

WOMEN IN COURTLY CULTURE: TEACHING FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Some years ago I found myself immersed in Lady Murasaki Shikibu's eleventh-century masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*. The courtly universe depicted in this immense narrative was both strange and familiar. After finishing the book, I wanted to investigate the differences and similarities between Western and Asian court cultures of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. I came up with the idea of a course in which Genji would cross paths with Tristan and the voice of the Countess of Dia would be echoed by that of Sei Shōnagon. Before I knew it, I was hooked on Heian court culture and indeed on the whole subject of court culture. The result was an undergraduate seminar on courtly culture in three distinct societies: twelfth-century France and Germany, Heian Japan (794-1185), and sixteenth-century England. I taught the seminar three times in the Freshman Seminar Program at Harvard University and once for the Program in Women's Studies at the College of the Holy Cross. A literature scholar by training, I chose to approach courtly culture mainly through works of poetry, fiction and drama. My pedagogical goal, however, was to contextualize individual literary works within a larger cultural history that would encompass court ritual, dress, codes of conduct, visual art and dance. The amount of material proved to be immense.

Over the past two decades, medievalist-feminists have been writing with great sophistication about the paradoxical centrality of women within Western courtly literature and culture. The contradictions within the experience of Heian women pose equally compelling questions. On the one hand, aristocratic women participated in all the courtly arts and writers like Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon are considered the greatest practitioners of Japanese classical prose. As consorts and mothers, women could exercise considerable power at the imperial court. On the other hand, Heian women lived mostly sequestered, confined lives, and suffered from sexual exploitation and various forms of religious and social stigmas. For all the profound differences in language, history, social structure, cultural values, artforms, and indeed metaphysical systems that divide East Asian civilizations from Western civilizations (and it is important to articulate them), the issues concerning Heian and Western European women and courtly culture intersect in intriguing ways. This teaching experience not only challenged my own Eurocentric perspective, but also suggested new areas of research, particularly on the subject of gender and material culture in court life.

The seminar's comparative element was a big part of its appeal and the cross-cultural approach attracted some very gifted students who would not ordinarily enroll in a course on the Middle Ages, especially one that required them to read lots of poetry! The seminar format had definite advantages: it put students in charge of their own learning, and the most motivated students produced outstanding and original work. Instead of an exhaustive and systematic

approach to the topic (for which I was hardly equipped), this more experimental format was intellectually open-ended. On the other hand, because I didn't give "background" lectures, I had to ask the students to do heavy amounts of reading aside from the core texts. It was not an experience for the faint of heart!

The topic of courts appealed mostly to women students. Very few men enrolled, even though we spent much time reading about and discussing male courtier culture. I modified the seminar each year as I learned more about the topic and realized that my (mostly female) students' interests centered on women and gender. All of the authors, with the exception of Shakespeare, Wyatt, and Webster, were read in translation. By and large, my students, like myself, were amateurs in the study of Japanese literature and history. A few were prospective Asian studies majors, and their knowledge and enthusiasm energized the group.

Ideally, I would have co-taught the seminar with a specialist in Heian literature or history; instead I did my best by reading extensively in the Anglophone scholarly literature on Heian culture that I gathered myself or learned of through consultations with Professor Janet A. Walker of Rutgers University and Professor Meera Viswanathan of Brown University. Non-comparatist scholars of Heian literature seemed less enthusiastic about my project. I suspect that the only sustained scholarly dialogue between East Asian specialists and medievalists has been between historians of feudalism. The intellectual potential for such exchange exists, however, as I discovered during the faculty colloquium on courtly literature in cross-cultural perspective I organized for Harvard's Center for Literary and Cultural Studies in 1993. Scholars of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Celtic, French, African, Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, and Hebrew literature engaged in a lively exchange about both the unique and the potentially shared features of courtly writing among the various traditions. More recently, a collection of essays on women writers of medieval France and Heian Japan has been announced. If I ever teach the seminar again, I might try to substitute a unit on another non-Western court culture for the unit on sixteenth-century England. I'd also like to incorporate more non-literary texts such as courtesy manuals, household inventories, and visual materials of court architecture in order to study how gender figures in the relationship between private and public space in court life.

Instead of a syllabus, what follows is a chronological account of the seminar that lists core readings and describes the principal themes of study and discussion. I also include a bibliography for those interested in teaching about women and court culture in literature and history.

