

Diary

(c. 1000)

Murasaki Shikibu

Introduction

Japan's greatest literary artist of the Heian period was Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 978 - ca. 1015), a lady-in-waiting at the court of Second Empress Akiko. Her masterpiece is the massive *The Tale of Genji*, a romance whose subtle psychological insights and realistic portraits of life have earned for it universal recognition as the single greatest piece of classical Japanese literature and one of the world's immortal novels. Focusing on the love affairs and emotions of Prince Genji, the work brilliantly captures the changing moods of people and nature.

Like many other imperial ladies-in-waiting who wrote about court life, Lady Murasaki kept a diary in which she recorded - with the same level of insight, sensitivity, and narrative ability she displayed in *The Tale of Genji* - her observations on court life and her deepest reflections.

Questions to Consider

- What attributes did Lady Murasaki find most desirable in other people?
- What place did poetry have in Japanese court life? What does this reveal about the values of Japanese court society?

Source

As the autumn season approaches the Tsuchimikado becomes inexpressibly smile-giving. The tree-tops near the pond, the bushes near the stream, are dyed in varying tints whose colors grow deeper in the mellow light of evening. The murmuring sound of waters mingles all the night through with the never-ceasing recitation of sutras which appeal more to one's heart as the breezes grow cooler.

The ladies waiting upon her honored presence are talking idly. The Queen hears them; she must find them annoying, but she conceals it calmly. Her beauty needs no words of mine to praise it, but I cannot help feeling that to be near so beautiful a queen will be the only relief from my sorrow. So in spite of my better desires [for a religious life] I am here. Nothing else dispels my grief - it is wonderful!...

I can see the garden from my room beside the entrance to the gallery. The air is misty, the dew is still on the leaves. The Lord Prime Minister is walking there; he orders his men to cleanse the brook. He breaks off a stalk of omenaishi [flower maiden], which is in full bloom by the south end of the bridge. He peeps in over my screen! His noble appearance embarrasses us, and I am ashamed of my morning [not yet painted and powdered] face. He says, Your poem on this! If you delay so much the fun is gone! and I seize the chance to run away to the writing-box, hiding my face -

Flower-maiden in bloom -

Even more beautiful for the bright dew,

Which is partial, and never favors me.

So prompt! said he, smiling, and ordered a writing-box to be brought for himself.

His answer:

The silver dew is never partial.

From her heart

The flower-maiden's beauty.

One wet and calm evening I was talking with Lady Saisho. The young Lord of the Third Rank sat with the misu partly rolled up. He seemed maturer than his age and was very graceful. Even in light conversation such expressions as "Fair soul is rarer than fair face" come gently to his lips, covering us with confusion. It is a mistake to treat him like a young boy. He keeps his dignity among ladies, and I saw in him a much-sought-after romantic hero when once he walked off reciting to himself:
Linger in the field where flower-maidens are blooming
And your name will be tarnished with tales of gallantry.
Some such trifle as that sometimes lingers in my mind when really interesting things are soon forgotten - why?...

On the fifth night the Lord Prime Minister celebrated the birth. The full moon on the fifteenth day was clear and beautiful. Torches were lighted under the trees and tables were put there with rice-balls on them. Even the uncouth humble servants who were walking about chattering seemed to enhance the joyful scene. All minor officials were there burning torches, making it as bright as day. Even the attendants of the nobles, who gathered behind the rocks and under the trees, talked of nothing but the new light which had come into the world, and were smiling and seemed happy as if their own private wishes had been fulfilled....

This time, as they chose only the best-looking young ladies, the rest who used to tie their hair on ordinary occasions to serve the Queen's dinner wept bitterly; it was shocking to see them....

To serve at the Queen's dinner eight ladies tied their hair with white cords, and in that dress brought in Her Majesty's dining-table. The chief lady-in-waiting for that night was Miya-no-Naishi. She was brilliantly dressed with great formality, and her hair was made more charming by the white cords which enhanced her beauty. I got a side glance of her when her face was not screened by her fan. She wore a look of extreme purity....

