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PERFORMING PRAYER, SAVING GENJI, AND IDOLIZING MURASAKI SHIKIBU: GENJI KUYŌ IN NŌ AND JŌRURI

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Introduction

The Murasaki Shikibu daraku ron [lit. “Story of Murasaki Shikibu’s Fall”] tells that after her death Murasaki Shikibu (d. ca. 1014) was cast to hell.² The earliest reference is found in Genji ipponkyō [Sutra for Genji] (ca. 1166), which recounts a Buddhist kuyō (dedicatory rite) performed on her behalf, with the reasoning that the Heian author had been condemned to eternal suffering in hell for writing Genji monogatari [The Tale of Genji] (ca. 1008). Though Genji ipponkyō makes no explicit claim to the efficacy of the kuyō, its performance is presumably successful and saves the Genji author. In such a case the earliest extant utterance of the Murasaki-in-hell story is coupled with her subsequent salvation, and the Genji author, though damned, is also to be saved.³ It may be more accurate, then, to say that the Murasaki Shikibu daraku ron is about Murasaki Shikibu’s deliverance, rather than her fall (daraku).

Through the medieval period and beyond, various sources recounted the execution of kuyō rites conducted for The Tale of Genji’s author, often initiated and sponsored by women.⁴ Such stories of Genji kuyō appear to have been conducted primarily by women until the late fifteenth-century. On the role of women and the development of Genji

¹ Author’s Note: I thank those who commented on earlier versions of this paper, in particular D. Max Moerman, Hauro Shirane, and Rebecca Copeland.
² This is also phrased as Murasaki Shikibu dagoku/dajigoku ron/setsu (legend/story of Murasaki Shikibu in hell). In such stories her spirit is either in hell or unable to attain salvation.
³ This notion of the already saved is reminiscent of the discourse on female salvation. For example, Hōnen (Genkū, 1133–1212), credited with founding the Jōdokyō (Pure Land sect), declared the inherent sin of being female but also provided the nenbutsu chant as a way to get to the Pure Land. Thus, women are “always already saved.” In the case of Genji kuyō, Murasaki being female only aggravates her sin of writing Genji.
⁴ Genji kuyō appear to have been conducted primarily by women until the late fifteenth-century. On the role of women and the development of Genji
underscore a preoccupation with notions of mōgo (falsehoods) and kigo (spurious phrases) and anxieties regarding the production and consumption of fiction, particularly those that display ambiguous morals like *The Tale of Genji*. These texts can together be called *Genji kuyō tan*, or stories of prayers for *Genji*. These texts can together be called *Genji kuyō tan*, or stories of prayers for *Genji*.

This paper discusses dramatizations of *Genji kuyō* by focusing on the seventeenth-century *jōruri bunraku* play *Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō* [Ishiyama Temple in Ōmi Province: Genji kuyō] (1676), popularly attributed — though likely erroneously so — to the famed playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725). I situate the *jōruri* within the long tradition of *Genji kuyō tan*, particularly as it relates to the fifteenth-century *nō* play *Genji kuyō*, to trace the varied portrayals of Murasaki Shikibu. Unlike the *nō* and earlier *Genji kuyō* texts, *Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō* has not hitherto received much scholarly attention, but the text manifests a crucial development in *Genji kuyō tan* and the discourse on Murasaki Shikibu. Despite its reliance on the *Genji kuyō* convention that originated alongside the Murasaki-in-hell narrative, in the *jōruri* the *Genji* author is

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7 This is the first of a series of *jōruri* and *kabuki* that have some basis on *Genji kuyō tan*. I do not include later texts here because they depart heavily from earlier *kuyō*. For a discussion, see Shirakata Masaru, “*Genji* monogatari to jōruri,” *Genji monogatari no tankyū* 4, ed. *Genji monogatari kenkyūkai* (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1979): 179–196.
made into a woman writer who – far from having fallen to hell – is a faultless figure.

**Early Genji kuyō tan**

Though tsukuri monogatari (fictional tales) were considered to violate Buddhist precepts forbidding falsehoods and specious words long before Murasaki Shikibu’s time, it was during the inseiki (cloistered emperor period, 1086–1185) that there arose an increased anxiety – fueled in part by general political and social insecurities of the age – that such tales were sinful. Thus it is no coincidence that the Genji ipponkyō was composed at this time. Attributed to Tendai priest Chōken (1126–1203), founder of the Agui temple and its line of sermonic orators, Genji ipponkyō [Sutra for Genji] (ca. 1166) is a hyōbyaku, or a declaration outlining the purpose of a Buddhist service.

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8 Sanbō’e (kotoba) [(Words Amended to the) Illustration of the Three Jewels] (ca. 984) calls monogatari lies which should be avoided: “do not let your heart get caught up even briefly in these tangled roots of evil, these forests of words.” Edward Kamen’s translation in *The Three Jewels: A Study and Translation of Minamoto Tamenori’s Sanbōe* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1988), 93.

9 There is still no clear consensus about the dating of the text, though Teramoto Naohiko positioned it between 1176 and 1189. Teramoto Naohiko, *Genji monogatari juyōshi ronkō zokuhen* (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1984), 508–509. Regardless, Genji ipponkyō is nearly contemporaneous to *Genji monogatari shaku* [The Tale of Genji Explicated] by Fujiwara no Koreyuki (ca. 1160), the earliest extant treatise on Genji.

10 Scholars generally follow Gotō Tanji’s early argument that the author is Chōken. Chōken, who was a son of Fujiwara no Michinori (1106–1159), is referred to in Genji ipponkyō as hō’in (Tendai prelate) but was not given that status until 1183. On the Agui School’s sympathy to issues of gender – for example, emphasizing the role of the mother over the father, see Komine Kazuaki, “Shōdō – Agui Chōken o meguru,” *Koten bungaku to bokyō*, eds. Kon’no Tōru et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1995), 32–36.

