Introduction

Murasaki Shikibu is to Japan what Homer is to Greece, Shakespeare to England, Dante to Italy, Goethe to Germany, and the T’ang poets to China. Her *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji; 1001?–1014?) is, moreover, the only national classic written by a woman. Why is it important to make a point of this departure from the expected relationship of gender to literary production? And what does it have to do with the representation of spirit possession and possessing spirits (*mono no ke*), a psychic phenomenon so integral to the text that it seems almost to structure the entire narrative?

To arrive at an answer, one must consider both the place of women in the elite courtly society of the Heian period (794–1186) and the status of the fictional narratives (*tsukuri monogatari*) that were their chief and unsurpassed mode of literary expression. Despite their considerable economic independence, aristocratic women were expected not only to concede political power to men—hardly unusual in any time or place—but also to grant men precedence in the realm of culture. Women were encouraged to show their sophistication by playing the koto and other musical instruments, by practicing calligraphy in the “woman’s hand” (*onna-de*), and by composing thirty-one-syllable poems (*waka*). Their penchant for composing vernacular narratives was tolerated. No matter how exciting contemporary Heian readers may have found these products of the imagination, the Confucian notion that prose fiction was synonymous with lies demoted women’s *tsukuri monogatari* to the lower rungs of a male–constructed artistic ladder. Meanwhile, men, writing in classical Chinese (*kanbun*), followed literary conventions imported from the continent. Since poetry was a literary form approved by the Chinese literati, men felt free to write poetry not only in Chinese but also in the vernacular.
The boundary between the genres of men’s and women’s writing was occasionally transgressed. Ki no Tsurayuki (869–945) crossed the line into women’s future literary territory by posing as the female author of an intensely personal diary, the *Tosa niki* (The Tosa Diary; ca. 935).\(^4\) Other men, writing anonymously, produced fictional narratives such as the *Taketori monogatari* (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter; ca. 960), the *Ochikubo monogatari* (The Tale of the Lower Room; late tenth century), and the *Utsubo monogatari* (The Tale of the Hollow Tree; late tenth century). (When women, writing in an animated style quite unlike men’s stilted historiography, collaborated in historical narratives [*rekishi monogatari*], such as the *Eiga monogatari* [A Tale of Flowering Fortunes; ca. 1092], they too effaced themselves.)\(^5\) Despite these sorties into unfamiliar territory, Heian female writers of vernacular prose fiction found themselves engaged in an undeclared contest with male scholars who—officially—had mere contempt for the “lies” (*soragoto*) of fiction. The struggle over “truth” became a gender issue. It is, therefore, especially ironic that, with the exception of the men who ventured into women’s territory, the mid-Heian literature best remembered and most admired today consists precisely of these women’s narratives.

Representing her male-dominated society through a female literary medium, Murasaki Shikibu (973?–1014?) dramatized spirit possession in ways that subtly subverted the structure of domination and significantly altered the construction of gender in Heian times. As John J. Winkler has noted about Sappho (late seventh century B.C.E.), “In distinguishing women’s perspective from men’s she necessarily shows a double consciousness of the two systems and their putative relation to one another as dominant to submissive. But, like linguistic minorities forced to be bilingual, Sappho understands more about the ‘dominant’ practices of men than they do about the ‘submission’ of women.”\(^6\) A reading of the *Genji*, as of Sappho’s lyrics, calls for the recognition of such a “double consciousness.” Even though Murasaki Shikibu may appear to present the mostly female phenomenon of spirit possession as perceived through the eyes of the male hero, the facts of female authorship and a largely female audience leave indelible traces in the text—traces that entice the reader to ask questions about the perceptions and the motivations of the possessed women.

