as superstitious what the Catholics themselves regarded as such – namely, the popular beliefs in ghosts and witches, demons and fairies, and what is commonly termed “the supernatural”, which were comparatively harmless, so long as the belief in witches (for example) didn’t develop into witch-hunts. All this world, however, is denounced by contemporary Protestant preachers, as when Henry Smith dismisses “the old question often debated among simple people, once deluded, whether the souls of men once departed walk after death and appear unto men”.

This is, moreover, the world we find appearing everywhere in the pages of *Genji Monogatari*, where it is not only not frowned upon by the religious establishment of the time, whether Shinto or Buddhist, but even accepted and utilised as a source of both preoccupation and income. It is also what we find everywhere in the plays, especially – as we might expect – in the tragedies, of Shakespeare. We readily think of all the ghosts in the history plays of *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, in the tragedies of *Hamlet* and

Macbeth, of the witches again in the tragedy of *Macbeth*, of the exorcisms or echoes of contemporary exorcisms in *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*, and of the miraculous interventions by such pagan gods and goddesses, in the final tragi-comedies, as Diana in *Pericles*, Jupiter in *Cymbeline*, and Apollo in *The Winter’s Tale*, not to mention the many fairies under their king and queen, Oberon and Titania, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It thus seems as if Shakespeare was no less familiar than Lady Murasaki with this supernatural world, which incurred the inexorably increasing frowns of the Protestant establishment, till the latter eventually came to have their own way in the so-called “enlightenment” of the eighteenth century.

To illustrate the extent of this world in *Genji Monogatari*, one would have to go through the whole of this long novel, at the expense of taking the many episodes of possession and exorcism out of their context. Rather, one may well concentrate on two notable episodes, both involving the Lady Rokujo and her resentment against two of Genji’s amours from whom the episodes are named, *Yugao* or “Evening Faces” (as she is called by Seidensticker) and *Aoi* or “Heart-Vine” (as the same Seidensticker calls her). In each episode the unfortunate heroine, each the object of Genji’s wanton predilection, dies in some mysterious manner owing to a greater or less extent to the resentment of the jilted Lady Rokujo.

The heroine of the first episode, named after the flower of the *convolvulus* or “evening glory”, dwells in a secluded, desolate house, which is strangely contrasted with the splendour of the Rokujo mansion. Yet there is a mysterious charm about it which attends its seclusion and attracts the wanton fascination of Genji. On the other hand, the mystery and the desolation also attract the interest of weird fox-spirits, who seem to have been aroused by the personal charm of Genji and who take possession of the lady after a single night of love-making, to such disastrous effect that she forthwith expires for all Genji’s attempts to revive her. In her case, the causality of Lady Rokujo can only be conjectured from the explicit contrast

between the two dwellings, the splendour of the one and the desolation of the other, and from the fact that the women in this novel are named either from their houses or from flowers mentioned in their poems.

As for the second episode centring on Genji's wedded wife Aoi, the causality of the Lady Rokujo is made more explicit in terms of her resentful spirit actually possessing her female victim. She herself is partly aware of the fact, as she confesses to Genji, though without any willing consent on her part. This is called, in Waley's translation, a case of "possession by the spirit of some living person". It is attributed to "some tremendous accumulation of malice" discharging itself on the victim, and even explained by "some enemy practicing conscious witchcraft against her". As a result, Lady Rokujo herself becomes convinced, in spite of its extraordinary occurrence, that "it was really possible for the spirit to leave one's body".

Such cases of possession are altogether exceptional even for *Genji Monogatari*, and needless to say, they never occur in any of Shakespeare's plays. Yet in principle the dramatist makes allowances for such things to happen, as when the intellectual Hamlet assures his skeptical friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." In particular cases, too, he shows in *Richard III* how far the vindictive resentment of an old lady like Queen Margaret can go in her cursing of Richard, as a result of which there appears a procession of the ghosts of his past victims in his dream on the eve of the fatal battle of Bosworth.