11 The term ipponkyō usually identifies a ceremony in which the twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra are copied, so the title Genji ipponkyō can be translated as “Copying the Lotus Sutra for Genji.” Gotō Tanji was the first modern scholar to comprehensively analyze this text beginning in 1930.
It explains that a nun has approached the priest for help in granting salvation to Murasaki Shikibu and readers of *The Tale of Genji*.\(^{12}\) She tells that the *Genji* author’s ghost has been appearing in people’s dreams, warning them that *Genji* readers will join her in hell because *The Tale of Genji* commits the offense of being *monogatari*, the lowest form of writing.\(^{13}\) deemed inferior for failing to tell “good and evil actions of people of the past” and “providing record of old events from earlier eras.”\(^{14}\) Though *Genji* is identified to be the most superior of such tales, it is especially egregious in showing relations between men and women and stimulating readers:


\(^{12}\) Though there is some doubt, the nun is said to be Bifukumon’in no Kaga (d. 1193), wife of Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204) and mother of Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241). If Bifukumon’in no Kaga took vows at the same time that Shunzei did (1176), the first *kuyō* was probably performed around 1180. See Matsuoka Shinpei, “Genji *kuyō,*” *Genji monogatari handobukku*, eds. Akiyama Ken, Watanabe Tamotsu, and Matsuoka Shinpei (Tokyo: Shinshokan, 1996), 83. As Michael Jamentz notes, however, the Sōanshū manuscript shows that the sponsor was a lady-in-waiting known only as Tosa no Naishi. Michael Jamentz, *Reading The Tale of Genji*, 189. It is possible that the same *kuyō* ceremony is referenced in several other texts including *Hōbutsushū* [Collection of Treasures] (ca. 1180) and *Ima monogatari* [Tales of the Present] (ca. 1240), though *Ima kagami* [Mirror of the Present] (ca. 1170) suggests that there were numerous ceremonies performed on different occasions.

\(^{13}\) The famous ranking of literature cited by *Genji ipponkyō* is the following: Buddhist scripture, Confucian tracts, histories, Chinese poetry, Japanese poetry, and finally, fictional *monogatari*. This hierarchy had already existed by the time of *Genji*’s composition, though it is only during the late Heian period that *monogatari* becomes recognized as a part of literature (*bungaku*). Takahashi Tōru, *Genji monogatari no taiihō* (Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1982), 265.

Of the *monogatari*, the tale of the Shining Genji was written by Murasaki Shikibu. Totaling sixty scrolls and comprising thirty-nine chapters, its words span those of Buddhist and Confucian texts, its contents skillfully composed of conversations between men and women. Amongst the tales of old, this is the most superior. Its poetry is superbly beautiful and stirs up passions. In homes where men and women value the senses, and with people, both wealthy and poor, who are easily allured, this tale is used as a means to manipulate people’s thoughts. When unmarried ladies in their inner chambers view it, they are moved to springtime yearnings. When men who lie alone on their cold mats open it, their hearts are worked up with autumnal passions. For this reason, the spirit of its maker and the many people who have viewed it are together bound in sin, trapped in the cycle of birth and death and will fall to the blades of the forests of hell. And because of this, the spirit of Murasaki Shikibu has from old appeared in people’s dreams to tell them of the weight of the sin.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Some versions cite 49 chapters and 60 scrolls. The specific number of chapters that comprise the whole of *The Tale of Genji* was long a source of some confusion, with numerous references to the tale having a total of sixty books, presumably to match the number of scrolls in the Tendai scriptural canon. By the Kamakura period major *Genji* recensions declared that the correct total was fifty-four, as we have today. Ii Haruki, *Genji monogatari no nazo* (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1983), 203–205.

It is not only men and women that “value the senses” and “who are easily allured” – that is to say, those who are somehow primed to be drawn to lascivious stories – who are affected by the tale.¹⁷ So potent is The Tale of Genji’s appeal that no one, including confined maidens brought up in protective homes and unattached men leading ascetic lives, can possibly resist its temptations. All such Genji readers, including the nun who has volunteered to sponsor the kuyō, are culpable and are bound in sin with Murasaki Shikibu, together awaiting a destiny of shared suffering. In order to save them all, the twenty-eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra are to be copied, each scroll appended with an illustration of a chapter of Genji.¹⁸ The same readers who could not help but be negatively influenced by the tale are tasked with this penitentiary act.¹⁹ The Genji reader is thus both victim and potential liberator upon whom Murasaki Shikibu must rely to expunge her of her unique sins as the Genji author.²⁰

Genji ipponkyō concludes with Bo Juyi’s view of kyōgen kigo (wild words and fanciful phrases) that admonishes secular literature while simultaneously declaring it a means to promote Buddhist truths. First seen in Hakushi monjū [Ch. Boshi wenji, Collected Works of Bo Juyi], in Japan, this declaration is most famously incorporated in Wakan rōeishū [Collection of Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing] (ca. 1017) and


¹⁷ “Genji ipponkyō,” 37.

¹⁸ Re-arranged into twenty-eight ‘corollary chapters’ (narabi no maki).

¹⁹ “Genji ipponkyō,” 37. The salvation ceremony is conducted by a diverse group of people, “whether they have entered the path of the Buddha or not, whether they be wealthy or poor.”

²⁰ There are other examples of cases in which the victims are the only ones able to mitigate the suffering of the perpetrator; for example, in A Wonderous Record of Immediate Karmic Retribution, a famed beauty appears in the dream of dharma monk Jakurin, after which the monk determines that she will not be relieved of her pain until her children copy out sutras in her name in a show of forgiveness. Charlotte Eubanks, Miracles of Book and Body: Buddhist Textual Culture and Medieval Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 103–104.
repeated in numerous texts including *Heike monogatari* [Tales of The Heike] (mid-thirteenth century) and *Shasekishū* [Collection of Sand and Pebbles] (1279–1283). The phrase *kyōgen kigo* comes to be, as Takahashi Tōru put it, akin to a “mantra that legitimizes literature and performing arts.”21 Though the *Sarashina nikki* [Sarashina Diary] (ca. 1059) hinted at the possibility of reading *The Tale of Genji* from the perspective of *kyōgen kigo*, it was not until *Genji ipponkyō* that the phrase was used in explicit reference to the tale.22 The first text of the *Genji kuyō tan* thus acknowledged *The Tale of Genji* to be problematic in its fictional depiction of amorous affairs while simultaneously employing Bo Juyi’s rhetoric to forge a connection between the tale and Buddhist enlightenment. This reconciliation of literature with Buddhist faith becomes one popular justification of *Genji* as seen in commentaries like *Kakaishō* [Book of Seas and Rivers] by Yotsutsuji Yoshinari (1362–67) and *Myōjōshō* [Notes for the Morning Star] by Sanjōnishi Kin’eda (ca. 1552).23 The possibility that literature could be repositioned or reconstituted as an instrument of Buddhist teaching is fundamental to early *Genji kuyō tan*.24