In attempting some answers to these questions, I mean to address not only *Genji* specialists but also scholars from the fields of anthropology and gender studies who are curious about the complex phe-
nomenon of spirit possession as it is reflected in the mirror of a major literary work. It may seem absurd, in an age that some have characterized as “postmodern,” for European and American scholars to attempt persuasive interpretations of the *Genji monogatari*, written a millennium ago in a culture other than their own. Even if we were privy to all the customs and conventions of that temporally and culturally distant society, what must we fail to hear in its courtly discourse? To begin with, we do not even know the author’s full name, only the sobriquet by which she was known at the imperial court. There is no holograph. Despite its fame the *Genji* began to elude the Japanese themselves as the culture of the Heian aristocracy fell into decline, overwhelmed by the thrust of a newly emerging warrior culture. The acknowledged difficulties of historical reconstruction can, however, be exaggerated. On the basis of the written, visual, and archaeological evidence that has been preserved from Heian times, scholars have done a great deal to suggest how Murasaki Shikibu’s world might have looked to her. I have, in turn, benefited from their efforts. There are skeptics who believe that all such efforts are futile because we must inevitably imagine the past from the perspective of our own time and with its conceptual instruments. These skeptics ignore the fact that even a minimally sophisticated twentieth-century approach can acknowledge otherness and adjust its angle of vision in order to avoid the temptations of narrowly ethnocentric interpretation.

The Japanese themselves have, necessarily, scrutinized the *Genji* from the perspective of their own time and place. Was Motoori Norinaga’s (1730–1801) emphasis on the *Genji*’s hitherto neglected mood of elegiac sensibility (*mono no aware*) in his *Genji monogatari Tama no ogushi* (A Small Jeweled Comb of the *Genji monogatari*; 1793–1796) not a product of his culture—an insight born from the need to revise radically the traditional approach of gauging literature solely for its didactic value? Contemporary Japanese scholarship no longer restricts itself to the critical tools handed down by *kokubun-gakusha*, itself a conservative term for Japanologists, but has boldly crossed boundaries to enrich the field with Western methods—structuralism, postmodernism, narratology, deconstruction, and finally, with some hesitation, feminist criticism. Ironically, the erroneous notion that twentieth-century Western scholarship must limit itself to the cultural perspective of Heian times is itself a Western construct.

Just as some scholars have worried about “imposing our ideas on them,” others have pointed to the dangers of taking literature as a
mirror of social reality. Michele Marra warns: “To take courtly refinement as the paradigm of the historical Heian court is to present fiction as reality.” Similarly, writing about the complex interplay between kinship and power, Peter Nickerson notes that, “as a work of fiction, the Genji is likely to narrate events that are interesting precisely because they are unusual; what the Genji characters do, including especially how they love and marry, may not have been typical of mid-Heian men and women. Thus, when we wish to assess the meaning of Genji characters marrying in certain ways, or finding certain types of matches exciting and others dull, we must do so, not reading the Genji as a kind of fictional ethnography, but instead assessing statements in terms of the larger structural and symbolic context within which the narrative operates.” The “larger structural and symbolic context” includes the courtiers’ diaries and chronicles composed in Heian times. As Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan has provocatively argued, they provide a corrective to the refined cultural construct eagerly gleaned from selected works of art and literature. They also provide us with a great deal of useful information but, as Helen C. and William H. McCullough have noted, they have their shortcomings. Even if the imaginary “reality” reflected in the Genji cannot be verified, neither can the politically colored “reality” of the chronicles. Where Murasaki Shikibu used the phenomenon of spirit possession to probe deeply into gender relations in her polygynous society, the chroniclers blamed rampant mono no ke for political strife and for inexplicable or untreatable diseases, both physical and mental. In addition to the problem of historicity—the reliability of any historical document—there is the inability of “objective” information to capture the feel of life as it is lived. As the McCulloughs have observed, fiction is often our best guide to experienced reality: “Although official chronicles may have their uses in government, we must turn to tales if we want to know how people have actually lived, and what they have felt and thought.” Scholars who are nervous about this use of literary texts can be reassured by no less an authority than Claude Lévi-Strauss. He begins his discussion of the Genji by asserting that “this dense, slow narrative, attentive to the finest details of Japanese court life during the Heian period, also offers a mass of precise anthropological data, especially about a social change that certainly took place elsewhere, too, but about which we have little information outside of this invaluable source.”

