

The Consumption of Literature in Heian Japan

*Martin TIRALA**

【要旨】

平安時代における文学の消費

マルティン・ティララ

「文学の消費」という言葉には、ある時代の様々な社会的・文化的な戦略が含まれている。この論文の主旨は、それを平安文学で開示することである。日本語で書かれた多くの文学はどのように生産され、享受されたのか。フィクションを書く動機と理由はいったい何だったのか。平安時代の散文はどのように読まれ、どのような流通経路をたどったのか。そして、当時の貴族によって本当に高く評価されたのかなどを再考したいと思う。

平安時代の婚姻制度から考察すれば、当時の女性は理想的な男性と出会うことか、少なくとも夢かロマンチックな物語の中で美しい恋愛を楽しむことを希望していたと思われる。言い換えれば、このようなロマン主義の需要が強かった。物語は単なる娯楽だと考えられてきたが、このジャンルは非常に人気があり、常に新たな物語が求められていたということがその証拠である。多くのテキストは「市場需要」により作成されていた。正確に言えば、後宮や平安京に住む限られた女性たちの「宮廷需要」により作成されていた。そして、さらに再編纂されていたと考えられる。これは、源氏物語の場合も同じであろう。読者たちは物語のさらなる続きを求めたため、紫式部は源氏物語を書き直したり、書き続けたりしていたに相違ない。

The term “consumption of literature” covers a broad area of socio-cultural strategies in a given historical period, and one of the main objectives of my paper is to uncover and explain these strategies in the Heian period literature, at least partially. I would like to investigate how the numerous literary texts written in Japanese were produced, received and appreciated by the aristocracy of that time. What were the motivation and reasons for writing fictional stories? How was Heian prose read and distributed among its recipients?

Works of literature from the Heian period (794-1185) constitute the core of the classical Japanese canon. These works include prose and poetry, masterpieces written both in Japanese and Chinese. Although poetry was more prestigious during the Heian period, which is considered the golden age of classical Japanese literature, it is the prosaic genre called *monogatari* (tale) that most appeals to contemporary readers.

The majority of these works were set in Heiankyō, today Kyōto. Heiankyō (literally “The Capital of Peace and Tranquility”), which was the seat of the emperor and the center of the imperial court surrounded by ancient

* Charles University, Prague

aristocratic clans, had many specifics that discerned it from its Chinese model, Chang-an, the capital of Tang China. Chang-an was encircled by strong walls built against potential aggressors while Heiankyō was without any protection, except the mountains and rivers. Both cities were divided into two parts, left and right, but only the left or eastern part actually developed in Heiankyō. Divergences were even in the structure of the imperial court and the customs observed in the imperial palace. A striking difference could also be seen in how the emperor's harem was organized. In China the empresses and other emperor's ladies were strictly guarded by eunuchs, obviously to do no harm to these women, while in Japan the empresses and other consorts of the sovereign were relatively free.

Together with their ladies-in-waiting, their servants, and the numerous female court officials and servants they could move within boundaries of the twelve connected buildings of the harem, the 'rear palace' (*kōkyū*) north of the emperor's residential palace, where, especially from the tenth century on, they presided over one of the chief centers of noble social life. (Shively, Donald H. and McCullough, William H. (eds) *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 2: Heian Japan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 127)

The rear palace had a crucial influence on the literature of that time. Most of the Heian *monogatari* had been written in the rear palace.

Although the rear palace was by no means freely accessible to any noble, the consorts were not prisoners of the palace, and even while there they were not isolated from society. They frequently returned for visits or childbirth to the homes of their parents or other close relatives, and while at court they were freely visited in their quarters by a variety of male and female relatives. Since each consort usually sought to make the physical trappings of her quarters as attractive as possible and to surround herself with particularly accomplished and beautiful ladies-in-waiting, the result was at least sometimes a highly stylish salon where men and women were able to meet and entertain themselves with considerable freedom. (Ibid: 127)

From history we know about two famous literary salons that evolved around two consorts of the same emperor, Emperor Ichijō (980-1011). One salon centered on Fujiwara no Teishi, whose leading lady-in-waiting was Sei Shōnagon, the author of *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book), and the other was created for Fujiwara no Shōshi, whose ladies-in-waiting included Izumi Shikibu, Akazome Emon and especially Murasaki Shikibu, the author of the world's oldest psychological novel, *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of *Genji*). Both consorts were rivals in love for the emperor, and correspondingly the salons competed with each other. By coincidence, this rivalry gave rise to the best works of Heian literature.

A habitual practice is to talk about Heian literature as feminine and assert that *nikki* (diaries) and *monogatari* used to be written principally by women. However, the reverse is true; most of the works before *Genji monogatari* were in fact originated by men. The first diary in Japanese was written by Ki no Tsurayuki, the famous poet who was also the author of the preface to *Kokinwakashū*, the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry that became the cornerstone of Japanese poetics. Tsurayuki's preface and diary, in which he pretended it was created by a woman, were the first important steps in recognition of Japanese script, or *kana*, as a script worthy of the eyes of the emperor. Without

Tsurayuki's effort to establish *kana* as a standard for writing a prosaic text, the women probably could not have achieved what they later achieved because until that time *kana* had been mainly used in Japanese poetry and could not compete with the prestige of the Chinese script.

