

# ***The Tale of Genji* and the Vibrant World of Heian-kyō (Kyoto)**

Instructor: Ekaterina (Kate) Komova

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course offers an in-depth exploration of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, c. 1008), one of the most—if not *the* most—esteemed works in the Japanese literary canon. Written by the female courtier Murasaki Shikibu during the so-called Golden Age of aristocratic culture, the text not only provides a vivid depiction of court life in Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto), but also offers a portrayal of desire, loss, jealousy, and impermanence so extraordinary that it has earned it the title of the world’s first psychological novel.

Over the course of the semester, we will explore the text through Royall Tyler’s English translation. While the students are encouraged to read the work in its entirety, because of its length and complexity, the class discussion will focus on a carefully curated selection of key chapters and passages, with other sections covered through excerpts and guided summaries. This selective approach will, in return, give us the opportunity to situate the *Genji* within the broader literary, cultural, and material world that has shaped both its composition and afterlife. For example, we will draw on readings and conventions from contemporary Heian texts such as the *Kokinshū*, *Pillow Book*, *Kagerō Diary*, or *Ise Stories*, and get to dip our feet into the fascinating world of *Genji* reception.

One defining feature of the course also lies in its sustained immersion in Kyoto as a living archive of *Genji* culture. In addition to engaging in close textual analysis in class, students will participate in a number of field trips and workshops foregrounding material culture and sensory experience, including visits to museums, temples, and historically resonant sites, as well as hands-on activities such as silk dyeing and incense-matching. Through these site-based encounters, we will consider how *The Tale of Genji* has been visualized, interpreted, ritualized, and remembered over the past thousand years, and how literary meaning is translated into spatial, material, and performative forms. By reading the *Genji* alongside its cultural contexts and afterlives—and by encountering these traditions within the landscape of Kyoto itself—we will thus approach the work not only as a monumental text, but as an evolving cultural tradition shaped by place, practice, and reception.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

### **1) Attendance and class participation (25% of final grade)**

As this seminar is centered on informed, active discussion of each week’s readings, it is crucial that students come prepared having completed all the assigned sections of the *Genji* as well as having read/viewed any relevant secondary materials. To receive full participation marks, students must attend classes regularly, make effort to come to all the fieldtrips, and engage in thoughtful and respectful dialogue with their peers. In the event of an unavoidable absence, the students are expected to contact the instructor beforehand and, where appropriate, make arrangements to make up any missed work. Unexcused absences, consistent tardiness, lack of preparation, and failure to contribute to class dialogue will adversely affect grades.

### **2) Fieldtrip reflections (20% of final grade)**

Taking advantage of our location in Heian-Kyō (Kyoto), the quintessential setting of the *Tale of Genji*, our classes will be supplemented by a number of fieldtrips and workshops to

help us better visualize, locate, and contextualize this classic. The students will be expected to write a short report on a minimum of five of our trips (of their choosing), reflecting on what they learned and how the experience enhanced their understanding of *Genji* and of our course themes at large.

### 3) Discussion leadership (15% of final grade)

Each student will have the opportunity to lead one in-class discussion section. The sign-up schedule will be distributed in Week 2. To prepare, the student should put together a concise handout (1-2 pages) analyzing some aspect of the primary reading for that week, in addition to addressing any relevant issues raised by the secondary readings and/or materials. The handout should avoid simple plot summaries, take approximately 10 minutes to present, and must also include three or more questions to guide the subsequent discussion.

### 4) In-class presentation on a work of *Genji* reception (15% of final grade)

At the end of the semester, each student will have the opportunity to do one mini-presentation (approximately 7 minutes) to introduce a work of *Genji* reception to the class. The students are encouraged to pick a work we might have encountered on one of our fieldtrips, but are generally free to choose anything across different media or from different periods, including picture scrolls, writings of criticism or apocrypha, Noh plays, film, video games, manga, etc. Besides providing a *brief* background information on the work, the presenter is encouraged to highlight how it engages with the themes discussed in class and/or how its content diverges from the source material.

### 5) Final paper or creative project (25% of final grade)

For the final requirement, students will complete an independent project that engages critically with *The Tale of Genji* and its cultural contexts or afterlives. Students may choose to write a traditional research paper that examines a thematic, formal, historical, or interpretive aspect of the text and its reception, drawing on primary and secondary sources discussed in the course. Alternatively, students may pursue a creative project that produces an original work of *Genji* reception in any medium (visual, literary, performative, digital, or otherwise). Creative projects must be accompanied by a reflective artist/author statement that explains the project's source materials, interpretive choices, and intended audience, and situates the work in relation to the themes, practices, and reception history explored in the course. More guidelines and criteria will be provided later in the semester.

