# *The Power of Fiction: The Nameless Book and the Birth of Literary Criticism in Japan*

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**Abstract**
*The Nameless Book* (Mumyōzōshi, ca. 1200) is frequently cited as the first work of prose criticism in the Japanese literary tradition, in part due to the author's sensitive treatment of several vernacular tales (*monogatari*) composed between the early tenth and late twelfth centuries. The author is generally assumed to be the poet known as Shunzei's Daughter (ca.1171-1252), and the text can be seen as part of a larger movement on the part of her father's Mikohidari House to promote *monogatari* fiction as essential to poetic training at court. This paper explores possible models the author may have considered in constructing this work that was the first of its kind. An analysis of text's rhetorical strategies will reveal several of the implied objectives of the text, including the promotion of literary women, and the elevation of vernacular fiction itself to the same critical level of the more esteemed genre of traditional *waka* poetry.

Keywords: literature, criticism, *monogatari,* tales, fiction, Japan, waka, poetry

## Introduction

In the classical era in Japan, specifically during the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods, the composition of poetry was a skill expected of every nobleman and noblewoman at court. Indeed, superior poetry was a mark of the enlightened aristocrat, and was even seen as an indicator of social and political worth. Not long after Murasaki Shikibu completed her famous "novel" *The Tale of Genji* (Genji monogatari) in around the year 1010, the ongoing competition between various schools of poetic composition took on a new twist: the *monogatari* genre, that is to say narrative fiction itself, became a point of contention. Up until the late 1100s, *monogatari* fiction was generally frowned upon as a source or model for serious poetry.

As these schools competed over what constituted the essentials of poetic training, the more conservative Rokujō School and the more progressive Mikohidari School became the main players in the dispute over who had access and authority over certain proprietary realms of knowledge. In a complex series of events, which included poetry contests (*utaawase*), edited compilations (*kashū, chokusenshū*), poetic treatises (*karon*), and personal letters to important imperial patrons, the highly-respected scholar and leader of the Mikohidari School, Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114-1204) successfully argued that knowledge of *monogatari* was essential for composing any kind of formal poetry. At the same time, through a related, but no less complex series of activities, Shunzei and his descendants also cornered the market on *monogatari* expertise, by collating and editing *The Tale of Genji* and other important pieces of narrative fiction, by securing authoritative manuscripts and commentaries, and by promoting these texts as part of the foundational education required for competent poetry.

Given this context, it is not surprising that the work hailed as "the first work Japanese literary criticism" appeared at roughly this time. *The Nameless Book* (Mumyōzōshi) was composed around the year 1200, most likely by the poet known as Shunzei's Daughter (ca. 1171-1251), and actual granddaughter who was then adopted, in part for the purposes of school affiliation. *The Nameless Book* is the earliest text of any significant length that evaluates, analyzes, describes, and interprets a range of works in the genre of vernacular fiction, and is significant also because its assessment of these *monogatari* have withstood the test of time. Because it discusses several works of narrative fiction that are no longer extant, it also serves as an essential resource for research into so-called lost and fragmented tales (*san'itsu monogatari*). The author, Shunzei's Daughter, employs specific rhetorical strategies to elevate vernacular tales as a genre, arguing their relevance to the central practice of poetic composition, their suitability as a mode of criticism, and their power to effect change in the real world. The intricately structured discussions within *The Nameless Book* contribute to a move towards the serious study of fiction, and are an important step in the canonization of *The Tale of Genji* and other works of fiction from the classical period.

## Models and Predecessors

Commentary on *monogatari* tale fiction that predate *The Nameless Book* is quite limited. A handful of examples can be found in diaries, letters, and in other *monogatari.* There are several works of poetic criticism that are more systematic in

their discussions, a genre later known as *karon*, that appear earlier, but there is nothing that approaches *The Nameless Book* in terms of its extended discussions of vernacular tales, their authors, and the poems and characters therein. This work really is the first of its kind. So what models might Shunzei's Daughter have looked to for inspiration?

Much has been made of the framework of the text. It begins with an elderly narrator who has taken Buddhist vows, but was previously an eyewitness at court—a figure that can be readily associated to the narrators in *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (Eiga monogatari, ca. 1030 and later) and *The Great Mirror* (Ōkagami, 1118-1123). The fact that these historical narratives written in *kana* and in vernacular Japanese are mentioned by name more than once, and also very prominently right at the end of *The Nameless Book* are internal clues that point to the fact that these were likely models for the Shunzei's Daughter. In fact, in the very last sentence of *The Nameless Book,* these two texts mentioned by name: "On this topic it would surely be better to consult *Yotsugi* and *Ōkagami*. What more could we add to these chronicles?' a lady answered, continuing the conversation [Yotsugi, Ōkagami *nado o goran ze yo kashi. Sore ni sugitaru koto wa, nanigoto ka wa mōsu beki*]" (Marra 1984, p.434; Kuboki 1999, p.285). (*Yotsugi* is an alternate title for *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes,* and specifically refers to the fictional narrator of that text).

