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# Bridging the Cultural Divide : Creative Writing/Performance Activitiesfor the Foreign Literature Classroom

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## Bridging the Cultural Divide : Creative Writing/Performance

### Activities for the Foreign Literature Classroom

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In the torchlight he had a fleeting glimpse of a figure by the girl's pillow. It was the woman in his dream. It faded away like an apparition in an old romance.

Dreams, lovers, vengeful apparitions : this scene is easily recognisable as Lady Rokujo's haunting of Genji's lover, Yugao, and will form the paradigm central to this course : the intersection of love and death, obsession and spirit possession. Everpresent in this configuration is the central role of woman as both love object and seeker of revenge so often represented in Japanese literature.

Teaching fictional texts with an emphasis on the treatment of the uncanny and its relation to feminine intervention opens the way for students to reach fresh insights about the literature itself and its connection to contemporary Japanese cultural traditions. This approach has proved fertile in my course of Japanese literature for American undergraduate exchange students at a Japanese university. The course, entitled "In the Footsteps of Genji," is a small upper-division elective seminar, intended mainly for those majoring in Japanese language. Unified by the concept of the uncanny, this course offers a historical and psychological perspective on fictions in which the supernatural plays a crucial role. Further, since intertextuality is a prominent feature of many of the texts, students are asked to participate not only as readers but as writers of texts within the same traditions. This paper will discuss the use of creative writing in the literature classroom to foster greater understanding of these texts deriving from a foreign literary tradition and culture. The use of parody, modern adaptation, and allusion involves students in similar processes to those employed by the writers studied.

In the course we concentrate on the supernatural as a striking undercurrent of much of the literature from *The Tale of Genji* to contemporary fiction. The course weaves together two strands : historical concerns (how spirit possession and ghosts operate in different periods) and socio-cultural concerns (how the changing role of women relates to the real and supernatural worlds of the fiction). Although spirit manifestations and the use of the uncanny form an

unbroken thread in Japanese literature, the continuity and transformations of this tradition may not at first be apparent to the Western reader.

Readings for this 10-session seminar range from the eleventh-century texts *The Pillow Book* and *The Tale of Genji* to Banana Yoshimoto's contemporary novel, *Kitchen*. Among the other works are the Noh transformation of Lady Rokujo in *Aoi no ue* and *Nonomiya*; tales from the Edo period writer Akinari Ueda; Enchi Fumiko's reworking of one of the Ueda tales in *Love in Two Lifetimes: The Remnant and Masks*, a fictional reconsideration of Lady Rokujo. Junichiro Tanizaki's *A Bridge of Dreams* further takes up allusions to *The Tale of Genji*, recasting the Mother complex in his own tale of haunting ambiguity.<sup>1)</sup> *Kitchen* depicts the various themes of sexual identity, love and death in an upbeat pop-fiction context. One might consider the inclusion of both Shikibu's masterwork and the recent novella *Kitchen* as surprising, so great is the contrast between these works, yet the thematic concerns overlap in a way to shed light on both works studied. The course makes explicit certain kinds of intertextual links, whether through reference, allusion, inspiration, genre or literary convention.

Those involved in teaching Japanese literature, whether classical or contemporary, to foreign students report various sources of difficulty in transmitting an understanding of a world that is in so many ways so far removed from that of the students. Various scholars differ widely regarding the areas of knowledge that should be focused on in alleviating problems with coming to grips with the texts; however, on one point there is consensus, and that is the perceived need to overcome problems due to lack of cultural and literary reading ability. In the case of classical literature, of course, this difficulty is not confined to foreign students; the teaching of *Genji* may be more effective for Japanese students too when it is thought of as belonging to a foreign literature. A foreign student thus finds himself at two removes from the culture of *The Tale of Genji*, distant in both time and culture from the original. Even in the field of contemporary Japanese literature, one may find that it operates in substantially different ways from Western literature and has often been misjudged when extraneous criteria are applied to it. Thus, an effective course in Japanese literature will make every attempt to bridge gaps that threaten to leave students stranded on one side of the cultural divide.

