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The Gossamer Years:
Gender, Religion and Aesthetics in Heian Japan

Editorial introduction

Kagerō Nikki or *The Gossamer Years: The Diary of a Noblewoman of Heian Japan* is an autobiographical diary by a noblewoman who lived in Heian Japan (794–1185). The author wrote candidly of her life, particularly about her relationship with her husband, who she referred to as “the prince.” The diary provides an excellent example of what life of nobilities consisted of in the classical period of Japan. The following papers written by the students from Prof. Hongjie Wang’s History of Japan class examine different aspects of Heian Japan revealed by the diary, including the daily life of noblewomen, courtship practices, importance of religion as well as the taste of *mono no aware*, a classical aesthetics defined as “a refined sensitivity toward the sorrowful and transient nature of beauty.” Together, these essays showcase the many ways in which one can use this diary to take a glimpse into the past and learn about classical Japanese society and culture.

The Life of a Noblewoman in Heian Japan

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The autobiographical work, *The Gossamer Years: A Diary by a Noblewoman of Heian Japan*, is a personal journal that provides an excellent example of what life in noble class consisted of in tenth-century Japan. In particular, the diary provides a significant amount of insight as to what a married woman's daily life might have been like. The author of the diary still goes unnamed even today, however, much can be inferred about her individual identity or personality from the writings which she left behind. By diligently keeping the diary, the noblewoman has unknowingly presented to the world twenty years of her unhappy life describing what marriage customs and daily life was like for women in the Heian period.

It is important to note that not every woman knew how to read and write at that time. The author was therefore lucky in this way, but there is speculation about what would cause a woman of her stature and lifestyle to choose to keep a diary of all things. The obvious answer is that she probably used her diary as most people do; as an outlet to express one's self creatively. Her station in the household dictates that she completes light house chores such as sewing and occasionally arranging flowers (41). Other than this it seems that one of the only major tasks which she is responsible for and required to do is entertaining her husband, "the Prince." Given the nature of the events that take place throughout her marriage it could be that she used writing in her journal as a mechanism for coping with what she describes as a life that was "rich only in loneliness and sorrow" (52). She suffers through long separations from certain family members and is deeply affected by the death of her mother with whom she was very close. Additionally, the Prince's constant involvement with other women makes her feel an extremely intense and hateful jealousy towards the women which causes her a great amount of pain and resentment of her husband. She makes it very obvious through her candor and fluctuating moods that she is unsatisfied with both the state of her life and the state of her relationship with her husband.

The noblewoman's personality is made evident from the beginning of the diary when she begins correspondence with the Prince. Her annoyance and indifference toward him presents how unpleasant she can truly be or how unpleasant he is to her. Her behavior often comes across as being fairly egocentric, and when disappointed or offended by something she also acts entitled, as though she deserves better. After her worst fights with the Prince it becomes clear that he likely has a quick temper. One such occurrence is when the two apparently have a fight about the disrepair of the garden and her husband is said to have “left in a fit of rage,” telling their son that he would never return (60). As indicated previously, the noblewoman tends to experience drastic shifts in mood which only seem to intensify her problems. She is prone to melancholy either because of her disposition or because of her displeasure with her place in the world, relying on those she deems undependable like the Prince. For someone moderately well provided for she seems ungrateful, however, the source of her bereavement clearly comes from emotional issues and perhaps even psychological factors. Having remained in a very unstable romantic relationship over the course of many years has taken a toll on her emotionally.

The Gossamer Years is a well developed and rich display of how life was for many women throughout the world in various different cultures during the Middle Ages. In the majority of cultures women were placed second to men and thus controlled by their husbands or fathers. Oppression was a daily part of life for women during this time period, and the noblewoman is yet another example of that. What sets her apart is the fact that she was able to express her personal feelings on the matter almost directly to a modern audience which can better sympathize with her plight.

Romance among Aristocrats in Heian Japan

Rodellen Mae Largo

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Heian aristocrats paid a great amount of attention in their arts and perception of beauty more than anything else. Indeed, this was what defined their aristocracy. Members of noble families were expected to learn how to write poetry, play music, and paint, among other things. Even the way they dressed and acted were part of what made them noble. With this much emphasis on the arts, it is only normal that we see it greatly in the courtship culture of the period.

