

THE TALE OF GENJI: A QUEST FOR THE TRUE HEART

Avery Morrow

The difficulties of finding a suitable husband for a young princess

If only there were *someone*, he thought—someone not perhaps up to the standard he has always set, but still, after his fashion, of a rank and character that would not be demeaning, and someone who would undertake in all sincerity to look after the princesses. (S 803, T 852)

So muses the Eighth Prince in the Uji chapters of *The Tale of Genji*, as he contemplates finding husbands for his two daughters. In the Eighth Prince's world, a father has the duty of arranging matches for his children, and this psychological novel suggests with fascinating detail what might have been running through the minds of many noble fathers in the Japan of a thousand years ago. The Eighth Prince does not appear to believe it is asking very much that potential suitors for his daughters, the Uji princesses, act *in all sincerity*. We might translate the text more literally and say he wants to find someone who will care for the princesses *with a true heart*.

Unfortunately, despite his good intentions, it seems that the Eighth Prince lives in a world where true hearts are quite rare, or at

least rarely discussed. The phrase “true heart”—*magokoro*, in Japanese—appears only four times in the complete text of *The Tale of Genji*. Significantly, three of these appearances occur in passages that convey the often subtle difficulties of finding a suitable husband for a young princess. Although the contexts in which the phrase appears differ significantly, each invocation carries with it the same ideal of how a *true heart* might assist the respective union.

Take, for instance, the case of the Third Princess, who eventually gives birth to Kaoru. Like the princesses at Uji, she is isolated from the capital and has few suitors. A nurse confides in hushed tones to the princess's brother that “only her father really cares about her” (S 542, T 581). Here, someone who “really cares” about the princess could be more literally translated as “one whom she could offer her thoughts to with a true heart” (J: *magokoro ni omoi kikoetamau beki hito*).

The immediate context in which “true heart” is used here is rather different from the case of the Uji princesses. In this instance, the

Opposite page: *A page from a 13th Century illustrated version of the ‘Ukifune’ chapter in The Tale of Genji.*

thought to be expressed begins in the Third Princess' "true heart," which we might also translate as her "heart of hearts" or "the bottom of her heart." But the ideal of a good husband ends up being the same: the Third Princess needs a man with whom she can communicate in earnest.

It is my contention that the way that *true heart* is used in the matchmaking stories of the Eighth Prince and Third Princess describes an ideal relationship between men and women, one expressed consistently throughout *The Tale of Genji*. In such an ideal relationship, one's thoughts and worries are not concealed from one's partner; indeed, they cannot be concealed. I further argue that *true love* in *The Tale of Genji* is achieved only insofar as two people can completely know each other's hearts. When two people become adept at reading each other's hearts in the novel, they become linked in a mysterious bond, and this marks the principal way in which characters develop and mature.

It is important to understand the ramifications of my definition. First, true love may induce jealousy, as with Genji and Murasaki, but that does not mean monogamy is preferable. Murasaki Shikibu, the author, is not particularly interested in monogamy, because she does not think that having multiple relationships hinders knowledge of the heart. In fact, from the noble portrait she paints of Genji, it seems she may believe that one actually can *gain* from having multiple relationships at once. Knowledge of the heart, it seems, cannot be had from books or conversations, but must be obtained by acting on one's passions and caring about the results. The book indicates that Genji's wild passions give him many opportunities to develop this peculiar brand of knowledge.

Shielding one's heart from another

Second, honesty as seen in *The Tale of Genji* is decidedly not the same virtue that would gain prominence in 17th Century, Neo-Confucian Japan, although we will see later that it shares some surprising characteristics. Since speaking from the heart, *magokoro*, places one in a state of vulnerability, the heart is not offered to just anyone. The physical screens and verbal circumlocutions in the novel are all feints by which one attempts to shield one's heart from another. Whatever a sociologist might want to say about it, for the novelist these are not artificial barriers created by any particular class or group; rather, they are fundamental necessities of life that prevent the disruption of sharing unfettered emotion. An exchange of short poems, in which artful allusion is the only thing covering bare feeling, is the most delicate and dangerous way two people can communicate.

