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Chapter 1

The cultural background

Politics

The Tale of Genji is the product of an aristocratic culture that flourished in Japan in the eleventh century at the height of the Heian Period (794–1192), a period that takes its name from the capital, Heian-kyō. It is seen to be the greatest achievement not only of Heian culture, but indeed of Japanese literature as a whole. Japan had just emerged from a time of substantial Chinese influence and was going through one of its periodic stages of readjustment, during which alien concepts were successfully naturalised. The *Genji* is thus the product of a native culture finding a truly sophisticated form of self-expression in prose for the first time. Chinese forms and Chinese ideas still remained a touchstone, a kind of eternal presence in the Japanese mind, but China itself was temporarily on its knees and was geographically far enough removed to allow for the unhampered growth of an indigenous tradition. The *Genji*, when it did come, owed very little to Chinese literary precedents.

Politically, matters took roughly the same course. Attempts to impose a Chinese-style bureaucracy had failed to supplant native habits. Power remained by and large a matter of heredity, and what civil service there was never won a sense of identity for itself, so bound up was it with the aristocracy. The dominant political fact was that the Emperor, at the spiritual and psychological centre, was politically impotent and under the influence of whichever aristocratic family happened to be in a position to take decisions. The Emperor's links with the machinery of government were tenuous, and he was usually too young and inexperienced to have a mind of his own. The coveted post was that of Regent, the degree of power being directly related to the proximity of Regent to Emperor as measured through

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family ties. It is hardly surprising that 'marriage politics' emerged as the major technique for the maintenance of such power.

The Japan of Murasaki Shikibu's day was dominated by one clan, the Fujiwara, and in particular by one man, Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027). His chief asset was a carefully designed network of marriage ties to the imperial family, which he manipulated to great effect: he became, among other things, brother-in-law to two emperors, uncle to one, uncle and father-in-law to another, and grandfather to two more. Such a position was only achieved, of course, after much internecine strife between various family factions vying for power throughout the late tenth century. Rivalry within the Fujiwara clan itself came to a head in 969, when the major remaining threat from a different clan, Minamoto no Takaakira, was finally removed from the scene on a trumped-up charge of conspiracy. From that time on there ensued a series of intrigues that set brother against brother, nephew against uncle, and that led to the early demise of three emperors. So it was that the Ichijō Emperor, who reigned during the time of most interest to us in the present context (986–1011), came to the throne at the age of six and was naturally under his grandfather's domination from the very outset.

When Michinaga succeeded his elder brother as head of the family, he came into conflict with his young nephew Korechika (973–1010). The story goes that Korechika, under the impression that a retired emperor was competing with him for the favours of a certain lady, surprised him one night and started a scuffle in which the eminent gentleman was nearly hit by an arrow. Whether or not the whole scene had been engineered by Michinaga we do not know, but it provided him with the excuse he needed. It was enough to have Korechika banished from the court for several months, and from this point on Michinaga was virtually unassailable. In 999 he introduced to court his eleven-year-old daughter Shōshi (988–1074) as an imperial consort; she quickly became Ichijō's favourite. In the twelfth month of 1000, Korechika's sister, who had been made the Emperor's first consort some years earlier, died in childbirth. Shōshi's position thereby became secure. It was into her entourage that Murasaki, from a different and less important branch of the Fujiwara, was to be introduced. The crowning glory for Michinaga came in 1008, when Shōshi gave birth to a son, so placing the

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Fujiwara leader in a powerful position for the future as well as the present.

Given this kind of marriage politics, women clearly had a role to play, passive though it usually was. But they were vital pawns and, depending on their strength of character, could wield considerable influence. We know that they had certain rights, income and property, that mark them off as being unusually privileged in comparison to women in later ages. Michinaga's mother, for instance, seems to have been a power to be reckoned with, and his main wife owned the Tsuchimikado mansion, where he spent much of his time. But it is difficult to determine the true position of women in society at large. The testimony we have from the literature of the period, much of it written by ladies of a lesser class, draws a picture of women subject to the usual depredations of their menfolk, prey to the torments of jealousy, and condemned to live much of their sedentary lives hidden behind a wall of screens and curtains. Marriage conventions will be a matter for later discussion: suffice it to say here that the female world was highly formalised and restricted. Seldom were women known by their own names; they existed rather in the shadow of titles held by brothers or fathers. Of course there must have been exceptions: the role of *femme fatale* was not unknown; but even here there is much talk of waiting to be visited, gazing out onto rainy gardens, and a sense of resigned listlessness.