### **Keeping a Heian diary**

With the first assignment based on the *Pillow Book* (Makura no Soshi),

students are asked to try and capture the voice and preoccupations of this spirited Heian diary and apply them to the vicissitudes of their own experience. Students have written in a number of different genres as they complete this exercise : the diatribe, the list, nature writing, humorous anecdotes etc. What tends to happen is that none of the students uses more than one of these genres, so that it is only when they are put together and presented to the group that one has a work of such variety as *The Pillow Book*. Closely related to their initial selection of genres found within *The Pillow Book*, student writing may also reflect a narrow range of mood, one student choosing to write about ‘awkward things’ and another choosing to recreate a poetic scene. The original work is appreciated more fully now in its fuller realization of the many moods and modes involved in the human experience.

If done well, the student assignments pay homage to the style of the original, reproducing such phrases as “of course” or “it’s best,” features that recreate notable traits of Shonagon’s style. At the same time, writings that deliberately work against the conventions of Heian life, such as the student passage entitled “A House Should be Filled with Light,” draw attention to the conventions of the life of the period. Matters of taste and aesthetics are thus seen as entirely relative, with various periods and cultures favoring distinctive features and manners.

Nature writing, on the other hand, tends to exploit those features of life in Japan that have least changed and are thus easily compared to the diary of one thousand years ago. This student passage about winds might very well have been appreciated by Sei herself :

I like the smell of a hot summer wind as I lie on my back in a wide field of tall, swaying grasses and fragrant wildflowers. Of course, even the slightest lake breeze in the city is appreciated in summer. The wind of a mid-summer thunderstorm is angry and powerful. It’s best at night, when I am startled awake by the thunder.

Despite the (to a Heian sensibility) preposterous image of the writer lying in a field on her back, the senses evoked by Sei’s descriptions in the diaries are brought to life here too and illuminate the sensibility that describes them.

Finally, and in many ways most important, this exercise provides students living in challenging new situations, immersed in a new culture that reveals so much that is new and sometimes strange every day, with a means of expressing their views and observations of life as they are living it in a foreign country. One student version of “Awkward Things” draws attention to areas of cultural

difference that struck the observer as notable.

Riding the train to school, and having a salariman with a runny nose tower over you. You are forced to listen to him snuffle every ten seconds or so, and you wonder if he will ever miscalculate the time between snuffles. You want to offer him a Kleenex, but it will be awkward if you do so.

She goes on to note a situation that occurred while eating dinner as a guest at a friend's :

Going over to a friend's house for dinner, and as everyone is at the dinner table eating, the head of the household lets out a resounding fart and everyone looks up at one another and continues eating as if nothing ever happened.

Such diary entries are not only humorous but enable participants in a new culture to begin to process their experiences ; first, in an aesthetic way, then with greater understanding of cultural differences.

### **Poetic Imitation : The Sincerest Form of Flattery**

In order to appreciate the work of intertextuality in the composition of the texts studied, students are encouraged to become not only readers but also producers of fictions and poetry. As Miyake points out, participation in a "court-centered society in which even everyday matters like courtship and social interaction were conducted through poems based on conventional imagery and rhetoric" (77) demanded a great deal of the courtier. Some appreciation of what these poetic tasks involve will do a great deal to involve readers in the text of *The Tale of Genji*. As a form of introduction to the world of *Genji*, in which characters are not only consumers of the poems of others, but are also expected to be producers of poetry, and are judged by their readiness and skill to respond to allusions to known poems, devising parodic poems is excellent.

To begin with, three forms of a classical Chinese poem based on a wife's thoughts on the parting of her husband are offered as models for the students to imitate. The situation is universal and is easily assimilated for the purposes of imitation. Students are simply asked to complete the final three lines of the poem, using images that are appropriate to a contemporary context. In Chinese history it was considered a mark of respect for a young poet to repeat the theme of an earlier poet's work, within the same form. One common theme is the

thoughts and feelings of a lonely woman who is waiting for her husband or lover to return (see appendix). Here again, the intrusion of modern devices such as the cellular phone, the answering machine or the pager (poke-bell) provide instances of the paraphernalia of the modern communication situation that radically differ from the Heian world we read about. The aesthetic components that constitute beauty in today's world will also differ from those of the past. Using a model to compose a new poem helps give students insight into an activity that they may have hitherto perceived as lacking in originality : having worked to compose their own version, they realize that the variation does form an original contribution to a given form.