Following this concept, over the next few decades *Genji ipponkyō* is succeeded by texts such as *Ima kagami* [Mirror of the Present] (ca. 1170), *Shin chokusen wakashū* [New Imperial Collection of Poetry] (1235) and *Ima monogatari* [The Tales of The Present] (ca. 1240) that tell of similar *kuyō* ceremonies. The *Ima kagami* cites the *Murasaki Shikibu daraku ron* only to debunk it and defend the *Genji* author, claiming that her tale—which was prized by emperors and empresses—cannot be deemed transgressive since the Buddha himself primarily preached not with

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22 Teramoto Naohiko, *Genji monogatari juvōshi ronshū zokuhen*, 500. Sarashina suggests that the amorous relations in *Genji* can ultimately lead the reader to seek Buddhist truths; in her *nikki*, Takasue’s daughter depicts herself as resisting this idea until later in her life. See *The Sarashina Diary: A Woman’s Life in Eleventh-Century Japan*, trans. Sonja Arntzen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
historical anecdotes but rather through allegorical parables.\textsuperscript{25} In its refutation of the Murasaki-in-hell legend, the historical tale suggests that the story was widely known by that time.

Though *Ima kagami* defends the author, in most narratives of *Genji kuyō* the story of *Genji* is identified as corrupt and corrupting, as seen in the below passage from *Ima monogatari* [The Tales of The Present] (ca. 1240).\textsuperscript{26}

In a certain person’s dream, someone without a discernable form appeared as if a shadow. When questioned who it was, [the form] replied: “It is Murasaki Shikibu. Because I gathered a great number of lies (soragoto) and misled people’s hearts, I fell to hell and am suffering. It is truly unbearable. Please, take the titles of *Genji*’s tale and for every chapter, compose a poem and include the chant *Hail, Amida Buddha* – and pray for my suffering.” When asked how such poems should be composed, she answered thus:

Lost in the darkness of *Kiritsubo*
Bring light by repeating the incantation:
*Hail, Amida Buddha.*\textsuperscript{27}

The sin identified here is similar to that outlined in *Genji ipponkyō*: the tale is fiction and it influences readers, leading them astray. And yet, Murasaki Shikibu is alone in hell, for the offense is here considered to lie only in the

\textsuperscript{25} See translation and introduction by Thomas Harper in *Reading The Tale of Genji*, 180–184. As Teramoto Naohiko succinctly summarizes, there have been various suggestions on the dating of the text, ranging from the third month of 1170 to as late as 1188. Most scholars agree that *Genji ipponkyō* preceded *Ima kagami*. Teramoto Naohiko, *Genji monogatari juyōshi ronkō zokuhen*, 521. Though *Ima kagami* denies the Murasaki-in-hell legend, in the end it declares that anyone with enough compassion (nasake ōku) who prays for her deliverance will be a recipient of good karma, thus advocating for the very thing that it denies is needed.

\textsuperscript{26} Attributed to Fujiwara no Nobuzane (ca. 1176–1266).

\textsuperscript{27} *Ima monogatari*, *Takafusashū, Tōsai zuihitsu*, ed. Kubota Jun et. al (Tokyo: Miyai shoten, 1979), 156.
writing of the tale, not in its reading. Unlike *Genji ipponkyō*, in which the readers and the author share in the sin and subsequently the penalty found in *The Tale of Genji*, here the responsibility lies clearly and solely with Murasaki Shikibu, who is held liable for writing and disseminating the tale – in other words, for constitutively being the *Genji* author. In fact, in the majority of *Genji* texts after *Genji ipponkyō*, the *Genji* reader is no longer depicted to be in any danger of ‘falling’ – to hell or elsewhere – alongside the *Genji* author.  

Indeed, one could argue that by conducting services for the author, readers were also hoping to save themselves; dreaming of the author in distress (or claiming to have such dreams) is itself perhaps a manifestation of a sort of guilt in associating with the tale. But so far as the *Genji* narratives after *Genji ipponkyō* are concerned, readers do not share in the sins of the *Genji* author. Komine Kazuaki has noted that the *Genji* kuyō

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28 The *otogi zōshi* [Muromachi tale] *Genji kuyō sōshi* [A Story of Genji kuyō] shows a nun who fears that her obsession with the tale is injurious and incompatible with her devotions, but the tale itself is not depicted as entirely problematic, as evidenced by the Agui priest’s facility with *Genji* chapter titles, which is praised and rewarded. Andō Michiko favors Fujii Takashi’s dating of the text between 1311 and 1381. Andō Michiko, “Genji kuyō sōshi” in *Monogatari bungaku no keifu 2, Kamakura monogatari 1*, ed. Mitani Eiichi (Tokyo: Yūseidō shuppan, 1989), 172. Most likely the *Genji* kuyō nō play was based in part on this tale.


30 As Komine notes, it is no coincidence that the *Genji* kuyō are first seen around the same time as *Genji monogatari shaku*, *Genji monogatari emaki* [The Tale of Genji Picture Scroll] and the age of Fujiwara no Shunzei and
narrative was born once *The Tale of Genji* was established as a ‘classic text’ (*koten*) and the world of the reader became separated from that of the tale. Indeed, *Genji* was undeniably on its way to becoming a ‘classic’ by the time of *Genji ipponkyō*, but the separation of reader from text – and from its author – is manifest more clearly in subsequent *Genji kuyō* texts.