Also the first known *monogatari*, the *Taketori monogatari* (*The Tale of a Bamboo-cutter*), was beyond doubt written by a man, or a group of learned men. Tales like *Taketori monogatari*, full of supernatural beings, powers and objects, appealed to both male and female readers, who craved for interesting stories that could dispel their everyday boredom. However, it seems more likely that these tales were intended for women who were not usually sufficiently competent to read Chinese texts full of complicated Chinese characters. The *kana* syllabary was a better alternative. Also the other two fictional *monogatari* before the *Genji* were written by men. The *Utsuho monogatari* (*The Tale of the Hollow Tree*) continues in the tradition of the supernatural. However, the *Ochikubo monogatari* (*The Tale of the Lady Ochikubo*) explores the very popular theme of the wicked stepmother and the oppressed stepdaughter, the Japanese version of the Cinderella story. These tales, partially fantastical but predominantly dealing with love, were the core of Heian prose before *Genji monogatari*. As we know from other sources, many such tales existed, but unfortunately most of these texts were lost. Only the three mentioned tales have survived.

Apart from the fictional tales, *tsukuri monogatari*, there also existed the poem tales, *uta monogatari*, prose fictions of varied length build around one or more Japanese poems. These tales were even more popular than the fictional ones because Japanese poetry was part and parcel of the amorous communication among Heian aristocrats. The main themes of these tales were unsurprisingly love and its variations. The most influential and oldest work of this subgenre is the *Ise monogatari* (*The Tales of Ise*), a collection of 125 episodes centering for the most part on the love adventures of the idealized male hero, who is commonly identified with the famous Heian poet Ariwara no Narihira (825-880). Noble ladies were impressed by this poet, who became an ideal of amorous courtship, refined taste (*miyabi*) and sensitivity (*aware*). They sought after such a man in reality, but in vain. This type of hero was found only in fiction. Actually, many Heian women were so captivated by this ideal that they had serious problems adapting to reality, as we can guess from their diaries.

The poem tales were usually produced during special sessions called *utagatari* (narrating about poems), during which a group of courtiers and poets create new stories for existing poems, or compose poems for existing stories. In this fashion *Ise monogatari* was probably even created. The authors of this and other narratives usually gathered at their residences outside the imperial court and enjoyed *utagatari* as one of the ways of escape from the harsh realities of political struggle. This was especially when the poets belonged to one of the ancient aristocratic clans oppressed by the ruling Fujiwaras. Their meetings eventually led to creating male literary salons, whose members were in most cases somehow discontented with the dirty tricks and machinations of the Fujiwaras. This dissatisfaction could be in many cases discerned in the *Ise monogatari* and the later poem tales. However the *Ise monogatari* is not a dominant theme of these texts. As I have mentioned, the main theme of the poem tales was love, and love was also the main theme of the fictional tales. What is the reason for this clinging to love?

As can be guessed from the information in Heian diaries and from the later *monogatari*, the women, for whom both types of tales were targeted, were in many cases dissatisfied with their lot, discontented with the institution of marriage. The marriages were technically speaking arranged; the ladies could not choose the person they loved. The prospect of creating a profitable alliance was more important than inner feelings. A marriage of convenience was also

a common phenomenon in other parts of the world. However, the difference was in the nature of a Heian marriage.

The typical marriage began with a period of duolocal residence, the husband only visits his wife at her house and continues to live in his own. This lasted for varying periods of time, from a few days up to a year or more, but eventually the husband took up residence at the house of his wife's parents (uxorilocal residence). (Ibid: 136-137)

The majority of marriages were monogamous, but polygamy was approved for high and important nobles. And it was especially in these situations that the woman suffered from loneliness, boredom or jealousy. The duolocal phase of common marriages had a similar effect. It is no surprise that these women longed to meet an ideal lover or enjoy a beautiful love, at least in their dreams or in romantic tales. There was a strong demand for this kind of romanticism. We can only imagine how many *monogatari* existed before the *Genji*. Some sources indicate as many as a hundred lost works. This proliferation of *monogatari* genre testifies to the extreme popularity and need for new stories.

Many of these texts were created and even recreated according to the "market," or to be more precise, the "court" demand of the limited society of empresses, princesses, court ladies and female servants living in the Heian capital. This is true even for the *Genji monogatari*. Murasaki Shikibu reworked and expanded the text, as readers called for further continuation of the story. This is related to how texts were read at those times. It was not common to read *nikki* or *monogatari* individually. A group reading was preferred. Usually one woman read and the rest listened and looked at the illustrations that accompanied these works. Female or male authors belonging to their respective salons, female or male, were with most probability in direct contact with the readers. They even read the stories themselves and could according to the demand continue or rewrite their stories. However, were these works viewed as masterpieces during the Heian period? Were they in fact considered literature? As we can judge from the small number of the tales that survived, they were not held in high esteem; nor were their authors celebrated. The reason we know the name of the author of the *Genji* is just a lucky coincidence. Murasaki Shikibu writes about this book also in her personal diary. However, even her name is not a real name but a nickname. The situation is completely different in Japanese poetry. Japanese poets signed their poems because Japanese poetry was recognized as an important part of high culture. In contrast, *monogatari* was considered to be a mere pastime. It took a long time to assess *monogatari* as a work of literature (prose), and not just a collection of poems.