The court nobles rose from their seats and went to the steps [descending from the balcony]. His Lordship the Prime Minister and others cast da. It was shocking to see them quarreling about paper. Some others composed poems. A lady said, "What response shall we make if some one offers to drink saké with us?" We tried to think of something.

Shijo-no-Dainagon is a man of varied accomplishments. No ladies can rival him in repartee, much less compete with him in poetry, so they were all afraid of him, but this evening he did not give a cup to any particular lady to make her compose poems. Perhaps that was because he had many things to do and it was getting late....

The Great Adviser is displeased to be received by ladies of low rank, so when he comes to the Queen's court to make some report and suitable ladies to receive him are not available, he goes away without seeing Her Majesty. Other court nobles, who often come to make reports, have each a favorite lady, and when that one is away they are displeased, and go away saying to other people that the Queens ladies are quite unsatisfactory....

Lady Izumi Shikibu corresponds charmingly, but her behavior is improper indeed. She writes with grace and ease and with a flashing wit. There is fragrance even in her smallest words. Her poems are attractive, but they are only improvisations which drop from her mouth spontaneously. Every one of them has some interesting point, and she is acquainted with ancient literature also, but she is not like a true artist who is filled with the genuine spirit of poetry. Yet I think even she cannot presume to pass judgment on the poems of others.

The wife of the Governor of Tamba Province is called by the Queen and Prime Minister Masa Hira Emon. Though she is not of noble birth, her poems are very satisfying. She does not compose and

scatter them about on every occasion, but so far as we know them, even her miscellaneous poems shame us. Those who compose poems whose loins are all but broken, yet who are infinitely self-exalted and vain, deserve our contempt and pity.

Lady Seishonagon. A very proud person. She values herself highly, and scatters her Chinese writings all about. Yet should we study her closely, we should find that she is still imperfect. She tries to be exceptional, but naturally persons of that sort give offense. She is piling up trouble for her future. One who is too richly gifted, who indulges too much in emotion, even when she ought to be reserved, and cannot turn aside from anything she is interested in, in spite of herself will lose self-control. How can such a vain and reckless person end her days happily?

[Here there is a sudden change from the Court to her own home.]

Having no excellence within myself, I have passed my days without making any special impression on anyone. Especially the fact that I have no man who will look out for my future makes me comfortless. I do not wish to bury myself in dreariness. Is it because of my worldly mind that I feel lonely? On moonlight nights in autumn, when I am hopelessly sad, I often go out on the balcony and gaze dreamily at the moon. It makes me think of days gone by. People say that it is dangerous to look at the moon in solitude, but something impels me, and sitting a little withdrawn I muse there. In the wind-cooled evening I play on the koto, though others may not care to hear it. I fear that my playing betrays the sorrow which becomes more intense, and I become disgusted with myself - so foolish and miserable am I....

A pair of big bookcases have in them all the books they can hold. In one of them are placed old poems and romances. They are the homes of worms which come frightening us when we turn the pages, so none ever wished to read them. [Perhaps her own writings, she speaks so slightly of them.] As to the other cabinet, since the person who placed his own books [there] no hand has touched it. When I am bored to death I take out one or two of them; then my maids gather around me and say: "Your life will not be favored with old age if you do such a thing! Why do you read Chinese? Formerly even the reading of sutras was not encouraged for women." They rebuke me in the shade [i.e., behind my back]. I have heard of it and have wished to say, "It is far from certain that he who does no forbidden thing enjoys a long life," but it would be a lack of reserve to say it [to the maids]. Our deeds vary with our age and deeds vary with the individual. Some are proud [to read books], others look over old castaway writings because they are bored with having nothing to do. It would not be becoming for such a one to chatter away about religious thoughts, noisily shaking a rosary. I feel this, and before my women keep myself from doing what otherwise I could do easily. But after all, when I was among the ladies of the Court I did not say what I wanted to say either, for it is useless to talk with those who do not understand one and troublesome to talk with those who criticize from a feeling of superiority. Especially onesided persons are troublesome. Few are accomplished in many arts and most cling narrowly to their own opinion.

Source: Murasaki Shikibu, "Diary," in Alfred Andrea and James Overfield, eds. *The Human Record: Sources in Global History, Volume I, 3rd Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998): 260-264.

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