**Genji kuyō nō**

In significant contrast to the *Genji* reader, the author of *The Tale of Genji* continues to be branded a sinner and made to pay penance in *Genji kuyō tan*. The image of her suffering ghost is most prominent in the nō play *Genji kuyō*, of unclear authorship and first performed in 1464. In it, a priest on his way to Ishiyama temple is stopped by the author’s spirit, who asks that he conduct a memorial service for *Genji* at his destination. He complies, reciting a condensed version of *Genji monogatari hyōbyaku* [*The Tale of Genji Proclamation*], a proclamation in the form of an extended poem comprised of *Genji* chapter titles attributed to Chōken’s son Seikaku (or Shōkaku, 1167–1235). This declares the tale to be akin to Buddhist doctrine. At the end of the play, it is revealed that Murasaki Shikibu was an incarnation of Bodhisattva Kannon, and that *Genji* was in fact written by the deity “to tell mankind that the world is but a dream.”

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32 Most scholars agree with Gotō Tanji’s early suggestion that Shōkaku is the author. Gotō Tanji, “Genji ipponkyō to Genji hyōbyaku,” 44–46.

During her first contact with the priest, who is identified only by his affiliation with the Agui temple and therefore could be either Chōken or Seikaku, the woman’s spirit requests a prayer. Below, the spirit is the shite, and the priest is the waki:

Shite: If I may, I wish to speak to the incumbent priest of Agui Temple.
Waki: Are you addressing me?
Shite: In seclusion at Ishiyama I composed the sixty Genji chapters, An idle diversion that survived my death. Although my name is still remembered for it, I failed to hold a memorial service for Genji and am thus condemned to wander without attaining salvation. If possible, would you please at Ishiyama Hold a memorial service for Genji
And pray on behalf of my soul?  

In this nō play, ubiquitous descriptors of the tale found in earlier Genji kuyō tan like the term mōgo (falsehoods) do not appear. Even though the phrase kyōgen kigo is included at the close of the hyōbyaku, there is no other explanation of the tale itself as being sinful. Instead, the identified sin is the failure of the author to “hold a memorial service for Genji” – in other words, she is wrong to not have conducted a Genji kuyō. In the kyōgen or comic interlude to the drama, the necessity for this kuyō is explained.  

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35 The priests’ reference to a “story of Genji” that is “not true” (makotoshikaranu) may point to the fictional nature of *The Tale of Genji*, but it is likely regarding the Ishiyama temple legend. Itō Masayoshi, *Yōkyokushū* 2, 55.
36 In the modern period the interlude is omitted from most performances. Janet Goff, *Noh Drama and the Tale of Genji*, 275 (n. 19). Royall Tyler includes the interlude in his translation. Tyler, *To Hallow Genji*, 8–9.
tells that Empress Shōshi (988–1074), after hearing that the Great Kamo Priestess (Senshi 964–1035) was tired of stories like Taketori monogatari [The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter] and Utsubo monogatari [The Tale of Utsubo], commanded Murasaki Shikibu to write a new tale. Finding this task daunting, Murasaki sought divine assistance at Ishiyama temple. On the fifteenth night of the eighth month, the temple deity Bodhisattva Kannon bestowed Murasaki with visions of the tale. Because the divine inspiration came to her so suddenly, she wrote the tale on the back of the Great Wisdom Sutra that was lying in front of her. In penance, she was supposed to have copied the scripture to dedicate it to the Ishiyama temple’s Kannon – but she neglected this duty.

This legend of the composition of The Tale of Genji at Ishiyama temple was popularized beginning in the late twelfth century around the same time as the Murasaki-in-hell story, and is later famously repeated in the influential Genji commentary Kakaishō [Book of Seas and Rivers] (1362–67). The two narratives appear to be in direct opposition to one another; that is, how could the Genji author be condemned for writing a tale if it was inspired by a deity? The nō play reconciles the apparent contradiction by recounting that the tale was in fact composed under Buddhist auspices at Ishiyama, but the author failed to make amends for having used the back of scripture to write it. The Ishiyama temple legend will be further discussed below, but here I point out that in the nō play the Genji kuyō is deemed necessary not because Murasaki Shikibu wrote fiction

37 Senshi was the tenth daughter of Emperor Murakami and the Priestess of Kamo Shrine from 975 to 1031. As her tenure lasted over five imperial reigns, she came to be known as Daisai’in, or Great Priestess of Kamo. Ii Haruki, Genji monogatari no nazo, 11.

with amorous content, nor was it (as we might otherwise expect) done in order to give thanks to Ishiyama’s Kannon for giving inspiration. What was judged sinful in earlier *Genji kuyō tan*—that Murasaki Shikibu was constitutively the author of *The Tale of Genji*—is no longer an issue. Rather, it is the use of the physical material upon which she wrote it that is deemed transgressive. This is a crucial difference from the sin identified in earlier *Genji kuyō tan*.

Furthermore, in the nō play the *Genji* reader is not made to save the *Genji* author. In fact, the position of the *Genji* reader, whose function was so indispensable in earlier *Genji kuyō tan*, is effectively eliminated. Instead of appearing in dreams and delegating the role of sponsoring a sanctification ceremony to a loyal reader of her tale, Murasaki Shikibu has taken on the task herself. In fact, though she asks the priest to perform the service, Murasaki Shikibu’s spirit provides the words of the *Genji hyōbyaku* for him to recite. In the passage below, the “I” points to the *Genji* author:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shite:</th>
<th>This rare encounter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chorus:</td>
<td>inspired a fervent prayer, which I have inscribed on a scroll hoping to awaken from darkness. May Radiant Genji’s spirit attain enlightenment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the nō play, the ghost of Murasaki Shikibu literally authors her own salvation prayer. By initiating the *kuyō* and providing the prayer to be used for it, Murasaki Shikibu takes on roles that were divided among *Genji* reader(s) and the priest in previous *Genji kuyō tan*. Furthermore, when the *Genji* author’s spirit reappears in the latter half of the play as the *nochi waki* (later waki), the actor wears an *eboshi* hat, as if Murasaki were at once the author and a character in her own tale. Indeed, in the *Genji kuyō nō* play, the *Genji* author is undeniably front-and-center, as it happens, atop the nō stage.