## COURSE MATERIALS

**Required text:** Tyler, Royall, trans. 2001. *The Tale of Genji* (unabridged). New York: Penguin Books.

\*Though a digital copy of the main text may be available, students are encouraged to buy a physical copy for easier reference. All other course materials will be made available online and/or distributed in class. In the event that some materials become difficult to obtain, the instructor will make necessary adjustments to the syllabus.

## POLICY ON ABSENCES AND LATE WORK

Due to the participation and discussion-based nature of this course, regular attendance is mandatory. In the event of unavoidable absences, including illness, students are strongly

encouraged to email the instructor in advance. Unexplained and unexcused absences will negatively impact one's grade.

Late assignments will be deducted a penalty of one grade per day (A becomes A- if one day late, B+ if two days late, etc.) unless there are advance arrangements made with the instructor, the Office of Disability Services, or the student's advising dean.

#### ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

Any students that may have a condition or disability that can adversely affect their ability to complete their coursework on time, prevent them from engaging in certain classroom activities, or otherwise require special accommodations are encouraged to seek assistance through the main office—both for the sake of a formal notification and to ensure that proper arrangements can be made in a timely manner.

Anyone who has a certified "Accommodation Letter" is kindly asked to get in touch with the instructor at their earliest convenience, ideally within the first two weeks of classes, to confirm their accommodation needs.

#### ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

**Plagiarism and academic dishonesty in any shape or form will not be tolerated.** Students are expected to submit their own original work, and only their own original work, for any and all assignments to be completed for the class. The unauthorized use of generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools to complete assignments, including fieldtrip reflections and papers, is strictly prohibited. Note in particular that AI is prone to fabricating certain data, materials, sources, etc. and students will be held responsible for any errors and misinformation that appear in their work as a consequence of using this shortcut. For any concerns regarding proper use and citations of materials, please consult with the instructor as ignorance of rules of attribution and citation is not considered a legitimate mitigating factor.

### COURSE SCHEDULE

- ▶ NOTE: Students are encouraged to read as much of *The Tale of Genji* as their time and interest allow. However, due to the length and complexity of the work, weekly assignments will focus on selected chapters or passages that will be communicated beforehand, and students will be provided with summaries for sections that are not read in full. The chapter ranges listed in the schedule thus indicate the overall chronological range of the text covered each week, but do not imply that all pages within those ranges are required reading.

#### Week 1: Introduction: Into the World of the Shining Genji

Class 1:

▶ **No Readings.**

- ▷ Course overview.
- ▷ Introduction to the text, its author, and cultural/literary background.
- ▷ Comparison and discussion of available English translations.

Class 2:

- ▶ Main reading: *The Tale of Genji* “Intro”
- ▶ Fieldtrip: Visit to the Heiankyō Sōsenkai Museum

**Week 2: Entering the Cycle of Love, Death, and Longing**

Class 3:

- ▶ Main reading: *The Tale of Genji* Chapters 1-2 (“The Paulownia Pavilion” through “The Broom Tree”)
- ▶ Additional reading:
  - The *Kana* Preface + selection of poems from the *Kokinshū* in *Traditional Japanese Literature* (Shirane eds., 2007)
  - Dore Jesse Levy’s (1988) English translation of “Song of Everlasting Sorrow”

Class 4:

- ▶ Main reading: *The Tale of Genji* Chapters 3-4 (“The Cicada Shell” through “The Twilight Beauty”)
- ▶ Additional reading:
  - Selections from Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book* (McKinney trans.)
- ▷ Optional secondary readings:
  - Catherine Ryu’s “A Flight of Cultural Imagination in Heian Japan: The Image of Yang Guifei in *Genji monogatari* and ‘Chang hen ge,’” in *Crossing Boundaries and Confounding Identity: Chinese Women in Literature, Art, and Film* (2023), pp. 65–88.
  - Richard Okada’s Chapter 8 “Feminine Representation and Critique: ‘Hahakigi,’” in *Figures of Resistance: Language, Poetry, and Narrating in The Tale of the Genji and Other Mid-Heian Texts* (1991), pp. 197–213.
  - Aileen Gatten’s “The Order of the Early Chapters in *The Genji monogatari*,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, no. 1 (June 1981), pp. 5–46.