Weeks 1-4: After a session in which we discussed the various meanings of the terms "court," "courtier" and "courtliness," we spent four weeks studying the courtly societies of the High European Middle Ages. Students read selected

chapters from Colin Morris's *The Discovery of the Individual*, Joachim Bumke's *Courtly Culture*, George Duby's *A History of Private Life*, several of Marie de France's *Lais*, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde*, and selected troubadour and trobairitz songs. Students reported on the court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, misogyny and anti-courtliness in clerical culture, the material culture of court life, and youth culture in twelfth-century France. We compared and contrasted masculine and feminine perspectives on courtly love in troubadour song, and students were extremely interested in gender ideologies within the aristocratic marriage system in relation to the representation of desire and courtship they discerned in the literary texts.

Weeks 5–7: The seminar spent three weeks studying the courtly society of Heian Japan. As an introduction to the history and culture of Heian Japan, students read Ivan Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* and excerpts from Lady Sei Shōnagon's poetic diary, *The Pillowbook*. When I taught the seminar at Harvard, students had access to the rich collection of Heian art at Harvard's Sackler Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Art. I was also able to schedule viewings of the 1957 Japanese film version of *The Tale of Genji* which always intensified the alterity of Heian civilization. Students were shocked by the scenes of sexual coercion perpetrated by the "effeminate" male hero: what, they wondered, could explain the protagonist's combination of extreme sensitivity and sympathy for women and his callous acts of rape and sexual exploitation? (This was before the Paula Jones case hit the front page!) The group heard reports on Heian women poets and diarists, the cultural construction of the courtly body as evidenced in Heian court dress and bodily disciplines, polygamy and court politics, and women courtiers and Buddhism. They read the abridged edition of *The Tale of Genji*, and selected *waka* (calligraphic poems exchanged between courtiers).

Seminar participants reacted strongly to what they perceived as masochism among Heian court women. They puzzled over the amount of sexual promiscuity practiced within a culture of such elaborate decorum that sequestered women behind screens and within separate compounds. Were there no parallels with the medieval culture they had studied? I asked them. Students also noticed the centrality of the incest theme in *The Tale of Genji*, and were interested in the numerous power struggles between wives and concubines. The erotic and social significance attached to artfully dyed and layered court costume in Heian narrative and painting impressed them, as did the fact that the texts never describe the bodies (except for women's hair) beneath the elaborate robes. Their insight suggests that the subject of bodies and clothing in courtly culture deserves further comparative study. Students could draw on the ideas of E. Jane Burns and James A. Schultz about gender, rank, and clothing in medieval romance as possible models for interpreting Heian vestimentary codes. Some students

were intrigued by the differences between masculine ideals in medieval Western and Heian court cultures, and the recurrent link between women and the supernatural.

Weeks 9–13: As a prelude to the unit on sixteenth-century England, the group spent a week studying Italian models of Renaissance court culture. Students read excerpts from Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* and selected sonnets by Petrarch. There were reports on medieval and early modern courtesy manuals and women in the *Book of the Courtier*. In studying Tudor and Elizabethan court culture, students read *Henry IV, Part I*, poetry and sonnets by Wyatt, Sidney, and Raleigh, *As You Like It* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Student reports addressed the relationship between poetry and court conduct in the career of Sir Walter Raleigh, the cult of Elizabeth I, and cross-dressing on the Renaissance stage. In discussing *Henry IV, Part I*, we considered the conflict between the culture of warriors and that of courtiers. After reading *As You Like It*, students debated whether pastoral, in presenting a fictional alternative to the world of the court, really offered a critique of female-male relations at court. When we turned to the nightmare world of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the discussion focused on anti-courtly ideology and misogyny.

Week 14: For this “summing up” session, I asked students to prepare discussion themes that dealt with all three societies. There were of course many more issues than we could adequately discuss in two hours, but the session served as an effective review and stimulated some fine papers. Among the many points of comparison identified were the relationship between art and power in court life (it seemed much stronger at the Heian court), gender and sexuality in court life, conduct codes and the discipline of the body in court life, the difference between gender hierarchy and rank, women as producers and consumers of courtly culture, women’s educations and their access to technologies of writing and publication, comparisons between male and female writers in each culture, the relativity of gender codes from culture to culture, the relationship between courtly ideology and misogyny, the cultural significance of female subcultures like that within the polygamous Heian court, and the relationship between modern American codes of etiquette (or lack thereof) and the ideologies of conduct they encountered in these premodern societies. Of course we didn’t come up with many definite conclusions. Whatever the specific topics of discussion and debate, this was always the most exciting session of the semester.