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40 It is possible that the scroll mentioned here is a copy of the *Lotus Sutra*, as Royall Tyler suggests (Tyler, *To Hallow Genji*, 5), but it is also likely to be the prayer that is recited immediately following passage. Itō Masayoshi, *Yōkyokushū* 2, 57.
This central figure of Murasaki Shikibu initially appears as a soul suffering in hell, but in the end she is revealed to be a Bodhisattva incarnate. Her divinity is amplified with the declaration that she composed *The Tale of Genji* with the intention of disseminating the Buddhist truth that life is but a dream. Centuries prior, *Genji ipponkyō* had used Bo Juyi’s declaration of kyōgen kigo to proclaim the potential of the tale to be a medium of Buddhist instruction, but the nō takes this concept further to allege that *The Tale of Genji* was in fact composed precisely for that purpose by a Buddhist deity.

The story that Murasaki Shikibu was a reincarnated deity – most commonly the Bodhisattva Kannon, the “god(dess) of mercy” – was prevalent by the mid-Kamakura period and appeared as early as the late eleventh century. The *Ima kagami* (ca. 1170) and *Mumyōzōshi* [Nameless Book] (ca. 1200) both claim that she must have been a deity.41 This Murasaki-as-god story likely emerged as a reaction to the Murasaki-in-hell narrative, and both are clearly premised upon a Buddhist worldview.42 The story of her deification also most effectively accounted for the perceived awesomeness of the *Genji*, as select scholars were unconvinced that a mere mortal could have written the tale on her own; the only legitimate explanation would include a superhuman origin. In the *Genji kuyō nō* play, Murasaki Shikibu is deified for the feat, after initially having been vilified for the transgression, of authoring the tale.

From the *Genji ipponkyō* to the *Genji kuyō nō* play we thus see the depiction of Murasaki Shikibu shift from that of a sinned woman whose spirit is forced to rely on others to save her, to a divine figure who composes her own means of salvation. There is also a significantly reduced presence of the *Genji* reader. The *Genji kuyō jōruri*, to which I now turn, is loosely based on the nō and its assimilation of the Ishiyama legend with the *Genji kuyō* narrative. In it, the *Genji* author becomes even more celebrated – even if she is no longer made to be divine.

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41 *Imakagami* shows the beginnings of Murasaki-as-deity story, suggesting that she was either Myō’on or Kannon. The basis may have been the myth that Bo Juyi was the reincarnation of Manjusri. Takahashi Tōru “Ōchō ‘onna’ bunka to Mumyōzōshi,” *Kodai bungaku kenkyū* 10 (2001), 7.
42 Misumi Yōichi, *Genji monogatari to Tendai Jōdokyō* (Tokyo: Wakakusa shobō, 1996), 199–200. The final revelation that a main character is divine is also not atypical in nō.
**Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō**

The jōruri play *Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō* [Ishiyama Temple in Ōmi Province: Genji kuyō] (1676) depicts the *Genji* origin story at Ishiyama temple found in the nō, and adds dramatic twists such as a literary competition between Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon ([ca. 965]), highlighting issues of humility, pride, and social expectations with regards gender and literary production. The *kuyō* ceremony appears almost as an addendum and is conducted for reasons distinct from earlier *Genji* *kuyō* stories. This, in addition to the motley nature of the play – with its sensational flourishes obviously intended for maximum entertainment on the bunraku stage – aligns it strongly within a uniquely bunraku tradition and is likely why it has not been the object of much scholarship on *Genji* reception. However, the differences of *Gōshū Ishiyama dera* from earlier *Genji* *kuyō* tan, including *Genji* *kuyō* nō, show the development of the Murasaki-in-hell narrative into a complete celebration of Murasaki Shikibu.

The play begins, as do many accounts of the *Genji* author of the time, with praise of Empress Shōshi (988–1074). Murasaki Shikibu is listed amongst her large and impressive salon of attendant women, which includes other renowned Heian women writers like Akazome Emon ([ca. 964–1021]), Izumi Shikibu (fl. ca. 1000), and Sei Shōnagon. The last in fact served Empress Teishi (977–1001), but in popular literature of the time is often depicted alongside her contemporaries in Shōshi’s rooms. In the jōruri Murasaki Shikibu is singled out as a “noble poet” whose “intelligence in matters of Japanese and Chinese are unparalleled now as in the past.” When Shōshi receives a letter from the Great Kamo Priestess ([Senshi 964–1035]) soliciting a new tale, she deems the duty best suited for Murasaki. The latter humbly declines, at which point Sei Shōnagon takes the opportunity to volunteer her own work, *Makura no sōshi* [The Pillow

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43 *The Tale of Genji* has not been as influential on jōruri as medieval *gunki mono* [war tales] such as *Heike monogatari* [*The Tales of the Heike*] in mid-thirteenth century, and nō, though some schools used references to *Genji* in an attempt to elevate their art. Masaru, “Genji monogatari to jōruri,” 177–79.

44 In fact, Sei is often depicted as an attendant to Shōshi, rather than to Teishi. I am grateful to Gergana Ivanova for this confirmation.

The Empress decides to turn this into a contest, commanding Murasaki to complete her own original tale as well.

When Murasaki’s husband Nobutaka hears of this momentous assignment, he arranges to steal The Pillow Book to assess the competition. This plan centers on a hired thief, disguised as a dog, who is promptly sidetracked from his mission when he becomes enamored by Sei Shōnagon. He makes his advances but is immediately rejected by a horrified Sei Shōnagon. Thus, the would-be-thief fails, both in his endeavor to steal The Pillow Book and to woo its author, and is ultimately executed by Nobutaka who wants to hide his connection to the whole ordeal. Murasaki, without giving any opinion on the matter, then cloisters herself in Ishiyama temple to write the tale; here we return again to the Ishiyama Genji origin legend. Murasaki completes the tale in sixty-four days. The narrative, which identifies it as “Tale of Shining Genji (Hikaru Genji monogatari)” confers ornate accolades upon the tale, comparing it to Shiki [Ch. Shi ji, Records of a Historian] and Nihongi (or Nihon shoki) [Chronicles of Japan] (720).