Again, in the second case, immediately after Lady Rokujo's recognition that "it was really possible for the spirit to leave one's body", there follow, again in Waley's translation, no fewer than two echoes of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. First, there is the general observation that "people take a malicious delight in saying nothing about the good even a good person has done and everything about the evil" – which recalls Mark Antony's remark in his famous speech over Caesar's corpse, "The evil that men do lives after them,/ The good is oft interred with their bones." Secondly, the lady further

reflects, "That after his death a man's ghost should pursue his enemies is a thing which seems to be of constant occurrence" – which we see as the actual outcome of Shakespeare's play, as the ghost of Caesar pursues his two assassins Brutus and Cassius, driving them to suicide. On that occasion Brutus exclaims over the corpse of Cassius, "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!/ Thy spirit walks abroad and turns our swords/ In our own proper entrails."

In this case, however, it may be instructive to compare this translation by Waley with the corresponding passages in the other two translations. In that of Seidensticker, who in other respects echoes the phraseology of Shakespeare more frequently than either of his rivals, we only find, "The world was not given to speaking well of people whose transgressions had been far slighter". As for Tyler, who has the smallest number of Shakespearian echoes, all he says is, "The world so uncommonly speaks well of anyone", and again, "No doubt it was common enough to leave a still active malevolence behind after death." From these varying instances one may conjecture that, at least in this one case, Waley was too much influenced by his schoolboy familiarity with *Julius Caesar* in his translation of *Genji Monogatari*. On the other hand, it must be added that the parallels are too frequent both in his and in the other translations to be satisfactorily explained by Shakespearian influence.

In general, it may be pointed out that the idea of sexual love being fated or foredoomed, which is so strongly emphasized by Shakespeare with regard to the "pair of star-crossed lovers" in *Romeo and Juliet*, is one that he frequently shares with Lady Murasaki, as when the latter remarks of the love between Genji and Yugao that it seemed "they had been fated from the start". Only, whereas such love is attributed by Shakespeare to the stars, it comes to Lady Murasaki from her Buddhist belief in *rinne* or reincarnation, which the dramatist rejects out of hand in *Twelfth Night*. A similar idea on love, or the exalted joy attending on love, is the danger of such excess incurring the jealousy of the gods. This is applied by Lady Murasaki to the

outstanding beauty of a child, as when she remarks of the youthful Genji that it occasioned alarm “lest soon the gods should cast an envious eye upon him”. Shakespeare, however, applies it to the extreme joy felt by Othello in his happy reunion with Desdemona on their safe arrival in Cyprus after the storm at sea, when he exclaims, “O my soul’s joy!/ If after every tempest come such calms/ May the winds blow till they have waken’d death.” And so it happens, thanks to the present witness of the villain Iago.

Such too, it may be added, is the jealousy which serves as the basic theme of Greek tragedy, when it is man’s sin of pride or self-complacency (*hamartia*) that provokes the anger or resentment of the gods (*phthonos theon*). In this case, moreover, the divine punishment is incurred not just once but in a succession of blows, as when in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* the remorseful Claudius tells his wife, “When sorrows come, they come not single spies,/ But in battalions.” This is also Genji’s reflection concerning the tragedy of Aoi, whether as translated by Waley, “Sorrow had followed too fast upon sorrow”, or by Tyler, “Genji had now suffered blow on blow”.

Altogether, such experiences lead to the general conclusion drawn by Shakespeare in *Richard II*, in the sad words of York to the sorrowing Queen, “We are on the earth/ Where nothing lives but sorrows, cares, and grief”. It is also the conclusion drawn by Lady Murasaki in Genji’s reflection (as rendered by Waley) on human life as “but a succession of futile miseries”, or in her own comment (as rendered by Tyler) that “Life was intolerable to him”.