Nancy A. Jones
Brandeis University

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This is by no means an exhaustive list—I have concentrated on items concerning Heian Japan and have kept the number of items on Western court culture and literature to a minimum: there is little on courtly love in medieval Europe, for example. For the seminar I put some titles on reserve and included others in a bibliography distributed to students at the beginning of the semester. They drew from the bibliography for their reports and research papers.

Courtly Culture in Medieval Europe (12th-13th centuries)

A. Primary texts in translation:

Andreas Capellanus. *The Art of Courtly Love*. Trans. J. J. Parry. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941.

John of Salisbury. *Polycraticus*. New York: Ungar, 1974.

B. Literary and Historical Studies—France and Western Europe:

Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991.

Benton, John. "The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center." *Speculum* 36, 4 (1961): 551–91.

Bumke, Joachim. *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages*. Trans. Thomas Dunlap. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991.

Burns, E. Jane. "Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man?" in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997, 111–34.

Dronke, Peter. "Peter of Blois and Poetry at the Court of Henry II." *Mediaeval Studies* (1976): 185–235.

Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. 2 vols. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Vol I: *The History of Manners*.

Jaeger, Stephen. *The Origins of Courtliness*. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989.

McCash, June Hall, ed. *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996.

Moore, John. *Love in Twelfth-Century France*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.

Morris, Colin. *The Discovery of the Individual 1050–1200*. Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972.

Schultz, James A. "Bodies that don't matter: Heterosexuality before Heterosexuality in Gottfried's *Tristan*." in Lochrie, 91–110.

Courtly Culture in Heian Japan, with emphasis on women at court:

A. Primary texts in translation:

Akazome Emon (?). *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes: Annals of Japanese Aristocratic Life of the Heian Period (Eiga monogatari)*. Trans. William H. McCullough and Helen C. McCullough. 2 vols. Stanford University Press, 1980.

Cranston, Edwin A. *A Waka Anthology*. Vol I: *The Gem-Glistening Cup*. Stanford University Press, 1993.

Daughter of [Sugawara no] Takasue. *As I Crossed the Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan (Sarashina nikki)*. Trans. Ivan Morris. New York: Dial Press, 1971.

Izumi Shikibu. (?) *The Izumi Shikibu Diary (Izumi Shikibu nikki)*. Trans. Edwin Cranston. Harvard Univ. Press, 1969.

Kōkin Wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry. Trans. Helen Craig McCullough. Stanford University Press, 1985.

McCullough, Helen Craig, trans. and ed. *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology*. Stanford University Press, 1990.

Mother of [Fujiwara no] Michitsuna. *The Gossamer Years: A Diary by a Noblewoman of Heian Japan (Kagerōnikki)*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1964.

Murasaki Shikibu. *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs: A Translation and Study*. Trans. Richard Bowring. Princeton University Press, 1982.

———. *The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari, abridged). Genji and Heike: Selections from "The Tale of Genji" and "The Tale of the Heike."* Trans. Helen Craig McCullough. Stanford University Press, 1994.

———. *The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari)*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Knopf, 1976.

———. *The Tale of Genji, (abridged edition)*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Nijō, Lady. *The Confessions of Lady Nijō (Towazugatari)*. Trans. Karen Brazell. Stanford University Press, 1973.

Sei Shōnagon. *The Pillowbook of Sei Shōnagon*. Trans. Ivan Morris. Suffolk, England: Penguin Books, 1967.

Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu. *The Ink Dark Moon: Love Poems by Ono no Komachi (834?–?) and Izumi Shikibu (974?–1034?)*. Trans. Jane Hirschfield with Aratani Mariko. New York: Vintage, 1990.

B. Literary and Historical Studies:

Bargen, Doris G. "The Problem of Incest in The Tale of Genji." In Kamens, 115–23.

———. "Spirit Possession in the Context of Dramatic Expressions of Gender Conflict: The Aoi Episode of the Genji monogatari." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48, 1 June 1988): 95–130.

Bowring, Richard. "The Female Hand in Heian Japan: A First Reading." In *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton. University of Chicago Press, 1987, 49–56.