Murasaki Shikibu

Given the fact that close relatives were set against each other with monotonous regularity and that matters of rank were sacrosanct, it is only natural that Murasaki Shikibu should feel that she had little in common with those in the higher echelons of the ruling Fujiwara clan, despite the fact that they shared a common ancestry. Her particular branch of the family had been coming down in the world for some time and was only on the very fringes of the establishment. The men filled such posts as provincial governorships, which gave ample opportunity for financial reward, but which alienated the holder from the tightly knit world of court and capital; frequent visits to the provinces were regarded as onerous duties and indeed as a form of exile.

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Yet if Murasaki's family was in no way powerful, it had reason to be proud of its literary lineage. Both her grandfather and her great-grandfather had known Ki no Tsurayuki, the driving force behind the rehabilitation of Japanese native verse in the early tenth century, and her father, dogged somewhat by ill luck, continued this tradition of scholarship, although his chief claim to fame must be the part he played in the education of his daughter.

The date of Murasaki's birth is a matter of some controversy, but 973 is generally accepted as being close to the mark. Our knowledge of her early years is extremely sketchy. She has left behind a set of autobiographical poems in which there is a suggestion that she accompanied her father to a province north of the capital in the summer of 996. She seems to have returned in 998 to marry Fujiwara no Nobutaka (950?–1001). This was a strange affair: he was almost as old as her father and already had a number of other wives. Tradition has it that her marriage to him was a happy one; they had a daughter in 999, but then fate intervened and he was carried away by an epidemic early in 1001.

For the next four or five years Murasaki led a widow's existence, during which time she began the work of fiction that was to bring her fame and secure her a place at court. We can assume that she began writing *The Tale of Genji* in either 1002 or 1003, and that she had written a fair amount by the time she entered service with Shōshi, in either 1005 or 1006. From the diary that survives, it appears that Murasaki acted as cultural companion-cum-tutor with few specific duties to perform. She certainly had time to record what was going on and tended to remain aloof, observing court ceremonial from a distance. She seems not to have had an official court post, but was employed privately by Michinaga to serve his daughter. Her name is a combination of part of a title that her father once held, Shikibu, meaning 'Bureau of Ceremonial', and a nickname, Murasaki, which is a reference to her main female character in the *Genji* and which was probably bestowed on her by a courtier, Kintō, who had read at least part of the tale.

The best information we have about Murasaki's life at court is, of course, her diary, although there are considerable gaps in what she is prepared to reveal. Tradition has it that she was one of Michinaga's concubines, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support this.

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By her own admission she seems to have been somewhat retiring and even severe. Her contemporaries never ranked her poetry very highly. Poetry was an intensely social activity and Murasaki does not appear in a number of important competitions where one would expect to see her name. There is also a remarkable lack of any record of correspondence or exchange of poems between her and any of her major female contemporaries. Her later years, as is the case with most Heian women writers and poets, are clouded in uncertainty. She may have died as early as l0l4, and this would explain why her father suddenly gave up his post and returned to the capital in that year. She may, on the other hand, have continued to serve Shōshi as late as 1025. She is definitely missing from a list of Shōshi's ladies-in-waiting dated 1031.

Religion

There are two sets of beliefs that one usually associates with Japan, Shinto and Buddhism. To these we should add Confucian principles and certain elements of Taoism. Confucian principles such as the overriding importance of filial piety and ancestor worship were an intrinsic element of court life in so far as they chimed with native family structures. The crime of unfilial behaviour certainly provides a strong source of anxiety for at least one emperor in the *Genji*, but in general family and marriage relations, especially at court, were so utterly different from the Chinese norm that Heian society cannot be described as 'Confucian' and it is highly unlikely that Murasaki Shikibu herself would have recognised such a category. The Chinese classics did, however, form the major part of the academic syllabus. Elements of Taoism were to be found everywhere in the ritual and religious life at court, but there was little that was systematised and most activities that we might now trace back to Taoist practice had been fully naturalised in their Japanese setting by this time, their origins largely concealed.