*The Collection of Treasures* (Hōbutsushū, 1179), with its conversational tenor and episodic format, also seems to have served as a model. The links to this collection of Buddhist stories become clear when one considers the religious tone of the opening passages of *The Nameless Book,* and the fact that it includes specific criticisms and defenses of Murasaki Shikibu that can be attributed directly to *The Collection of Treasures.* The following two quotes serve as examples:

> 'Didn't Murasaki Shikibu recite the Lotus Sutra?' The first lady answered, 'Well, it's rather sad that she has to put up with such criticism' ['*Murasaki Shikibu ga,* Hokkekyō *o yomi tatematsurazarikeru ni ya' to iu nareba, 'Isa ya. Sore ni tsuketemo, ito kuchi oshiku koso are.'*] (Marra 1984, p.137; Kuboki 1999, p.187)

> 'I can't help being surprised when I think about the appearance of *Genji Monogatari*. However much I think about it, its origin is surely not of this world. Didn't it spring from the fervent worship of the Buddha? I believe that all subsequent novels must have been produced with ease. Perhaps in the future someone will be able to write a novel superior to *Genji Monogatari* in light of his knowledge of that work' ['*Satemo, kono* Genji *tsukuri idetaru koto koso, omoedo omoedo, kono yo hitotsu narazu mezuraka ni obōyure. Makoto ni, butsu ni mōshi koitarikeru shirushi ni ya to koso oboyure. Sore yori nochi no monogatari wa, omoeba ito yasukarinu beki mono nari. Kare o saikaku ni tsukuramu ni,* Genji *ni masaritaramu koto o tsukuri idasu hito mo ari namu.'*] (Marra 1984, p.137; Kuboki 1999, p. 188)]

Scholars have also noted several characteristics of the text that clearly indicate that the author was familiar with certain *karon* poetic treatises, and may have looked to them as a framework for her discussion as well. For instance, the critical vocabulary and terms for appraisal, such as *sugata* (form) and the *kokoro-kotoba* (meaning-word)

dichotomy, come directly from such works as Fujiwara no Kintō's (966-1041) *Newly Selected Essences* (Shinsen zuinō, ca. 1012) and Shunzei's own *Treatise on Poetic Styles Past and Present* (Korai fūteishō, 1197). A second characteristic of the text that points to a familiarity with works of poetic criticism is the way that characters from the tales are judged according to their responses under particular circumstances. Poetic treatises often offer model compositions, based on a set of circumstances, and then judge the quality of those responses. In *The Nameless Book,* a total of 97 poems, mostly but not all from *monogatari*, are quoted in full, generally as positive models. Several more poems are partially quoted or otherwise clearly referenced. Furthermore, the appraisal of several of the tales begins with a simple judgment of whether the poems are good or bad, suggesting that the quality of the poetry was an overriding consideration when judging the success of any particular tale. Poetic composition and modeling is a major concern of this text. Even so, I would hesitate to call *The Nameless Book* a poetic primer or handbook, because it does much more than present and discuss poetry. So what is the purpose of this hybrid text that has elements of historical narratives, stories of religious awakening, and poetic treatises?

### *The Nameless Book* as a "Defense of Fiction"

Both the structure and content suggest that *The Nameless Book,* as a whole, is fundamentally a highly crafted defense of fiction, argued along the lines of Murasaki Shikibu's own so-called "Defense of Fiction" in the "Fireflies" chapter of *The Tale of Genji*. To summarize that argument, *monogatari* are of value to the extent that they are true to life, if not true to fact. In other words, works of fiction can draw attention to significant details about our existence in the real world. As Genji says in his conversation with Tamakazura, histories "give only part of the story. It is tales that contain the truly rewarding particulars!" He continues, "Not that tales accurately describe any particular person; rather, the telling begins when all those things the teller longs to have pass on to future generations—whatever is it about the way people live their lives, for better or worse, that is a sight to see or a wonder to hear—overflow the teller's heart" (Tyler 2002, p.461). In the expression about how things that are "a sight to see and a wonder to hear—overflow the teller's heart," there is an obvious connection to the most famous definition of Japanese poetry: "Japanese poetry takes the human heart as seed and flourishes in the countless leaves of words. It comes into being when men use the seen and the heard to give voice to feelings aroused by the innumerable events in their lives" [*Yamato uta wa hito no kokoro o tane to shite, yorozu no koto no ha to zo narerikeru. Yo no naka ni aru hito, kotowaza shigeki mono nareba, kokoro ni omou koto o, miru mono kiku mono ni tsukete iidaseru nari*] (McCullough 1985, p. 3) This definition comes from the preface to the first-ever imperial collection of Japaense poetry, *Kokinshū* (The Collection of Ancient and Modern Times, ca. 905), a work the established the basic parameters of poetry for centuries afterward. Thus, already included in Murasaki Shikibu's "Defense of Fiction" is an association not just to poetry, but poetry from the most elevated imperial collections.