Commenting on the passivity of the student reader when confronted with *Genji*, Miyake has this to say :

They expected to stand outside the text and be entertained. Instead, they found that if they were to make any sense of the text, much more interaction and participation on their part were required. Providing historical, cultural, and social information was helpful but, ultimately, not enough. For these students to fit the contours of the implied reader . . . of *Genji*, they had to modify radically their values, assumptions, and attitudes as readers (77).

Though her emphasis is on the narrative situation, and the student as implied reader, her observations about the perceived problem apply here also. My solution has been rather to involve the student as writer of new intertexts that help to illuminate the original. Whereas the original reader was a member of a highly circumscribed, aristocratic society that shared a corporate body of assumptions and facts, twentieth-century readers must attempt to break down the barriers between their alien world and that of *Genji*.

### **The Heian Poetry Contest : Uta-awase**

In chapter five of Seidensticker's abridged *Genji*, The Festival of the Cherry Blossoms is held, and Genji inspires tears with his beautiful and moving contributions to the poetry contest. Even his rivals and estranged father-in-law find themselves touched by his poetic expression and sensibility. Such a contest is utterly removed from our experience as modern readers and might be difficult to appreciate. A remedy for this gap in experience and aesthetic training can be provided with a staging of the uta-awase by both teacher and students, who submit poems one week before staging the contest.<sup>2)</sup>

The use of uta-awase not only to help students reach an understanding of the Japanese poetic tradition but also “to recreate the atmosphere of poetry contests as they were practised in Japan for five hundred years” (Arntzen). To that end, Arntzen directs students to the account of the Naidaijinke Uta-awase (118) given in *Japanese Court Poetry* (248-253). At this event, the conservative judge was Fujiwara Mototoshi and the liberal judge was Minamoto Shunrai. Students are directed to act in accordance with the given roles such that

the conservative judge will always be looking to see if the poems stay within the diction and treatment of the poetry of the past. The liberal judge will be more tolerant of deviations in diction and treatment from the poetry of the past (Arntzen).

With the teacher also offering a poem to the contest, the situation closely parallels an historic uta-awase in which the emperor himself would have a poem in the contest. This adds to the piquancy of the contest as the judge must attempt to set rigorous guidelines and judgements, yet must not overstep himself and unwittingly offend his superior in rank. Students are directed for the purpose of this exercise to work within the spirit and language of the Japanese tradition, using conventional allusions and imagery where appropriate. Modern elements are thus discouraged. The poems will be in the waka form of 31-syllable format, though a syllable more or less will be allowed in one line or two. The procedure of the contest is as follows :

At the contest, the poems will be read in their topic pairs in the order of the master topic list. The judges will declare their decisions and give reasons for the decisions. If both judges like one poem over the other, it becomes the clear winner. If one likes one poem, and one the other, it is a draw. If the judges disqualify both poems, there is no winner for the round. The other participants can also express their opinions at this time. (Arntzen)

The effectiveness of this activity can probably best be measured by the satisfaction of the participants, who have chosen topics, marshalled appropriate images and language, and finally acted their part in reproducing the event of the uta-awase. The episodes in *The Tale of Genji* relating to poetic contests can never be read the same way again, for now the reader has also experienced being both poet and participant in a central feature of Heian court life.

The greater understanding of Heian life, and its enormous expectations of creativity on the part of its inhabitants, help to shed light on the modern section

of the course, in which authors who have both translated *Genji* and worked with an intimate knowledge of his world incorporate elements of it into their original work. This dialogue between the centuries is better grasped by students who have experienced what it is to work with and adapt the ancient materials of Heian prose and poetry.