**Week 3: Forbidden Passions: Substitutes, Affairs, and Possessing Spirits**

Class 5:

- ▶ Main reading: *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 5-9 (“Young Murasaki” through “Heart-to-Heart”)
- ▶ Additional reading:
  - Selections from *The Ise Stories* (Tyler & Mostow trans.), esp. *kaimami* episodes

Class 6:

▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to the Costume Museum, focusing on the “Rebirth of *The Tale of Genji*” scale exhibit.

▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Selections from Doris Bargaen’s Chapter 3 “Narrating Courtship Through a Gap” pp. 57–63, in *Mapping Courtship and Kinship in Classical Japan: The Tale of Genji and Its Predecessors* (2015).
- Doris Bargaen’s “Spirit Possession in The Context of Dramatic Expressions of Gender Conflict: The Aoi Episode of *The Genji monogatari*,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48, No. 1 (June 1988), pp. 95–130.

#### **Week 4: Transgressions, Punishments, and Exile**

Class 7:

▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 10-13 (“The Green Branch” through “Akashi”)

Class 8:

▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to Arashiyama and Sagano

▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Haruo Shirane’s Chapter 2 “The Poetics of Exile,” in *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (1987), pp. 17–23.
- Selections from Rajyashree Pandey’s Chapter 3 “Erotics of Power in *The Tale of Genji*,” in *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Woman, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives* (2016), pp. 55-81.

#### **Week 5: The Hero’s Glorious Return and Echoes of Past Mistakes**

Class 9:

▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 14-19 (“The Pilgrimage to Sumiyoshi” through “Wisps of Cloud”)

Class 10:

▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to the Toribeno (Toribeyama) Cemetery and the Imperial Mausoleum of Empress Teishi

▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Haruo Shirane’s “The Aesthetics of Power: Politics in *The Tale of Genji*,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45, No. 2 (Dec. 1985), pp. 615–647.

- Joshua Mostow’s “‘Picturing’ in the *Tale of Genji*,” in *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 33, no. 1 (April 1999), pp. 1–25.
- Aileen Gatten’s “Weird Ladies: Narrative Strategy in the *Genji monogatari*,” in *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 20, No. 1 (April 1986), pp. 29–48.

### **Week 6: Collecting Women, Building a Residence for All Seasons**

Class 11:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 20-23 (“The Bluebell” through “The Warbler’s First Song”)

Class 12:

- ▶ **Fieldtrip:** Yuzen silk fabric dyeing workshop

▷ **Optional secondary readings:**

- Edith Sarra’s Chapter 3 “The Rokujōin: The House of Wishful Thinking,” in *Unreal Houses: Character, Gender, and Genealogy in the Tale of Genji* (2020), pp. 85–125.
- Tomiko Yoda’s “Fractured Dialogues: *Mono no aware* and Poetic Communication in *The Tale of Genji*,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59, No. 2 (Dec. 1999), pp. 523–57.

### **Week 7: Fatherly Transgressions and the Rise of the Second Generation**

Class 13:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 24-31 (“Butterflies” through “The Handsome Pillar”)

Class 14:

- ▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to the Kyoto Imperial Palace and the surrounding areas

▷ **Optional secondary readings:**

- Haruo Shirane’s Chapter 7 “Pseudo-Incest: The Tamakazura Sequence,” in *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (1987), pp. 88–106.
- Richard Okada’s Chapter 9 “A Figure of Narrating: Tamakazura,” in *Figures of Resistance: Language, Poetry, and Narrating in The Tale of the Genji and Other Mid-Heian Texts* (1991), pp. 214–231.

### **Week 8: At the Height of Genji’s Social Power**

Class 15:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 32-34 (“The Plum Tree Branch” through “Spring Shoots I”)

- [In class viewing] Clips from Kōzaburō Yoshimura’s film “Genji monogatari” (“Tale of Genji,” 1951) and “Hikaru Kimi-e” (“Dear Radiance,” 2024) (63<sup>rd</sup> NHK *taiga* drama).

Class 16:

▶ **Fieldtrip:** Genji-ko incense blending workshop at Jikido ICHIFUNE

▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Selections from Norma Field’s Chapter 2 “A Minor Heroine and the Unmaking of the Hero,” in *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of the Genji* (1987), pp. 86–159.
- Selections from *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* (Richard Bowring trans., 1999).