Although it is doubtful whether Murasaki Shikibu would have had a concept of 'religion' as a definable area of human experience, she would have certainly recognised the difference between sacred and profane. She would not, however, have seen 'Shintō' and Buddhism as being traditions in any way commensurate. Indeed,

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they managed to coexist precisely because they fulfilled very different needs and so came into conflict only rarely. The use of a term such as 'Shintō' ('Way of the Gods') in such a context is in fact anachronistic, because during this period it was neither an organised religion nor a recognisable 'way' to be followed by an individual. The attempt to create a doctrine and so to provide a viable alternative to Buddhism came much later in Japanese history. Perhaps a term such as 'native beliefs' is closer to the truth. It was rather the practice of certain rituals connected with fertility, avoidance of pollution, and pacification of the spirits of myriad gods. At the individual level this was not far removed from simple animism, an activity governed by superstition and the need to pacify whatever was unknown, unseen and dangerous. At the level of court and state, however, we find something more formalised, a collection of cults connected to aristocratic families and centred on certain important sites and shrines. Although there did exist formal institutional links between these shrines, in the sense that the government made attempts to put them under some measure of bureaucratic control, they were essentially discrete cults; we cannot, therefore, treat 'Shintō' as a true system. The Fujiwara, for example, had its cult centre with its shrine at Kasuga in the Yamato region. This was not linked in any meaningful sense to the shrines at Ise, where the cult centre of the imperial family was situated. The imperial family sought legitimacy for its rule via the foundation myths propagated in the *Kojiki* ('Record of ancient matters') of 712, but from a Western perspective it is important to understand that this text was mytho-historical in nature, not sacred in the sense of having been 'revealed'. It was not itself of divine origin. It merely explained the origins of Japan and its gods and justified the rule of the emperor by the simple expedient of linking him directly to these gods. The concept of a sacred text does not exist apart from prayers and incantations.

Cult Shintō, if we can call it that without suggesting too much of a system, was therefore linked to matters of public, state and clan ritual rather than private concerns. Of the many centres in Japan, it was those at Ise and Kamo, just north of the capital, that loomed largest in the consciousness of women such as Murasaki. Both these shrines were central to the legitimacy of the imperial house. There were others, of course, but these were the most prominent. Ise was by

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far the oldest but was also far removed from the capital, linked only by the presence there of the High Priestess of the Ise Shrines, usually a young girl of imperial lineage sent as imperial representative. In the *Genji* it is Akikonomu, Lady Rokujō's daughter, who fulfils this role. Few courtiers would have ever been to Ise and most would have had only a very hazy idea of where it lay. Kamo, however, was within fairly easy access. The institution of High Priestess of the Kamo Shrines was in fact only a fairly recent one, begun in the reign of the Saga Emperor in 810. The capital had moved from Nara in 794 and the imperial family must have decided that there was a need to create a shrine in the vicinity of the new city. As was the case with Ise, a young girl was chosen to represent the Emperor at the shrine, to ensure the correct rituals were carried out and to maintain ritual purity. Although the intention had been to choose a new girl for every new reign, by Murasaki Shikibu's time one person, Senshi (964–1035), had become a permanent occupant of this post. She held it continuously from 975 to 1013.

We know from Murasaki Shikibu's dairy, as well as other sources, that Princess Senshi had a formidable reputation as a poet and that she 'held court' at her home near the Kamo Shrines. It so happens that she also provides a good example of the kind of tensions that did sometimes exist between Cult Shintō and Buddhism. There were plenty of shrine-temple complexes where native gods were simply seen as the other side of the Buddhist coin, where every shrine had some sort of Buddhist temple and every temple had its protective shrine, but, in the restrictive world of a place like Kamo and Ise, the demands of the two traditions did occasionally clash. The collection of Senshi's poetry entitled 'Collection of poems for the awakening of the faith' shows that she was constantly torn between the demands of ritual purity, which forced her to avoid contact with all forms of pollution as part of her role, and her own deeply felt need to find salvation.

Cult Shintō, then, seems to have offered no personal creed, not even for one of its high priestesses. Neither Ise nor Kamo were places where an individual would go to pray. They were sacred sites, where the gods revealed their presence. Access was strictly limited and in most cases remained the prerogative of priests alone. Once or twice a year public rituals were held, which often took the form of festivals,

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but the shrines themselves were remote, places of ritual purity whose careful maintenance was essential for natural good order and to ensure future prosperity. There were other kind of shrines, however, notably the one at Sumiyoshi, which occupies a central role in the *Genji*, where an individual could go and pray for fortune and good health. When Genji chooses self-exile, Sumiyoshi plays an important part not only in his return to the capital but also in his fathering of a girl who is destined to be a future empress; and the Akashi Lady goes to Sumiyoshi to give thanks for a safe birth. But one did not go to a shrine for devotion leading to salvation or in the face of death.

It was in this last area of private life that Buddhism played the largest part, and a cursory knowledge of basic Buddhist beliefs is central to an understanding of much that occurs in the *Genji*; it even helps us understand the shape of the work itself. On one level, Buddhism can be an abstruse subject with a plethora of conflicting doctrines expressed in a highly complex philosophical vocabulary. But it is doubtful whether anyone at the Heian court paid much attention to doctrine. The basic beliefs are reasonably simple and, as one might expect of a religion with such a huge following, emotionally satisfying.