### **Bridging the Present and the Past in Literature**

The modern section of the course continues to enable the students deepen their reflections about *Genji* as well as encounter diverse texts in Japanese literature. First, a brief look at the Noh plays involving Lady Rokujo sees her entrenched in a system of Buddhist belief, enmeshed in a never-ending cycle of vengeance and jealousy. In looking at Akinari Ueda's satirical stories involving the supernatural, we may note the persistence of the supernatural in the Edo period, but with a markedly different flavor. Then in examining Enchi Fumiko's use of Ueda's "Love in Two Lifetimes: The Remnant," we can appreciate the way she employs the same story in *mise en abyme* to reconsider the roles of the woman as writer, translator, and sexual being. We follow up the short story with *Masks*, a fascinating meditation on *Genji*, and a powerful analysis of the roles available to women in the Japan of the modern day. We supplement the discussion of shamanism with contemporary accounts of its use in contemporary Japan by Lebra (1976: 232-47) in order to think about its operation as part of women's lives. Enchi Fumiko is followed by another consummate translator of *Genji* as well as writer and thinker about women's lives, Junichiro Tanizaki. We note the points of convergence between his tale re-examining the theme of incest and relations with a stepmother in the tale "Bridge of Dreams" and the text that provides its inspiration. We see how Tanizaki has attempted to recreate some of the graciousness and aesthetic sensibility of Heian court life in the fantasy world of the Japanese garden setting of the novella. Finally, in Banana Yoshimoto's story *Kitchen*, we note that the site of the uncanny, though still tied up with death, and the possibility of communicating with the dead, has shifted to the troubled arena of sexual identity. Popular themes in contemporary society such as transvestism and alternative sexual identities form the areas marked with the uncanny in this coming-of-age novel. The title itself demarcates a new function of the kitchen in modern Japanese women's lives: no longer exclusively a site for her unpaid work at home, in this novel it is also a career and a place where woman may find fulfillment outside her traditional task of housewife.

In the latter part of the course students have undertaken such creative



projects as collage or other artistic forms in addition to the traditional literary essays assigned in such courses. These projects may constitute a means not only of expression but a means of communication: one student designed a series of paper dolls bearing a keyword from Cherry Kittredge's *Womansword* (*burikko*, *kawaii*, *o-jo-sama*, *joshi dai sai* etc.) with the definitions of each stereotyped form of woman. Over these definitions she wrote her opinion of each type and solicited the opinions of others, fellow exchange students, Japanese students and homestay family members. What resulted was a palimpsest of conflicting ideas about each type, so that the project represented a wide spectrum of opinion. At the same time it was noted that while the vocabulary delineating various feminine stereotypes is well-developed, such terms are relatively few for their masculine counterparts. Such projects, rather than revealing a final conclusion about the questions examined, help to outline an area of inquiry that may be pursued with the student's stay in Japan.

### Conclusion

Exchange students, unlike their counterparts in the classroom outside Japan, bring to literary texts questions and interests that cannot be restricted to the literary field. If such pursuits into socio-cultural areas are encouraged, however, they may in turn enrich the student's knowledge and appreciation of the literature. Activities that focus on the world outside the text—diary observations, poetry writing, a poetry contest—can also be framed in such a way that they foster greater knowledge of the literary forms studied. In this paper, I have tried to outline a course of study that undertakes to acknowledge the student's identity as both scholar and participant in a foreign world. Together we attempt to bridge the vast divide between esoteric literary forms practiced only in the Japan of the past and the concerns of the student in the here and now. A bridge of dreams? With the teacher's enthusiasm engaging student cooperation, it need not be so.

### NOTES

- 1) The points of convergence and difference between Genji and Enchi's *Masks* and Tanizaki's *Bridge of Dreams* are highly suggestive, but that discussion is outside the concerns of this paper. See Ann Sherif, "The Bridge of Dreams and Masks: Two Modern Responses to *The Tale of Genji*" in Kamens for a detailed discussion.
- 2) I am indebted here to Sonia Arntzen's excellent presentation relating to parodic creative writing to accompany teaching of *The Tale of Genji*. (Unpublished conference presentation, Edmonton, Alberta, Aug. 22, 1998.)

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### Appendix

Hsu Kan *A Wife's thoughts, III*

Since you, sir, went away,  
 My bright mirror is dim and untended.  
 My thoughts of you are like flowing water ;  
 Will they ever have an end ?

Fan Yun *In imitation of 'Since you, sir, went away'*

Since you, sir, went away,  
 My gauze curtains sigh in the autumn's wind.  
 My thoughts of you are like the creeping grass  
 That grows and spreads without end.

Wang Jung *In imitation of Hsu Kan*

Since you, sir, went away,  
 My golden burner has had no incense,  
 For thinking of you I am like the bright candle,  
 At midnight vainly burning itself away.