Although it cannot be my aim to reconstruct Heian historic “real-
ity” from the pages of the *Genji monogatari*, there is much to be learned about Heian mentalité from Murasaki Shikibu. Fujimoto Katsuyoshi’s recent comparative study of *mono no ke* in the *Genji* and in historical narratives demonstrates that the brief scenes of spirit possession interspersed in the chronicles of courtly life fall far short of the psychological depth of Murasaki Shikibu’s literary masterpiece.¹⁴ The chroniclers’ intermittent flashes of insight became an explosive force in Murasaki Shikibu’s dazzling spectrum of the possessed, their spirits, and their targeted witnesses.

Besides gleaning information about *mono no ke* from a variety of sources and from the techniques of Western and Japanese literary scholarship—obviously a sine qua non—I have, like the classicists who have recently enlivened the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, drawn upon the methods and insights of modern cultural anthropology. This cross-cultural discipline can “raise questions and provide comparisons that illuminate much of the ancient material, letting us see much more clearly just how familiar and how strange it really is.”¹⁵ In this spirit, I locate *mono no ke* within the politics of Heian polygynous society and interpret spirit possession as a predominantly female strategy adopted to counter male strategies of empowerment such as incestuous transgressions and *kaimami* (“peeping through a hole in the fence”), a custom that inspired Heian noblemen not only to compose poetry but to take physical possession of the glimpsed woman. I have also drawn, cautiously, upon modern psychoanalytical theory (with the modifications necessary to adjust for cultural differences). Freud’s notion of the uncanny (1919), for instance, is useful in understanding certain aspects of the *mono no ke* crowding the Heian unconscious and the *Genji monogatari*.

In addition to contemporary Japanese scholarship, there is now an impressive body of Western *Genji* scholarship that simply did not exist as recently as twenty years ago. Virtually all *Genji* scholars on both sides of the Pacific preface their efforts with modest remarks about the astronomical number of books and articles devoted to Murasaki Shikibu’s classic. I too am awed by the sheer magnitude of the critical task.¹⁶ To limit the focus, as I have, to spirit possession reduces the vast amount of scholarship somewhat, but it is still a mountain that one cannot climb from all sides. I am greatly indebted to the Japanese and American guides—mentioned in the acknowledgments—to my chosen mountain path. Since the *mono no ke* path is a particularly dangerous one, I have tried to cut through the underbrush to find an
alternate route that avoids some of the stumbling blocks which impeded earlier scholars.

The organization of my chapters is simple. Since spirit possession expresses not merely the conflict of an individual but a larger crisis generally not acknowledged by society, the individual case studies of possessed women in the Genji are embedded in ritual drama staging mono no ke who enter and exit like dramatis personae.17 Thus my chapter, entitled “Enter mono no ke,” emphasizes some of the salient aspects of the Genji within the context of Heian culture and defines the flickering contours of mono no ke against the backdrop of related psychic phenomena. Since the ancient custom of illustrating copies of monogatari allows us valuable insights into the text, I end this chapter by exploring the relationship of monogatari conventions to the representation of mono no ke within the iconography of Genji art. Yet it is the rare Genji picture (Genji-e) that focuses directly on the central drama of trance and exorcism. Since mono no ke can startle through their absence in traditional iconography, I have also explored the artistic displacements of mono no ke in the triggering, foreshadowing, or analogous incident for each spirit possession, as well as in tentative resolutions, such as religious vows or poetic compositions. I then discuss, in chronological order, each of the Genji’s five important cases of spirit possession. In addition to showing how visual artists have perceived all five cases of spirit possession, I have, with one exception, concluded my chapters by commenting on spirit possession in the Genji as it was centuries later refracted through the lenses of no playwrights.18 In “Exit mono no ke,” the final chapter, I assess the efficacy of spirit possession as a woman’s weapon and suggest that possessing spirits may seem to vanish only to reappear in different form—not only in the pages of the Genji but throughout Japanese culture, down to the present day. Finally, my study contains two appendices. Appendix A places the emergence of possessing spirits within the chronology of major Genji events. Appendix B provides genealogical charts that locate characters implicated in cases of spirit possession within the complex kinship structure of the Genji.19