When both Murasaki and Sei’s works are presented, the priest Seikaku, designated by the Empress to act as judge, first reads The Pillow Book and deems it clearly praiseworthy, its words “elegantly refined (yasashiku taketakaku).” But then he reads Murasaki’s offering and cannot help but name it the clear winner:

After reading [The Tale of Genji] thoroughly, for a while [Seikaku] remained in awe. Noticing this, Shōshi asked: “how is it?” Though it was in front of Her Highness, without hesitation he suddenly clapped his hands together. The beauty of the prose, the flow of the waka, it is alluringly refined (en ni yasashiku). It not only holds its mysterious awe, but leads to the deep meanings of Buddhism…. It is an exceptional monogatari.” Raising it three times to his head, he looked to be extremely moved indeed.48

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46 Ibid., 29. This nomenclature is common.  
47 Ibid., 30.  
48 Ibid.
Murasaki soon asks Seikaku to pray for the tale’s characters. Though moved by this request, it is not until he has a vivid dream of Shining Genji suffering in hell for his treatment of women that the priest hastens to conduct services. The kuyō again includes recitation of Genji monogatari hyōbyaku. In attendance at Ishiyama temple to witness the service are Empress Shōshi, Murasaki Shikibu, and other ladies of the salon. In the conclusion of the play, Genji and others from the tale appear together with a declaration that they have attained Buddhahood.

The jōruri within Genji kuyō tan

This jōruri retains key aspects of earlier Genji kuyō tan; first and foremost, the text includes the performance of a Genji kuyō, conducted by Seikaku. This priest and his father Chōken are the religious institutional figures who appear individually to conduct kuyō rites in most versions of the Genji kuyō tan, including Genji ipponkyō and the nō play. The jōruri continues in this tradition, though Seikaku is accorded the added authority to judge the quality of The Tale of Genji. One significant element shared with the nō is the inclusion of the Ishiyama legend, but another is the recitation of Genji monogatari hyōbyaku. As it has often been discussed, the hyōbyaku, while closing with a reference to the sins of kyōgen kigo, is itself quite ornate in its lyricism. Clearly the notion that Genji is sinful because of its form and content cannot be taken literally, and in fact the extended poem facilitates memorization of Genji chapter titles, thereby promoting an important aspect of the tale’s popular dissemination. The Genji hyōbyaku, far from simply condemning the tale, lauds it as an effective vehicle to Buddhist understanding, and functions similarly to the reference to Bo Juyi’s declaration of kyōgen kigo in Genji ipponkyō. This ultimate celebration of Genji is fundamental to Genji kuyō tan, though it is

49 This may also refer to the people on which the characters are based.
50 Yuasa Yukiyo, “Genji monogatari hyōbyaku,” in Genji monogatari to Bukkyō: butten, koji, girei, ed. Hinata Kazumasa (Tokyo: Seikansha, 2009), 235–236. In comparison to Chōken’s other known hyōbyaku there is far less decorative language, perhaps precisely because the text admonishes the literary work of Genji. Komine, “‘Hōei bungei’ to shite no Genji kuyō – hyōbyaku kara monogatari e,” Genji monogatari to waka o manabu hito no tameni, eds., Katō Mutsumi and Kojima Naoko (Kyoto: Sekai shinsōsha, 2007), 244.
not until the jōruri that its author becomes fully and unapologetically celebrated.

Though the jōruri is thus clearly marked as belonging to the Genji kuyō tradition, there are also several peculiarities. For instance, the hired thief in dog’s clothing has little to do with The Tale of Genji except to highlight the competition between Sei’s camp and that of Murasaki. The elaborate scene in hell of Genji being ‘haunted’ by the women he has wronged is also unique (in the kuyō nō play the audience is also told that he is in hell, but this is not dramatized). Clearly these additions are meant to make the most of the jōruri stage, functioning as miseba, or highlights of the play worthy of viewing. Parts of the Suma and Akashi chapters are also staged as if above the waters of Lake Biwa, using a technique repeated in later jōruri plays.51 Though I do not elaborate on this any further here, Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō clearly belongs to the bunraku theatrical tradition.52

In this jōruri, it is also notable that Shōshi and her entire salon are together for much of the narrative. In Genji kuyō tan, the archetypal Genji reader – first represented in Genji ipponkyō by the sponsoring nun – is notably female, but the jōruri’s united community of women further and more absolutely genders the tale’s transmission. Though Murasaki writes in solitary confinement, the tale is precipitated, evaluated, and prayed for in the illustrious company of the Empress and her closest female attendants. The notion of a female-gendered audience to Genji is not new; after all, Takasue’s daughter recounted in Sarashina nikki (Sarashina Diary, ca. 1059) that the tale was shared amongst female readers, and Mumyōzōshi (Nameless Book, ca. 1200)53 depicts only women evaluating Genji and other tales. But it is also significant that the male priest Seikaku has such an integral part in the tale’s assessment and its characters’ salvation. Though

53 Attributed to the “daughter” of Fujiwara no Shunzei (Shunzei no musume, ca. 1170–1250), who was in fact his granddaughter.
scholars have importantly demonstrated that the *Genji* commentarial tradition was not limited to men. The *jōruri* is one example of the popular depiction of *Genji* being critically assessed by a male authority figure while read predominantly by women.

More clearly deviating from earlier *Genji* *kuyō tan* is the prominent narrative position given to Sei Shōnagon. A tendency to speak of her together with Murasaki Shikibu was prevalent by 1703, when Andō Tameakira aggressively declared that they could not even be compared. This comment was extremely influential for Meiji intellectual critics who maligned Sei in favor of Murasaki. As it is evidenced, however, the assessment of Murasaki’s work as superior was not unique to Tameakira, even if the effect of the *jōruri* is not to disparage *The Pillow Book*, since it too receives high accolades. Murasaki herself is also depicted as giving no negative opinions – or any opinions, for that matter – regarding her so-called rival. In fact, she is clearly depicted as being forced into the competition by the Empress. And though she does express curiosity in *The Pillow Book*, it is her husband who arranges for its burglary. She does not stop his plans, but neither does she play a part in it, and instead is portrayed as obediently following her husband. Murasaki remains above the fray, and

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54 For example, Christina Laffin examines the significant critical work of Nun Abutsu in *Rewriting Medieval Women: Politics, Personality and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013).