The book *The Gossamer Years: The Diary of a Noblewoman of Heian Japan* tells the author's experience of her twenty-year marriage to Fujiwara Kaneie. Despite the author's minute focus on the Prince's wooing that lead to their marriage, we get more of a glimpse of Heian courtship towards the end of Book Three. In this period, women lived a very private life. They spent their days hidden behind layers and layers of curtains that prevented anybody, especially men, from seeing them. Men and women had little contact with each other and to see her would mean marriage.¹ Because of this, aristocratic men determined a woman's attractiveness not by her physical appearance but by how well-trained she was in the arts.

Poems constituted most of the communication between two people during this period. If a man had decided to pursue a woman, he would send her poems that told of his intentions. The author recorded her son, Fujiwara Michitsuna's pursuit of a lady after seeing her in one of their annual festivals: "The boy was with us, and as everyone was leaving, he noticed a fine lady's

¹ Hiromu, Kurihara, Ph.D. "Marriage and Divorce in Ancient Heian Japan." August 13, 2011. Ohisama4103.co.jp/heian.

carriage after which he started. It dodged off into a crowd, to avoid him perhaps, but he followed and made inquiries. The occupant, it seemed, was a lady from Yamato, and the next day he sent off a poem to her: ‘My thoughts have turned to you, and I wonder how long a time must pass before our next chance to meet’” (136).

There was a great deal of attention given to details in regards to the exchange of poems as well. Poems should have the proper amount of imagery, and word play were used to express someone’s feelings. “...somewhat later, [the Prince] wrote: The barrier of Osaka, the gate to pleasant meetings, Is so very near and yet, alas, so difficult to cross. I answered with a similar word play: Well may you speak of *Osaka*, which summons and forbids. But what of famous *Nakoso*, that Barrier ‘Come-not-my-way’” (35). Both *Osaka* and *Nakoso* pose as word play in this poem. *Osaka* is a place and the word literally means “meeting hill.” Thus, the poem talks about arranging a meeting between lovers. *Nakoso* is also a place and literally means “do not come” (169). During this period, the cleverer the metaphor, the more attractive and well-educated a person was. The cleverness of the exchange might have attracted the Prince towards the author even more.

A person’s penmanship is also taken into account. “A fine hand was probably the most important single mark of a ‘good’ person, and it came close to being regarded as a moral virtue.”² The color or the paper the poem was written on, as well as branches or flowers that were sent along with it, also added to the meaning of the poem. The first chapter in Book One, where the author talked about one of the first poems the Prince sent her, gives us an example of such details. “It consisted of one verse: ‘Sad am I, ‘mid talk about the warbler. May not I too

² Gerald Figal, “The Heian Period Aristocrats.” Figal-sensei. 2006. figal-sensei.org/hist157/Textbook/ch3_main.htm (accessed February 1, 2016).

hear its voice?' The paper was rather unbecoming for such an occasion, I thought, and the handwriting was astonishingly bad. Having heard that he was a most accomplished penman, I wondered indeed whether he might not have had someone else write it" (33-34).

More examples are found in Book Three. "[Michitsuna] broke off a branch of brocade tree, splashed with red even then, and sent it off to the lady from Yamato with this poem: 'The dew lies heavy under the summer trees, and already the leaves have turned for sorrow'" (138). and "[Michitsuna] meanwhile was keeping up his correspondence with the lady from Yamato. His own letters, he was afraid, were lacking in appropriate imagery and had a rather childish ring, and he had me too compose for her" (143).

Despite the efforts and skills courting in Heian Japan requires, we realize through the book that this does not bear long-lasting romance. The author writes of the Prince's multiple affairs and her constant plea for his attention, "Had that life been one befitting a well-born lady" (33)? Through this book, we learn of the romance that resulted in the polygamous lifestyle of the Heian aristocrats.

The Importance of Religion in Heian Japan

John Hendrix

Armstrong State University

Religion was, and continues to be, an important aspect of people's lives around the world. This was especially true for the people of Heian Japan, an era in which Japan was seeing the spread of Buddhism throughout its borders and interactions between Buddhism and

Shintoism. *The Gossamer Years* demonstrates the important role that religion played in the life of the Japanese, specifically the nobles of the Heian era.

