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Liza Dalby. *The Tale of Murasaki: A Novel.* New York: Vintage Anchor, 2001. 448 pp. $14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-385-49795-4.

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Liza Dalby, well known to many who had read her *Geisha* (Random House: New York, l983) has made another important contribution to Asian studies with *The Tale of Murasaki, a Novel (Chatto and Windus, London: 2000). In the former book Dalby described what the life of a Geisha is like by becoming one. Undergoing training for a year; in l983 she proclaimed she was "the only non-Japanese ever to have become a geisha" (p. 281). Now in 2000 she has taken an even greater step in imagining that she was Lady Murasaki, the author of the great novel* The Tale of Genji_ and lived 1000 years ago.

Once again Dalby has offered a readable, engaging account of the historical court lady whose life bridged the tenth and eleventh centuries in Heian (Kyoto) Japan. Dalby suggests her novel was by piecing fragments of Murakaki's diary into "an imagined reminiscence, much as an ancient vase might be reconstructed by setting the original fragments into a vessel of modern clayóa sort of literary archaeology" (p xiii)

As well as fragments from the Diary of Murasaki, here are many echoes fom The *Tale of Genji*, well known to students of world literature through the Waley and Seidensticker translations. Dalby acknowledges her reliance upon Richard Bowring's *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs* (Princeton, l982) from which she took "practically all of the waka from her poem collection, and Helen and William McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (Stanford 1980) or "historical counterpart to the fictional Tale of Genji. Dalby's novel is a creative piece that will be useful especially when read in conjunction with *The Tale of Genji*, just as Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* has been for several decades when read with Waley's translation on which Morris based his essay. Now many readers may find a "voice" for the thousand-year-old author of Genji as they read *The Tale of Murasaki.*

The dramatis personae (pp. xv-xvii) may prove helpful, even to readers familiar with the Heian period. Most of the characters will be well known from Seidensticker's translation of Genji and from Bowring's biographical listing (pp. 171-181). Some readers may not recognize which were historical people and which created by Murasaki or by Dalby. But there is a wonderful solution to this problem. A website entitled "Characters-fact or fiction" will quickly inform the reader which are historical and which are not. In fact, on that website one can find the following: material about Dalby, the twentieth-century author; material about Murasaki, the tenth-century author; a list of some seventy-two seasons in Japan; issues of sexual preference; a well-illustrated page on foods served at the time,in vivid color, not to be opened if one has any inclination towards hunger.

Some aspects will puzzle readers of *The Tale of Murasaki.* For example, the first chapter entitled "Katako's letter" is written in the first person by Katako, Murasaki's daughter, to her own child telling her that she was pregnant her, when her own mother, i.e. Murasaki died. She tells her child that the "Genji tale was like an elder brother to me from the time I was born. He took up much time and attention: like any selfish body." Only later does Katako fall under his spell. She tells her child who the father is, a nephew of the regent.

The second through the forty-fifth chapters have the voice of Murasaki herself, and only with the last chapter entitled "Katako" does the voice shift back. Chapter three opens with the death of Murasaki's mother when Murasaki was 15, in what would be the year 978.

In the first half the book Dalby was imaginative in having "her Murasaki" begin to create the earliest Genji stories as a kind of "coming of age ceremony" which parallels the Heian author's own sexual experiences. Dalby suggests "The night of the Hazy Moon-Oborozukiyo" was written for a friend Chifuru, when the fictional Murasaki was only 17 years old (p. 25). The exchange of fans which took place in The Tale of Genji was, according to Dalby, based upon the exchange of fans between the two fictional adolescent girls in their own intimacy.

Another major influence upon the fictional Murasaki was her grandmother, who had told her tales of the Heian Court and stories like "The Bamboo Cuter" and "The Tale of the Hollow Tree." From the fictional grandmother, Dalby conjectures, Murasaki was exhorted to include more poems in with her narrative. Dalby's Murasaki reads the stories and poems aloud to her grandmother, and thereby she discovered what many writers in future years would discover "that the very process of speaking them aloud to an audience helped me to write them" (p. 34). Dalby's readers may want to ponder the oral quality in the stories and poems of the actual text of *The Tale of Genji*.

A third influence for Dalby's Murasaki was a young woman named Ruri with whom she had the most explicit sensual experience (p. 48). From Ruri she heard more tales of the Court; and for the first time Murasaki started to think of Genji as "of royal blood but not an imperial prince, because then his actions would be constrained by his high rank." She became fascinated by stories she heard of sexual exploits, and at one point actually sees him in public and finds him attractive, but is sad to learn he was once banished from Kyoto.

