195:475 “*The Tale of Genji* as World Literature”

Rutgers University

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**Syllabus**

**Instructor**

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**Description**

In this course we will read *The Tale of Genji*, by the Japanese court lady Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 978-1015). Completed somewhere around the year 1010 C.E., during the Heian period (794-1185) in the imperial court of Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto), the work is considered to be, in the words of Donald Keene, “the supreme masterpiece of Japanese literature.” Keene goes on to assert that this work in the *monogatari* (tale) form is “not only the quintessence of the aristocratic culture of Heian Japan, but has affected the aesthetic and emotional life of the entire Japanese people for a millennium.” But *The Tale of Genji* is also a major work of world literature. Sometimes compared with the Western novel form due to its intense focus on the internal lives of its many characters, the work has similarities also with the European medieval romance due to its presentation of a court-based society and its extreme focus on love in its various manifestations. We will study this work in detail, as a court romance, psychological novel, and feminist text. Readings include the unabridged text and several scholarly essays that shed light on various aspects of it.

**Structure**

The course is divided into three units: **Unit 1**—The first generation, chapters 1-21, Genji’s youth, political setback, and triumph; **Unit 2**—The second generation, chapters 22-41, life at Genji’s Rokujō estate, the competition to place his children advantageously at court;**Unit 3—**The third generation, chapters 42-54, the quest that leads Kaoru to Uji after Genji’s death, the Eighth Prince and his daughters.

**Requirements**

Each student must prepare a 2-page, double-spaced discussion sheet for the scholarly essays assigned in class. This sheet will provide a basis for discussion in the seminar and must be turned in at the end of class. The discussion sheet should address two or three specific points in the essay that the student found particularly interesting, useful, or controversial in relation to the day’s reading assignment from *The* *Tale of Genji*.

A 10-page seminar paper is due at the end of Unit 3, exploring larger themes or scholarly debates that were raised in the seminar.

**Grading**

Grade based on class participation (20%), twelve discussion sheets (40%), and a final 10-page seminar paper (40%).

**Texts**(for purchase at Rutgers Bookstore, Ferren Mall)

1. Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*, translated by Royall Tyler, unabridged. Penguin Books, 2001.
2. Harold Bloom, ed. *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Murasaki Shikibu’s The Tale of Genji*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2004.
3. Paul Gordon Schalow. *A Poetics of Courtly Male Friendship in Heian Japan .* University of Hawaii Press, 2007. (recommended)