One way in which religion is important and helpful to a society is in easing the mourning and grieving process. Many examples of this are present in *The Gossamer Years*, most notably when the author's mother dies. First of all, there are many funeral processions surrounding the death of the author's mother. These traditions give the author time to grieve and an environment in which she will not be judged for a long period of mourning. Helping a family grieve and come to terms with the loss of a loved one is just one of many ways that religion was incredibly useful in Heian Japan.

However, the author's beliefs do not help her when she is faced with her sister's departure after her mother's death. When the author and her sister burst into tears, they are told to "this is hardly a lucky way to start a trip" (56). In this situation the beliefs and superstitions of the Japanese during the Heian period prevent the author from expressing her emotions. The author mentions in the introduction that beliefs at the time included many superstitions such as "days [that] were bad for cutting hair" (56), and a few others. While the belief system of Heian Japan serves a similar purpose as modern belief systems do, the superstitious aspect of their beliefs are quite different from our own today.

Another aspect of religion that we see examples of after the mother's death are the funeral rites practiced by the Japanese. Honoring the dead is very important in Japan and this is shown in *The Gossamer Years*. The author details the 49th day rites and reveals what sort of religion she and her family are practicing in the process. The 49th day rites are a commonly observed funeral rite in Buddhism. The family even commemorates her death the next year with a pilgrimage and a cleansing ritual for objects used during the mourning period. Cleanliness in

Shintoism is often associated with being free of sin, so the cleaning of one's robes after a period of mourning is a holdover from Shinto tradition. The funeral rites and ceremonies that take place after the author's mother's death showcase the merging of Shinto and Buddhist traditions that occurred in Heian Japan.

In addition to the many religious rites and ceremonies associated with Funerals, the author also goes on many pilgrimages throughout her life. The pilgrimages taken are often for cleansing, or as a retreat from the stresses of day-to-day life. As stated earlier, cleanliness is an incredibly important aspect of Shintoism and this is shown many times throughout the diary. When arriving at a temple the author is quick to wash herself and may even wash herself multiple times if she feels that she was not cleansed of sin.

Another more practical use of religion is in the form of taking up the priesthood or becoming a nun. There are a few examples of public officials, most notably the Captain of the Guards retires to a monastery when the Emperor dies, as does his wife. The author even gives becoming a nun some thought and her son proclaims that he will retire with her into the priesthood if she decides to do so. Despite the importance placed upon religion, politics can still trump it. When the Minister of the Left is convicted of unknown crimes, he attempts to become a monk. However "they refused to respect his status" (73) and send him off into exile. Now, whether the "they" in question is the government or even the monks themselves is unanswered, but it's made clear that one's religious decisions can be overturned if it's being used to evade the law.

Even though a majority of *The Gossamer Years* is devoted to the failing marriage of the author and her husband, the diary ends up helping the reader to understand the role of religion in Heian Japan. From funerals to travelling, religion and the beliefs of the Japanese were important

in every aspect of their life. While the beliefs share similarities with the use of religion today, the superstitious nature of the author's religion is the most unfamiliar and strange. Overall, religion is quite important in Heian Japan and even shares some similarities with religion today.

The Transient Nature of Beauty in *The Gossamer Years*

Fred Smithberg

Armstrong State University

The Gossamer Years is considered early Japanese diary literature that has become an important window into aristocratic life in tenth-century Heian Japan. It stands as a manifestation of the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, “a refined sensitivity toward the sorrowful and transient nature of beauty.”³ This emotional, but pessimistic view of life has etched itself on the psyche of the Japanese and becomes a recurrent theme in *The Gossamer Years*. “The mother of Michitsuna,” the diary's author, finds her relationship with Prince Fujiwara Kaneie to be less than ideal. It is this turbulent relationship that forms the subject of this diary and creates the expression of *mono no aware* through poetry and narrative. The human pathos in this story compares the sorrowful deterioration of relationships with “the transient nature of beauty.” This changing nature becomes metaphor for the human condition and depicts the impermanence of life.

³ Todd Shimoda, “Mono No Aware,” *Oh A Mystery of Mono No Aware*, 2010, <https://ohthenovel.wordpress.com/mononoaware/> (Accessed January 30, 2016).