Finally, although *The Tale of Genji* is best known in modern Japan for its extended discussions of evanescence, there is an odd permanence to the way relationships work in the novel. There is no question of "freedom" in this novel, and a man cannot walk away from a woman, even after her death. The eternal bond can only be frayed, not actually broken—something Genji seems to know better than any other character. Perhaps the most romantic aspect of the novel is that when two hearts have loosened their secrets, they can never thereafter abandon each other.

How does one begin the quest for a person to whom one might relate one's "true heart"? The long monologue by the Chief Equerry at the beginning of the novel encapsulates this ideal along with most of the philosophy of the book at large, and it is worth quoting here:

On the other hand, with a dutiful, frumpish housewife who keeps her sidelocks tucked behind her ears and does nothing but housework, the husband who leaves in the morning and comes home at night, and who can hardly turn to strangers to chat about how so-and-so is getting on in public or private or about whatever, good or bad, may have happened to strike him and is entitled to expect some understanding from the woman who shares his life, finds instead, when he feels like discussing with her the things that have made him laugh or cry, or perhaps have inflamed him with righteous indignation and are now demanding an outlet, that all he can do is avert his eyes, and that when he then betrays private mirth or heaves a sad sigh, she just looks up at him blankly and asks, 'What is it, dear?' How could he not wish himself elsewhere? (T 25, S 25)

This is how the novelist portrays the dilemma from the perspective of the husband, and she places herself with usual grace in the shoes of a man of the court. We should have no doubt that any such relationship between two people requires honesty on both sides. The husband's laugh or sigh is powerless because it falls on uncaring ears. He longs for someone who cares about the things weighing on him; like the Third Princess, he needs "someone whom he can offer his thoughts to with a true heart." In the face of an uninterested wife, the thought is suppressed, and an accompanying resentment of his situation simmers beneath the surface: "How could he not wish himself elsewhere?"

From resentment to devotion

Although this segment of the Chief Equerry's speech appears a bit humdrum and somewhat self-evident, in fact it points towards an

insight underlying the work, one which allows the story to go on for a thousand pages without ever getting stuck in a single political affair: However powerful the husband may be at court, at home his situation is defined by his incompleteness. If we want to know why the characters in *Genji* keep getting entangled with each other when they are capable of living by themselves, this visceral incompleteness provides an answer long before any abstract definition of man as a "political" or "social" animal. And where another writer might locate the optimal solution to humanity's needs in any number of power structures, Lady Murasaki brings a man home from his work and sits him in front of his wife, showing him that the need for love is more fundamental than any of these.

The method by which the novelist arrives at her optimal solution, though, is certainly distinct from what we might hear from a modern writer of self-help books. In fact, the truest of all relationships in the book, between Murasaki and Genji, is marked by Murasaki's attempts to conceal her fits of jealousy and pique with utmost skill, and Genji's ability to see through her. Murasaki's jealousy should not indicate that she really believes Genji is violating their relationship with his many affairs; as a stand-in for the author, Murasaki wishes she could have Genji all to herself even as she acknowledges the necessity of his education in love. A close reading of the Japanese supports such a claim, as the following analyses will show.

The phrase "true heart" is itself used in reference to Murasaki's jealousy. When Murasaki expresses a humble inferiority to Lady Akashi, Genji realizes that "she who once sharply resented this lady now, out of pure devotion to [Akashi], admitted her indulgently to her presence" (T 647, S 609).

Here, “pure devotion” literally is “her heart being true” (J: *magokoro naru*). In this passage, we learn a surprising fact about the true heart: when one acts from the bottom of one’s heart, resentment melts away—even for a rival lover—and is replaced by “devotion” or, as the translator Seidensticker puts it, making “good friends.” We might expect Murasaki’s jealousy to be a constant and stable part of her character, yet her access to the true heart prevents this. The lesson, it seems, is that if people can open up to others, they can discover their natural goodness and improve themselves. This insight predates the Neo-Confucian doctrine of the goodness of human nature by several hundred years. It is tempting to conclude, as did Motoori Norinaga in the early modern period, that the goodness of the true heart is a belief native to Japan.