Suddenly in her novel, Dalby employs historical detail of Murasaki going with her father to the Province of Echizen. There she develops a style of writing travel narratives. Her father, according to Dalby, was sent there because of his study of the Chinese language. Indeed, there were Chinese merchants living and trading in Echizen. From that historical detail, Dalby created perhaps the most interesting of her inventions, a young man from China whose name was Meikoku (or Ming-gwok, in Chinese), (p. 111). In a discussion this reviewer had with Dalby in Claremont, California, in October 2001 she commented that Ming-gwok gave her literary license to explain many things about the Heian period. From Ming-gwok Murasaki would learn much about Chinese poetry such as the poet Li He and about life in China, historical and scientific developments. One story Ming-gwok told her was about love between girl and a dog which Murasaki found disgusting, but Ming-gwok found a moral in the story and even was about to write a waka, in Japanese, showing that the love must "spring from karmic vows of former Lives." Dalby gives a footnote showing her source for this story (p. 133). I told Dalby that the figure of Ming-gwok was so haunting that I expected through the remainder of the novel for him to return. Dalby told us that although Ming-gwok was a useful fictional character, there is strong historical evidence of Chinese people who lived in Echizen which bordered on the sea between Japan and the Asian Mainland. Dalby also reminded us that the name of Murasaki was given to the author by the readers of her novel a thousand years ago when they came to love the child "Murasaki" who was first adopted by and the married to Prince Genji. (As an aside someone said this is like Charles Dickens being called "Copperfield" by his readers).

Again relying upon an historical detail, Dalby says that during the period Murasaki was in Echizen she had been promised in marriage to a friend of her father, Lord Nobukaka. At this point, Dalby uses *The Poetic Memoirs*, the Bowring translation. In direct sequencing, she uses the waka in Bowring's translation beginning with Poem 29 (p. 226 and Dalby p. 147). The next five chapters of the Tale of Murasaki reveal details such as accepting marriage, living in Nobunaka's house, conceiving his child, and then suddenly learning of his death (p. 201). These chapters were masterfully constructed by interweaving the waka of *The Poetic Memoirs* into the narrative of novel.

The Diary of Lady Murasaki covers only two years starting in 1008, beginning in the fall with a description of autumn and ending in the first month of 1010. Empress Shoshi is pregnant with the future emperor. "It was about midday, yet we all felt just as though the morning sun had risen into a cloudless sky. Our delight on finding both mother and child were safe…and when we heard it was a boy how could we have been anything but ecstatic? " (Bowring, p. 57)

Dalby's great achievement is in the development of the fictional Murasaki in bringing readers to the same point in Murasaki's life when the historical Empress had a child. Dalby wrote, "It was high noon when the announcement was made, yet everyone felt that the morning sun had just risen in a cloudless sky. That Shoshi had survived was reason enough to celebrate, but that the child was a boy made everyone ecstatic" (p. 318). At that point in the story Dalby's Murasaki is a developed

and accomplished woman of about 30 years of age, who had written many chapters of the Genji stories by then. She had done many things. She had gone into exile in a distant province, fallen in love, married a man the age of her father, become pregnant by him, attended his funeral, and been selected to become a court attendant to the Empress by the Regent Fujiwara Michinaga. Dalby has Michinaga say, "I need you to record this, he continued. This will be my most glorious moment, and I want a full record of it."

Thereby Dalby explains the existence of the Diary. It was to record the birth of Michinaga's grandson, his seal of authority in Heian Japan, the prince who would become Emperor. Dalby deals with many important issues in the interpretation of *The Tale of Genji*. Among them are the awareness by Murasaki of her audience and the changing nature of the character of Genji in response to the audience. Years ago Jin'ichi Konishi, in *A History of Japanese Literature* (Princeton, l986), pointed out that when Murasaki met Lord Michinaga, "she would have regarded him as the equivalent of a patron" (p. 274). Probably the intellectuals Kinto and Kozei were in her audience and therefore she would have wanted to "create serious topics worthy of their critical standards." So even if a more modest goal was Murasaki's intent with a less sophisticated audience, after becoming part of the Court at Michinaga's invitation, the nature of Genji would change. Dalby is very skilled in suggesting how this process of change takes place in her novel.

Dalby's recent work is part of a much broader development which Donald Richie has recently called the "Genji business." For more than a hundred years, he suggests there as been a revival of interest in Genji reawakened by several forces in Japan. Staring in 1901 a translation by Yosano Akiko offered some "lightly erotic poems" in a collection of tanka translated in English as "Tangled Hair (Donald Richie, Yosano Akiko and the "Tale of Genji," translated by G. G. Rowley [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000], *Japan Times*, The Asian Bookshelf, July 4, 2000). Richie shows that Yosano was followed by Tanazaki's translation in the 1930 through the Yoshimura Kozaburo l951, and the Ichikawa Kon TV version in the 1970's. And recently we have a modern dance version coming and a three-hour Genji Opera. Even the new Japanese 2,000 yen bill has image of Genji on it. There seems to be much ahead for Prince Genji as he ages into a new millennium.

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