The mother of Michitsuna is not a happy person and may have not been mentally stable. The word sad or sadness was used fifty-two times by the author. She writes in Book One, “There seemed no relief from the gloom that had become the dominant tone of my life” (61). Her relationship with the Prince and her loneliness as the second wife of a cheating husband destroyed her self esteem and left her lonely and brooding. She laments the Princes infidelity when she compares it to waves breaking over a mountain. “The waves can hardly break over yon pine mountain-their own extravagant thoughts arouse them thus” (64). After a journey away from home, she returns to her mansion and says “I am back here leading the same meaningless life” (114). Loneliness and rejection had become the reality and definition of the author’s life.

Prince Kaneie’s many liaisons with other women have deeply scarred the author. During a winter snowfall, she describes the accumulation of snow like the accumulation of unhappy years with the Prince. “The snow is as the accumulation of unhappy years...the snow melts away, and I am not so favored” (79). The author is unable to forget the unhappiness that the Prince has caused her and unlike the melting snow, her unhappiness will not disappear. Snow is a transient condition of nature, but the author claims that her unhappiness is not transient.

In Book One of the diary, the author compares her relationship to Prince Kaneie to fading flowers. “The season of fading flowers will come, I thought, and nothing is to stop it” (100). Like the beauty in nature, love and relationships are seen as transient and ending in sorrow. In this statement, the author is predicting the sorrowful end of her relationship to the Prince. Her marriage to the Prince will fade away like a fading flower. The fading flower presents a metaphor for a fading relationship and an example of *mono no aware*, transient natural beauty.

In Book Three, as the relationship between the author and Prince Kaneie continues to deteriorate, so does the mental state of the author. In this section, more attention is given to

transient beauty in nature with emphasis on its sorrowful aspects. When the author sees an old farmer in a field, she comments on the changing seasons. “How interesting and yet how sad it must have seemed to him this passing of the seasons. I was struck with the sadness myself” (138). She goes on to say that “the dew lies heavy under the summer trees, and already the leaves have turned to sorrow” (138). It has become apparent that the sorrow in the changing of the seasons and the dew on the leaves is a metaphor for the transient and sorrowful nature of the author’s relationship to her husband, Prince Kaneie.

Near the end of the narrative, the author is so completely despondent and unhappy, she considers suicide. She concludes; “It was just as I had always thought: the happy are sooner released from this life than the wretched” (138). The river Nakagawa becomes another metaphor for her relationship to Prince Kaneie. “I had hoped that it would go on flowing, this Nakagawa...but it seems to have wasted away from this torment” (138). The author considered herself to be wretched and condemned to a long and unhappy existence. The river Nakagawa, like her relationship to the Prince, has wasted away from the torment. The river has suffered from the torment of natural forces, and the author’s marriage has suffered from the torment of the Prince’s many romantic affairs and inattention. With respect to *mono no aware*, relationships like nature are transient at best and sadly are just as impermanent.

The story and poetry that create the narrative of *The Gossamer Years* establish for the modern reader a glimpse of aristocratic culture in Heian Japan. The common folk are hardly mentioned except for a reference to a body floating in a river. The fact that the body had not been retrieved is a clue to that person’s social status and value to Heian society. Rank and ritual were all important to the aristocrats of Heian Japan and became an important aspect of their daily life. The concept of *mono no aware*, although coined in the eighteenth century, is a central theme

in this diary. The mother of Michitsuna describes the value of her journal to be transient. “Call it this journal of mine, a shimmering of the summer sky” (69). Her work is beautiful, but ephemeral. *Mono no aware*, or the “transient nature of beauty” and the ephemeral nature of life, becomes a metaphor for the sorrow inherent in the human condition and an important theme in Japanese modern culture.

About the authors

Caitlyn is a senior History major at Armstrong State University and will graduate with her B.A. in December of 2016. Her main interests in the field are military history and archaeological studies. Upon completion of her degree, Caitlyn hopes to use the knowledge and skills she has gained to further her career as a fiction writer. Rodellen, a Philippine native, is a senior majoring in Cell/Molecular Biology. She plans on going to a medical school to pursue a career in Cardiology. John is junior and he hopes to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in Liberal Studies. Fred is a retired airline pilot and U.S. Marine Corps officer. He is a graduate of the University of South Carolina and of the U.S. Naval War College.

Reference

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