Needless to say, not all of Shakespeare, even if we limit our attention to his tragedies, is so gloomy, but his genius includes a deeply comic vision even in the depths of human tragedy. In this respect, it may be added, the canvas of his dramatic paintings may be compared to Rembrandt’s style of *chiaroscuro*, where the tragic gloom is exaggerated only to bring out the clarity of tragi-comedy. This is true even or especially of the saddest of his tragedies, *King Lear*, which paradoxically centres on a climax of divine comedy in the supreme happiness of reunion between the aged father and his

loving daughter Cordelia. This is also what may be found in *Genji Monogatari*, though, being in the extended form of a novel covering the whole lifetime of Genji and even beyond, it can hardly convey the sudden impact of a Shakespearian climax. For this reason, one may be tempted to compare the length of her novel with that of the *The Faery Queene*, the epic romance of Shakespeare’s contemporary Edmund Spenser.

Finally, it is time to consider what light the foregoing comparison with *Genji Monogatari* may have to shed on the plays of Shakespeare as a whole – and *vice versa*. The many remarkable similarities between these two great literary masterpieces, whose authors may be said, like the two great kings at the beginning of *The Winter’s Tale*, to shake hands “as over a vast”, may serve to show, in the first place, how deeply Shakespeare’s dramatic inspiration was derived from the mediaeval past which was for him at once “merry England” in particular and “the body of Christendom” as a whole. Unlike so many of his educated contemporaries, he was fully sympathetic with the religious and popular tradition of England, as one brought up in the rural Midlands, without the questionable benefit of a university education whose rigid humanism and more rigid Protestantism would have cut him off from his mediaeval roots. Insofar as he may be compared with Hamlet, disaffected with the political orthodoxy established in Denmark under Claudius and Gertrude with the indispensable advice of Polonius, he may also be seen in contrast to Laertes, whose reaction to his father’s death, which he wrongly attributes to Claudius, is one of open rebellion. Such was the rebellion of the more extreme Protestants, the Puritans, of Shakespeare’s time, in their passion to stamp out what they termed “the rags and relics of Popery” with the whole of that mediaeval religious tradition of England which went back to the time of Pope St. Gregory and St. Augustine of Canterbury – in Claudius’ description, “As the world were now but to begin,/ Antiquity not known, custom forgot.”

Also by the side of the Puritans, yet in some ways in contrast to them, stood the new philosophers, represented by Shakespeare’s great

contemporary Sir Francis Bacon, whose professed aim was to do for the world of learning what Luther had done for the world of religion. Just as Luther had rejected the Catholic religion in going back to the book of Scripture for the revealed Word of God, so it was Bacon's plan to reject all intellectual learning, whether natural or human, in looking back to the other book of Nature, which was also the Word of God as manifested to the reason of Man. Then, as Luther was followed by the Puritans in England, even to the extent of waging war against the king, so Bacon came to be followed by the philosophers from Hobbes and Locke and by the scientists from Boyle and Newton onwards, even to the extent of bringing about a series of political, agrarian and industrial revolutions. The outcome of their combined influence, in the form of Puritan moralism and scientific rationalism, is to be seen in the eighteenth-century "enlightenment" and what the poet T.S.Eliot has termed "the dissociation of sensibility" between the reason and the imagination. It may also be seen in terms of a decline in literary inspiration and creative imagination following on "the Shakespearian moment" and a corresponding rise in what Pope laments as an age of dullness.

In the wider world the new scientists and the rationalist philosophers have proved to be the secular counterparts of an ongoing Puritan revolution, leading to the further dissociation between man and nature, the city and the countryside, together with all the problems of ecology and the environment with which we are faced today. Then, if we are to solve these problems, we may learn from our mistakes of the past not to trust ourselves to the continued guidance of the scientists or the rationalists with their ever new promises for the future, but to look back for our inspiration to such great mediaeval masterpieces as the plays of Shakespeare and the novel of Lady Murasaki – where we may find these two great representatives of the English and the Japanese, the Christian and the Buddhist cultures, shaking hands "as over a vast" and joining their hands in prayer to the one author of our human being.

Note on the Translations.

The earliest English translation of Lady Murasaki's *Genji Monogatari* is that by Arthur Waley, first published by George Allen & Unwin in 1935, and republished by Tuttle in 1970. This was followed by that of Edward Seidensticker in 1976, as published by Albert A.Knopf, and then in 1978, by Tuttle. The latest translation is that of Royall Tyler, published in 2001 by Viking Penguin Books.