55 In *Shika shichiron* [Seven Essays on Murasaki] (1703): “It has long been the custom to speak of Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon as two of a kind. But Sei Shōnagon’s talent is so limited and slight, and her intellectual pretentions so obvious that her work is often distasteful. These two women can hardly even be compared.” Andō Tameakira, *Shika shichiron*, in *Kinsei shintō ron*, *zenki kokugaku*, *Nihon shisō taikei* 39, eds. Taira Shigemichi and Abe Akio (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1972), 422–41. Introduction and partial translation by Naito in *Reading The Tale of Genji*, 392–411.


57 In fact the early thirteenth-century *Mumyōzōshi*, mentioned above, concluded that while *The Pillow Book* is an excellent work, Sei was not a great poet, though it does not explicitly declare that Sei is inferior to Murasaki.
she is calm despite the chaos that surrounds her. This is just one attribute that adds to her image in this jōruri as a faultless woman.

**Faultless Murasaki**

A major contribution to the image of Murasaki as an exemplary woman is found in the jōruri’s use of the Ishiyama temple legend. As recounted above, this story tells that Murasaki wrote her tale as mandated by the Empress and thanks to divine inspiration; this, then, allowed her to be cleared from the responsibility of writing a fictional tale of lascivious content, effectively negating any liability as an individual author who creates from her own genius and intention. The nō uses this effect but simultaneously has her commit the sin of failing to atone for writing the tale on the back of the *Great Wisdom Sutra*. In the nō it is also only after the kuyō recitation declares that Murasaki is to be saved that we are told she was in fact the Bodhisattva Kannon. Hence, as the narrative order is concerned, she has to be saved before she is revealed to be divine. In the jōruri, however, Murasaki Shikibu is not made to take any misstep, and she needs not be saved at all. This depiction of the *Genji* author as being completely free of culpability – a characterization that became prominent in popular culture at the time – is the most significant development of the *Genji kuyō tan* found in the jōruri.

Instead of Murasaki Shikibu, in the jōruri it is the character Genji who has sinned. This assessment of the character as morally depraved is seen much earlier outside of *Genji kuyō tan*. In the jōruri, Genji is alone in his sins, and does not share them with the author. Though he and the other characters are censured, the tale itself is not deemed problematic; thus, there is no prolonged discussion of it containing mōgo or kigo, as was the case in earlier *Genji kuyō* texts. In the jōruri the performed kuyō recitation ends with the words: “Help the Shining Genji’s next life” – and

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58 One example is *Mumyōzōshi* (Nameless Book, ca. 1200).
59 As Shirakata Masaru phrased it, “when the sin is shifted to Genji, that of the author is forgotten” (*Genji monogatari to jōruri*, 184).
60 *Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō*, 34. Use of the phrase *Hikaru Genji* [Shining or Radiant Genji] does not necessarily point to the character, since the tale at the time was sometimes identified as *Hikaru Genji no monoagatar* [Tale of the Shining Genji]. Here the context makes clear that the phrase applies to the character.
the recitation is meant for the character Genji, not the tale Genji. While Genji kuyō texts had before shown a Murasaki Shikibu daraku ron, here it is quite literally a Hikaru Genji daraku ron instead.

In the jōruri, Murasaki Shikibu is not ‘in hell’ but rather is alive and well. Significantly, in earlier Genji kuyō tan, it is always the Genji author’s spirit that is depicted as suffering. In contrast to her female Heian contemporaries – particularly Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, popularized in medieval legends as leading degenerate ends to their lives – when Murasaki is damned, it is after her death. But in the Genji kuyō jōruri, she is seen as not even deserving this after-life of destitution. Moreover, Murasaki is not an incarnated deity, as was the case in the nō play. Though she may have been assisted by superhuman powers in writing the tale, she herself is still very much human. She is simultaneously greatly idealized; this is in keeping with the popular image of the Genji author in texts such as jokunsho (instructional books for women) and ōraimono (primers) for women of the time, wherein she is predominantly depicted not just as an extraordinary writer, but also a humble, chaste, and beautiful woman, venerated in both Confucian and Buddhist contexts. While within Genji kuyō tan the image of a faultless Genji author stands out, the jōruri’s textual and visual depiction of Murasaki Shikibu could easily be found in such popular texts for women of the time. The combination of Murasaki’s image as an exemplary woman and the Genji kuyō tan tradition is significant because of the origins of the latter in the Murasaki-in-hell narrative. The Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō’s characterization of

62 For a discussion on Murasaki Shikibu in Early Modern popular texts for women, see Satoko Naito, “Beyond The Tale of Genji,” Early Modern Women 9/1 (2014): 47–78. Outside of Japanese literature, the construction of a humble, non-ambitious and quiet female writer is perhaps most famously seen with Jane Austen, frequently referred to as the unmarried ‘Aunt Jane’ who cared little for money or fame, whose image and letters were “whitewashed.” Emily Auerbach, Searching for Jane Austen (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 5.
Murasaki Shikibu is unrecognizable when compared to that found in *Genji ipponkyō*. What began as Buddhist apologia for *The Tale of Genji* that had the *Genji* author paying penance for writing fiction of amorous content is eclipsed by the new popular narrative that greatly idealizes the figure of Murasaki Shikibu.

**From Purifying *Genji* to Celebrating Murasaki’s Name**

More than four centuries separate *Genji ipponkyō* and *Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō* and the entirety of *Genji kuyō tan* covers an even longer period of history.⁶³ As discussed above, *Genji kuyō tan* and the Murasaki-in-hell narrative first emerged, in the form of *Genji ipponkyō*, as Buddhist apologia for the tale during a time when prose fiction was regarded with suspicion by the religiously devout. As Ikegami Jun’ichi put it, particularly during the time of the Genpei Wars (1180–85), it was simply necessary for Murasaki Shikibu to fall into hell.⁶⁴ And though there is evidence that the nun depicted in *Genji ipponkyō* was the wife of Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204), it was also written a generation before he made his famous judgment in 1193 that all poets must know *The Tale of Genji*.⁶⁵ This declaration was instrumental in the initial canonization of the tale and came to represent the most accepted manner of *Genji* consumption and evaluation which identified it as a handbook for *waka* poetry composition.⁶⁶ But *Genji ipponkyō*, appearing before Shunzei’s proclamation, makes no

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such connection and instead declares every aspect of *Genji*, from its composition to its consumption, to be problematic. It thus relies on the authority of Bo Juyi and of the *Lotus Sutra* to declare the tale a means to Buddhist enlightenment. Soon after, however, the text was on its way to becoming a standard poetic resource, and anxieties regarding the consumption of the tale became less pronounced. All the while, the narrative of Murasaki-in-hell continued to spread, showing a persistent ambivalence with the text as well as a fascination with its author’s fate and a pervasive Buddhist notion that women were a root of sin and suffering.