Field, Norma. *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji*. Princeton Univ. Press, 1987.

Huber, Kristina Ruth. *Women in Japanese Society: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected English Language Materials*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992.

- Kamens, Edward, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Murasaki Shikibu's "The Tale of Genji."* Approaches to Teaching World Literature, 47. New York: MLA, 1993.
- McCullough, Helen. *Brocade by Night: Kōkin Wakashū and the Court Style in Japanese Classical Poetry*. Stanford Univ. Press, 1985.
- Miller, Barbara Stoler, ed. *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspectives: A Guide for Teaching*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.
- Miner, Earl. *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford Univ. Press, 1968.
- Marra, Michele. *The Aesthetics of Discontent: Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991.
- Morris, Ivan. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. New York: Penguin, 1964.
- Morris, Mark. "Waka and Form, Waka and History." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1986): 551–610.
- . "Desire and the Prince: New Work on *Genji monogatari*." *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (May 1990): 291–304.
- Mostow, Joshua S. "The Amorous Statesman and the Poetess: The Politics of Autobiography and the *Kagerō nikki*." *Japan Forum* 4, 2 (Oct. 1992): 305–15.
- Pelarik, Andrew, ed. *Ukifune: Love in "The Tale of Genji."* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Rosenfield, John. *The Courtly Tradition in Japanese Art and Literature*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1973.
- Sarra, Edith. *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs*. Stanford University Press, forthcoming 1998.
- Schalow, Paul Gorden and Janet A. Walker, eds. *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. [contains an excellent bibliography of bibliographies, studies and translations of classical works by Japanese women]
- Shirane, Haruo. *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of the Tale of Genji*. Stanford Univ. Press, 1989.

Varley, Paul. *Japanese Culture*. Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1984.

Walker, Janet A. "Poetic Ideal and Fictional Reality in the *Izumi Shikibu nikki*." *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 37 (1977): 135–82.

———. "Conventions of Love Poetry in Japan and the West." *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 14, 1 (1979): 31–65.

Court culture in Early Modern Italy and England:

A. Primary texts in English or in translation:

Della Casa, Giovanni. *Galateo*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.

Elyot, Sir Thomas. *The Book named the Governor*, ed. S. E. Lehmberg. Everyman Library. London: Dent, 1962.

Kelso, Ruth. *Doctrine for a Lady of the Renaissance*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1956.

Puttenham, George. *The Arte of English Poesie*. Kent State Univ. Press, 1970.

B: Literary and Historical studies:

Freccero, Carla. "Politics and Aesthetics in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*: Book III and the Discourse on Women." In *Creative Imitation: New Essays on Renaissance Literature in Honor of Thomas M. Greene*, eds. David Quint, Margaret W. Ferguson, G. W. Pigman III and Wayne Rebhorn. Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992, 259–79.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980.

———. *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973.

Harvey, E. D. *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Heale, Elizabeth. *Wyatt, Surrey and Early Tudor Poetry*. New York: Longman, 1998.

Javitch, Daniel . *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England*. Princeton Univ. Press, 1978.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Nets and Bridles: Early Modern Conduct Books and Sixteenth-Century Women's Lyrics." In *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse. London: Methuen, 1987.

Kelly, Joan. *Women, History, and Theory*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984.

Loades, D. *The Tudor Court*. Bangor: Headstart History, 1992.

Martines, Lauro. "The Gentleman in Renaissance Italy: Strains of the Body Politic." In Robert S. Kinsman, ed., *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974.

Mazzeo, Joseph. "Castiglione's Courtier: The Self as a Work of Art." in *Renaissance and Revolution: The Remaking of European Thought*. Pantheon, 1965, 131–41.

Montrose, Louis. "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form." *English Literary History* 50 (1983): 415–59.

Ong, Walter, S. J. "Latin Language as a Puberty Rite." In *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971, 113–41.

Starkey, David. "The Court: Castiglione's Ideal and Tudor Reality, Being a Discussion of Sir Thomas Wyatt's Satire Addressed to Sir Francis Bryan." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 232–9.

——, ed. *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*. London: Longman, 1987.

Thornton, P. *The Italian Renaissance Interior*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991.

Whigham, Frank. *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Woodbridge, Linda. *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Mankind, 1540–1620*. Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984.