Yet there is a major difference between the Neo-Confucian idea of human nature and that represented in *The Tale of Genji*: while a Neo-Confucian’s honest heart can be opened up to everyone, sharing one’s nature in the novel is an act of love toward an individual. For example, the Third Princess’ nurse assumes that if no decent gentleman can be found for the princess, then an indecent one may appear instead, and *The Tale of Genji* is nothing if not a record of how any type of man, decent or indecent, can have his way with an unmarried woman. Indeed, a maiden is in such a precarious position in Heian Japan that the nurse warns the princess that even other women “could easily bring about her ruin” (S 542, T 581). The only alternative to this dire scenario is to find someone with whom the princess can share her vulnerability. If she were to fall prey to the machinations of a malicious maid or a malevolent man, the possibility of revealing

her true heart would be lost. This seems like common sense, but it reveals an important difference from the Neo-Confucian ideal of good human nature. The true heart is not something that can be paraded around before good and evil alike, but can only be safely revealed when the relationship is one of mutual trust and affection.

The necessity of mutual openness

In the story of what happens to the Third Princess after her match is made, we see a straightforward expression of the necessity of mutual openness. Genji is chosen as a husband because of his admirable constancy. This sounds ironic from our cultural perspective, but according to the court gossip, it is in fact a point in his favor that he has been able to show that constancy and loyalty to multiple women over the course of his life. His mastery of polygamous love is a virtue, and proves his skill in knowing the hearts of others and speaking to them with care.

But the princess is unable to express her feelings with similar eloquence. Genji is optimistic that “we can arrange things happily enough for her,” but Murasaki worries from the beginning that “she might feel less than completely at home” (S 550). Like the lonely husband who would “wish himself elsewhere,” the princess might feel unable to communicate if she does not regard Rokujo as her home. Indeed, although Genji teaches her an instrument, she remains childlike, unable to speak in a dignified manner with the mature women around her.

When Kashiwagi barges into the Third Princess’ room, the princess’ failure to develop an artful voice has grave consequences. Neither is able to communicate with the other. She is unable to

gasp out a word of protest against his physical advance on her. Instead, her ability to speak is choked off entirely, as Ukifune's will be when dealing with Kaoru. Although Genji tried his best to entice her to "offer her thoughts with a true heart," she is unable to do so at the most crucial moment. On Kashiwagi's part, his passion overcomes his ability to communicate himself properly. The result is an unhappy relationship for both of them, rendered in a gesture of common sadness: "Brushing away her tears, he let them mingle with his own." When Kashiwagi leaves, he feels "as if he were leaving his soul behind" (S 615, T 651-2). Something has gone wrong for both parties.

The Eighth Prince, father of the Uji princesses, does not turn out to be as morally unambiguous as the imperial family was in the New Herbs chapters, but we must at least trust his desire to have someone care for his princesses with "a true heart." The implications are just as heavy here as they are in the case of the Third Princess. The prince worries that even suitors who wrote to him "looked down upon ladies left to waste away in the mountains" (S 804). A good husband must be able not only to take his daughters to a noble home, but also to genuinely care about them and treat them with respect.

The best prospects, by these criteria, are Niou and Kaoru. But does either really care about the girls? During their initial meetings with the princesses, romance seems imminent, but eventually we see that neither one brings his "true heart" to the occasion. Niou is a prolific liar, and while Kaoru believes he is telling the truth, he is not interested in listening genuinely to the princesses as much as making them into objects in his grand drama. Here, we must refer to the definition of "true heart" furnished by Murasaki's

relationship with Lady Akashi. Kaoru's idiosyncrasies are not a true part of his nature, because they are clearly not issued from a pure goodness. He possesses a simulacrum of honesty, but he is bottled up inside himself and unable to approach the larger world. In practice, this turns out to be just as bad as Niou's open deception. As it turns out, the true heart is not accessible until one stops trying to look for it inside oneself and turns to face the outer world. The novelist paints a compelling picture of a romance without any truthful core. Although Kaoru supposedly is in love with Oigimi, he does not take the risks necessary to make her part of his family, and she stops eating and wastes away. The other princess, Nakanokimi, is taken by Niou, but he quickly abandons her.

**The tragedy of Ukifune:
a parody of the 'true heart'**

We have now seen three moments in which the novelist chose the phrase "true heart" to express an ideal. For Murasaki, the ideal rings true. For the Third Princess, Genji does his best to fulfill its promise, but is eventually thwarted by Kashiwagi. For the Uji princesses, the ideal is more evident in its appalling absence. The final appearance of the phrase "true heart," though, goes beyond a distant, unattainable ideal to become a cruel and grotesque parody.