By the time the nō play was first performed in the mid-fifteenth century, Shunzei’s pronouncement had long been taken for granted, and *The Tale of Genji* had continued to gain reputation as a singular text. It was prized not just for poetry composition, but was popular amongst warrior lords as cultural commodity connecting them to the imperial court of the Heian period. Production of *Genji* commentaries that included identification of literary and historical references as well as narrative interpretation was in full swing, and this tradition clearly deemed the tale as worthwhile of serious study. Such scholarship had also suggested the possibility that *Genji* was to be read didactically, and indeed in *Genji kuyō nō* we are told that the intention of the author – who in fact was Bodhisattva Kannon – was precisely to those ends.

As times changed and the *kuyō* narrative developed further, the sins and the sinners continued to be transformed, suggesting decreased anxieties and expectations regarding *The Tale of Genji*. It is not surprising that of the *Genji kuyō tan* texts discussed here, the jōruri shows the least resistance to fictional tales like *Genji*. Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century and the advent of mass print publication, there was a surge of old and new literature, particularly in Edo, Kyoto and Osaka. Anxieties about writing – let alone reading – fiction, comparable to medieval ideas of *kigo*, were hardly widespread. The *Genji* also became available for the first time to a wider audience thanks to print technology. Greatly influential was *Genji monogatari Kogetsushō* [The Tale of Genji Moon on the Lake Commentary] (1673) by Kitamura Kigin (1624–1725), published only

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67 Most noteworthy was the *Kakaishō*, but contemporaneous to the *Genji kuyō nō* was Ichijō Kanera’s (or Kaneyoshi, 1402–1481) *Kachō yosei* [Intimations of Flowers and Birds] of 1472.

three years before Gōshū Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō, it allowed access to the entirety of the original tale to a vastly larger audience.

By the early modern period, the tale was comfortably on its way to uncontested canonization. To be sure, there were some detractors, like Sinologists who found the tale unfit for general women’s readership. Some scholars of kokugaku (nativist learning) also continued to find fault with elements of the tale that seemed to denigrate the imperial throne. In the late seventeenth century when the jōruri was first performed, we had yet to see some of the most influential arguments defending the tale such as that of mono no aware by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). But Norinaga clearly came after a long tradition of Genji scholars who found the tale both in need of defense and worthy of celebration. And as discussed, the Ishiyama temple legend had long claimed that Genji was created under imperial sanctions and Buddhist auspices, and the story became even more widely repeated after the publication of Kogetsushō. By this time The Tale of Genji was also being widely disseminated in various other deconstructed and reconstructed forms; the list of chapter titles and select poems were frequently included not only in Genji digests but also in instructional texts for women. The tale was also ‘rewritten’ in several ways, most famously in


70 Mono no magire, or onkoto – the ‘incident’ in which Genji and Fujitsubo’s affair results in their offspring ascending the imperial throne. Andō Tameakira’s Shika shichiron, mentioned above, transforms this sequence of events, previously deemed the most problematic component of The Tale of Genji, into its most important plot development and lesson. Kobayashi Masaaki, “Genji monogatari no bunka genshō – kōgeki suru taishakka to kenyō kara shōgai,” Genji monogatari kenkyū no genzai, Kōza Genji monogatari kenkyū, ed. Ii Haruki (Tokyo: Ōfū, 2006), 73.

a loose parody by Ihara Saikaku in Kôshoku ichidai otoko [Life of a Sensuous Man] (1682). In short, though it did have detractors, the Genji was being widely consumed in one way or another. Murasaki Shikibu was not considered to be in need of saving, nor was the tale in any true need of validation.

Genji kuyō tan is at its core a discourse on the justification of The Tale of Genji and its place within Japanese literature, and the study of Genji kuyō texts, is crucial to understanding the complex reception history of Genji and its canonical status. This paper has given an overview of Genji kuyō tan with a focus on the often-overlooked text Gôshû Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō to highlight the changes in the presentations of Murasaki Shikibu. Genji kuyō tan is said to have been born of the separation between the Genji reader and its author, and indeed already by the time of Genji ipponkyō new readers of The Tale of Genji no longer lived in the world of Murasaki Shikibu. Clearly with each passing generation the potential and actual Genji reader, as opposed to Murasaki’s contemporary audience, is separated even further from the author – temporally, linguistically, and otherwise. But within Genji kuyō tan it is only after Genji ipponkyō that Murasaki Shikibu is beatified and truly separated from her readers. The Genji kuyō texts discussed here show crucial developments in the relationship between the Genji reader and writer and the daraku ron narrative. Early on, readers are exonerated of the ‘sin of reading Genji’ and are no longer made to pay penance alongside the Genji author. The Genji kuyō nô suggests that readers can be further freed of the responsibility of saving Murasaki Shikibu.

Finally in the Gôshû Ishiyama dera Genji kuyō, the Genji author is herself completely absolved of all sins to do with writing Genji. This transformation is particularly crucial considering that the Murasaki Shikibu daraku ron was from inception concerned with the author’s ultimate salvation. And yet, the initial, even if provisional, presentation of the Genji author as committing some sort of sin is a significant part of much of Genji


It is with the *jōruri* that Murasaki Shikibu is cleared of all wrongdoings and made to be an exemplary woman and writer, one that deserves as much praise and canonical status as her tale. In fact, the compulsion to apologize for the Shining Genji’s actions as illustrated in the *jōruri* — that is to say, the persistent need to defend the prose content of *The Tale of Genji* — suggests that Murasaki Shikibu, *Genji*’s author, is an icon that transcends her tale.