Buddhism starts with the premise that life is marked by suffering and that such suffering is an inevitable consequence of human desire, of the craving for pleasure, attachment and rebirth. If nothing is done to interrupt this process of birth, death and rebirth, it will continue in an endless cycle of transmigration. The process of repetition is not random, but is governed by a strict principle of causality known as karmic law. All actions in one life are to a certain extent governed by acts in former lives and will in turn be responsible for acts, and indeed incarnations, in future lives. There are no unconditioned origins. Given that the aim of Buddhism must be the interruption of this endless wheel, the right-thinking man, the one who has awakened from ignorance, must act to cut the cycle by attacking its root cause, namely the desire that gives rise to suffering. The aim is to negate desire in the self through the kind of intense mental and spiritual effort that it takes to come to a full realisation that the self does not exist. Enlightenment and entry into that state of bliss known as nirvana, where the wheel no longer turns and where

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there is no death and no rebirth, occurs when all attachment, all desire is sloughed off. To enter nirvana is to become a Buddha, a divine being, a potential open to all men.

Clearly, if Buddhism was characterised solely by such a severe doctrine and such a difficult concept as 'non-self', it would never have become a popular religion. The effort demanded here can only be for those few initiates who have the drive and intellect to carry through such an enterprise. For the ordinary layman there could be no hope. The kind of Buddhism (Mahāyāna) that lies at the heart of the *Genji* was more compassionate and was based on a shift from enlightenment for the few to salvation for all; a shift from meditation to devotion.

The world of birth and rebirth, of karmic law and transmigration, is not one world but many worlds: six in the popular imagination. Although these worlds coexist, they are ranked in order: heaven, human, anti-gods, animals, hungry spirits and hell. As these worlds coexist, movement between them is quite common, and illness, be it physical or mental, is explained by the belief that a spirit has wandered across the divide. Note that heaven is not nirvana but lies within the world of karma, so that if one stops striving for perfection it is possible to slip back into a lower world. Movement up through these worlds is achieved by good deeds and right thinking, and by evincing at least a willingness to try and negate desire. The karmic law of retribution for past sins and the transference of present sins into the future is of course not absolute, because then there would be no hope and no compassion. Salvation, in the form of an upward movement into a higher world, is always a possibility, even from the lowest of the hells. And if one lacks the ability or strength to help oneself, help is always at hand. There are myriad divine and semi-divine figures, bodhisattvas, who have achieved enlightenment and yet through compassion remain present in all worlds to bring salvation to those who call.

During the time of Murasaki Shikibu one of these figures emerged as a favourite source of solace, the Buddha Amida. Amida, it was claimed, had promised eventual salvation to all who simply trusted in him and had faith. His paradise (known as the Pure Land) was not nirvana itself but was much more than 'heaven'; it was certainly outside the karmic wheel and once gained there was no backsliding.

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This quickly became the paradise to which all aspired, since it offered an 'easier' route to salvation than that normally offered. Murasaki Shikibu herself in her diary talks of giving herself to Amida, and when people talk of devotion in the *Genji* it is mainly with Amida in mind.

The ensuing discussion of the *Genji* will illustrate how these ideas emerge in practice. The sense of transgression, for instance, is a basic principle without which the story could not operate, and the taking of vows in later life becomes an extremely important gesture towards ensuring rebirth in paradise. Vows are the sign of a genuine willingness to cast off desire, but by the same token they mark a heart-rending moment for those close to one who are still tied to this world and its pleasures. Vows are in this sense a death-in-life, a renunciation, and a clear statement of the vanity of human passion. And yet it must be remembered that Buddhism is at root a religion of great hope and of everlasting second chances. The concept of eternal flux is more than partly responsible for the compassion that we find in the *Genji*, as well as the seemingly never-ending repetitions that it contains.

Language

The use of language as a tool of cultural and sexual domination is of course a universal phenomenon, but it is rare to come across such a clear example as that afforded by conditions in Japan from the ninth to eleventh centuries, a period most notable for the uneasy coexistence of two essentially incompatible linguistic systems, Chinese and Japanese, each exerting a powerful claim to primacy. Written Chinese had been the language of government and authority in Japan for some centuries. The first real signs of a native writing system came with the compilation of the first collection of native Japanese verse, the *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, in the late eighth century. Here, the Japanese syllabary, evolved by adapting Chinese characters for use as a phonetic script, was still in an early stage of development, but it proved adequate for the transcription of Japanese sounds and showed that Chinese did not have to be the only form of written language.

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