### Week 9: Beginning of the End—The Disaster of the Third Princess

Class 17:

▶ Main reading: *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 35-37 (“Spring Shoots II” through “The Flute”)

▶ Additional materials:

- Selections from *The Kagerō Diary* (Antzen trans.)
- Viewing & discussion of select images from the *Genji monogatari emaki*

Class 18:

▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to Kyoto National Museum

▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Royall Tyler’s “Genji and Suzaku (I): The Disaster of the Third Princess,” in *Essays on The Tale of Genji* (2009), pp. 63–96.
- Valerie Henitiuk’s “Seeking Refuge in Prepubescent Space: The Strategy of Resistance Employed by the *Tale of Genji*’s Third Princess,” in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 28, No. 2-3 (June/Sept. 2011), pp. 193–214.

### Week 10: The Heroine’s Death and the Hero’s Undoing

Class 19:

▶ Main reading: *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 38-41 (“The Bell Cricket” through “The Seer”) + “Vanished into Clouds”

Class 20:

▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to Ishiyama-dera

▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Steven Carter’s “‘The End of a Year—The End of a Life as Well:’ Murasaki Shikibu’s Farewell to the Shining One,” in *Approaches to Teaching Murasaki Shikibu’s The Tale of Genji* (1993), pp. 124–31.

- Royall Tyler’s “‘I am I:’ Genji and Murasaki,” in *Monumenta Nipponica* 54, No. 4 (Winter 1999), pp. 435–80.
- Excerpts from Jane Tanabe’s “The Lotus Lectures: *Hokke Hakkō* in the Heian Period,” in *Monumenta Nipponica* 39, No. 4 (Winter 1984), pp. 393–407.

### **Week 11: To the Peripheries of Uji: Enter the Third Generation**

Class 21:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 42-43 (“The Perfumed Prince” through “Red Plum Blossoms”)
- ▶ **Additional materials:**
  - Selections from *Mumyōzōshi* (Marra trans.)

Class 22:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 44-45 (“Bamboo River” through “The Maiden of the Bridge”)
- ▶ **Additional materials:**
  - Selections of *Genji kuyō* (Harper trans.)

#### ▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Paul Schalow’s Chapter 5 “The Uji Chapters: ‘Maidens of the Bridge,’” in *A Poetics of Courty Male Friendship in Heian Japan* (2006), pp. 163–87.
- Royall Tyler’s “Rivalry, Triumph, Folly, Revenge: A Plot Line through ‘The Tale of Genji,’” in *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 29, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 251–87.

### **Week 12: Finding Agency in Death, Resisting Substitution**

Class 23:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 47-49 (“Trefoil Knots” through “The Ivy”)
- ▶ **Additional materials:**
  - Selected stories from *Ōjōgokurakuki*

Class 24:

- ▶ **Fieldtrip:** Visit to The Tale of Genji Museum & Byōdo-in Temple

#### ▷ Optional secondary readings:

- Aileen Gatten’s “Death and Salvation in the *Genji monogatari*,” in *New Leaves: Studies and Translations of Japanese Literature* (1993), pp. 5–27.
- Esperanza Christensen-Ramirez’s “The Operation of the Lyrical Mode in the *Genji Monogatari*,” in *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji* (1982), pp. 21–61.

### **Week 13: The Aesthetics of Isolation**

Class 25:

- ▶ **Main reading:** Primary reading: *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 50-52 (“The Eastern Cottage” through “The Mayfly”)
- ▶ **Additional materials:**
  - Clips from Noh play *Yume no Ukihashi*

Class 26:

- ▶ **Student final presentations session #1**
- ▷ **Optional secondary readings:**
  - Haruo Shirane’s Chapter 11 “Repetition and Difference: Ukifune” pp. 151–68, in *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (1987).
  - Amanda Stinchecum’s “Who Tells the Tale? ‘Ukifune:’ A Study in Narrative Voice,” in *Monumenta Nipponica* 35, No. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 375–403.

### **Week 14: Across the Bridge of Dreams: From Source Text to a Thousand-Year Classic**

Class 27:

- ▶ **Main reading:** *The Tale of Genji*, Chapters 53-54 (“Writing Practice” through “The Floating Bridge of Dreams”)

Class 28:

- ▶ **Student final presentations session #2**
- ▷ **Optional secondary readings:**
  - Tomi Suzuki’s “The Tale of Genji, National Literature, Language, and Modernism,” in *Envisioning ‘The Tale of Genji:’ Media, Gender, and Cultural Production* (2008), pp. 243–87.
  - Michael Emmerich’s “Making Genji Ours: Translation, World Literature, and Masamune Hakuchō’s Discovery of *The Tale of Genji*,” in *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 20 (Dec. 2008), pp. 226–45.