This last use of the phrase appears in the "Eastern Cottage" chapter, when the suitor lieutenant abruptly changes his marriage partner from Ukifune to Himegimi. The bumbling governor of Hitachi, eager for a good marriage, issues a quick approval: "Just let him be good to her, and I'll see him all the way" (S 942, T 979). For "Just let him be good to her," a closer reading may be Tyler's:

“All he needs to do is put his [true] heart into looking after her” (J: *tada magokoro ni omooshikaeri misasetamawaba*). On the surface, this appears to be the same sort of virtuous desire for a loving relationship that other figures have expressed with respect to their own matchmaking events. But the governor of Hitachi has just betrayed his stepdaughter and agreed to marry off another daughter instead. His reference to a true heart immediately rings hollow. The insult to Ukifune hits home in the miserable conclusion to his little speech: “The two of them are going to be very happy, I guess” (J: *shiawase to aru beki koto niya to mo shirazu*). The whole scene feels a bit like the invention of lying, an exposition of what an unscrupulous person tells himself when induced to betray his family. The governor is not talking directly to the lieutenant, but to a “crafty” intermediary who is hoping for a reward from both sides and could not be expected to care how exactly the governor justifies his decision.

Ukifune’s trials occupy the remainder of the book. Unlike the two princesses of Uji, for whom the false love of Niou and Kaoru has immediate consequences, Ukifune is beset with their broken affections until she is forced to take action herself. Having never known communication from a true heart, she is duped by a travesty when she encounters Niou: “This must be the sort of thing people meant when they spoke of love” (S 982, T 1018). Ukifune does not know how to distinguish between true and false love because she has been sealed off from the capital in an isolated manor. Her isolation cuts her off from all opportunities to find the truth; like the hypothetical man of the court from the beginning of the novel, her true heart must be suppressed in an unheard sigh.

Other people may recall faint memories of “the gentleman they used to call ‘the shining Genji’ or something of the sort” (S 1077, T 1107), but Ukifune knows nothing of this. Perhaps the ideal of a “true heart,” echoed here only in the form of a parody by her evil stepfather, is being lost entirely.

When Lady Murasaki took on the tremendous challenge of writing *The Tale of Genji*, she was also querying the depths of human passion. Is love a chemical compound, an irrational obsession shot from Cupid’s bow? Does love find an animal satisfaction in merely conquering the other? Or can it be heightened into an art and a virtue—a way for us to conquer our own instincts and find deeper truths within ourselves? There is no discourse in the novel on the good and the true. But there is a crushing sense, especially in its concluding chapters, that some characters have failed to find goodness and truth in their relationships. And there are hints, here and there, of an ideal expressed with words like *magokoro*—the true heart, from which goodness proceeds, as in the case of the character Murasaki.

The true heart’s love as portrayed in *The Tale of Genji* is not the universal *magokoro* of early modern Neo-Confucians, because it is not available to just anyone. Rather, a meeting of hearts is a meeting of vulnerabilities. For some reason, it is necessary to make oneself vulnerable to find this goodness and truth; romantic experience, when handled artfully, serves as a method of instruction. But it is just as easy to lose this ideal, or to be born into a world where it never makes itself visible. In describing this final loss, the novel itself seems to offer some kind of instruction, for a thing can only become lost if it at some point existed. The Buddhists say the world is transitory, but

maybe there is a type of power that does not vanish entirely after its time is up. Even after Genji dies, something mysterious remains, and even after we close the pages of the fiction called *The Tale of Genji*, something about it lingers in our thoughts. The true heart must die in the narrative, so that it can be reborn within us.



AVERY MORROW is a PhD candidate at Brown University in the field of Japanese religions. He studied *The Tale of Genji* and other classic works of East Asian thought in two M.A. programs at St. John's College and at the University of Tokyo. His first book, *The Sacred Science of Ancient Japan*, was published by Inner Traditions/Bear & Company in 2014.

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These are respectively abbreviated “S,” “T,” and “J” in the text. When S comes first in a citation the quoted translation is from Seidensticker, etc.