During the same discussion, Genji puts forward the idea that events that happen in fictional tales are not "removed from life as we know it," but rather "happen to people in real life too" [*utsutsu no hito mo, sa zo aru bekamere*] (Tyler 2002, p.462). This argument within *The Tale of Genji* invokes the familiar *hōben* "expedient devices" section of *The Lotus Sutra.* Very briefly, *hōben* encompasses the idea that, even

though words are necessarily an inaccurate representation of truth, some stories, such as sutra parables, can be useful as "expedient devices" to lead readers or listeners to religious awakening. This notion is another clear link between *The Tale of Genji* and *The Nameless Book.* In the opening passages of *The Nameless Book,* the narrator, and elderly nun, wanders through the Eastern Hills of the former capital and takes refuge at a temple, where she says, "Gradually I began to recite in a low voice from the 'Expedient Devices' chapter at the end of Book One [of *The Lotus Sutra*]" [*Ichi no maki no sue no kata, hōbenbon bikuge nado yori, yōyō shinobite uchi age nado sureba*] (Marra 1984, p.132; Kuboki 1999, p.178).

A number of women gather to listen to the narrator, and they then engage her in conversation, especially after hearing that she was previously in service at court. The text continues, "Three or four ladies sitting close to me continued talking quietly. 'Well now, what is the most difficult thing to give up in this world? Let each of us give her opinion on this,' someone suggested" [*San yo nin wa nao itsutsu, monogatari o shimejime to uchi shitsutsu, "Satemo satemo, nanigoto ka kono yo ni torite dai ichi ni sutegakaki fushi aru. Ono ono, kokoro ni obosaremu koto notamae" to iu hito aru ni*] (Marra 1984, p. 133; Kuboki 1999, p.181).

Eventually, tales, or *monogatari,* are proposed as one of the things that are "difficult to give up in this world." And once the discussion of the *Tale of Genji* itself begins in earnest, one of the "Pleasant Women" (*konomoshiki onna*) mentioned is Tamakazura. One of the women cites a famous poem by Tamakazura, one that she addresses to Genji in the middle of the so-called "Defense of Fiction." The same woman offers the following opinion of Tamakazura: "She was self-confident and clever, and I think that what she said about Genji, 'In this world we cannot see such an unparental heart,' doesn't fit her character at all" [*Amari ni hokori ka ni, sakasakashiku, 'kono yo ni kakaru oya no kokoro wa' nado ieru zo, ano hito no onsama ni wa fusawashikarazu oboyuru*] (Marra 1984, p.141; Kuboki 1999, p. 195). The context here is that Genji is pointing to these various *monogatari* romances from the past as precedents to start up an affair with his adopted daughter, and Tamakazura parries with her poem that scolds him for his rather unparental expressions of desire.

This is a key moment in the *Tale of Genji* text, where Murasaki Shikibu puts forward an extended discussion of the usefulness of tales, as was outlined above. Shunzei's Daughter no doubt had this "Defense" in mind as she constructed her own discussion of tale fiction. Just as Murasaki emphasizes that tales can be true to life and therefore useful, the women discussing these works in *The Nameless Book* clearly value works that can be applicable to real life.

**Poetry, Uses of the Romance, and a Proposition**

In other words, in *The Nameless Book*, truth and realism are prized, while the fantastic and the old-fashioned are shunned, precisely because they do not reflect true experience, but also for a more utilitarian reason: because they cannot be applied to the practical composition of poetry at court. There is an unmistakable emphasis on poetry and the act of composition in the women's discussion of their favorite tales. All of these details funnel into a central proposition of *The Nameless Book:* that women should be afforded the opportunity to compile an official anthology of poetry.

Of the first eight imperial collections of Japanese poetry, all were compiled by exclusively male editors, usually working alone, but sometimes working as part of a committee of as many as six, along with their male imperial patrons. A second impetus for composing *The Nameless Book,* in addition to elevating vernacular fiction as a worthy literary genre, may have been to suggest that women should be allowed to participate in the anthologizing process. *The Nameless Book* dovetails these two motivations by providing a compelling pedigree of feminine poetic prowess to pair with the fact that almost all of the most important tales of the time were written by women—the most important example, of course, being *The Tale of Genji.*

*The Tale of Genji* begins and also takes up nearly half of the discussion of *monogatari* in *The Nameless Book.* Characters from the tale are grouped in categories such as *medetaki* (praiseworthy)*, imijiki* (fascinating)*, itōshiki* (pitiful)*,* and even *asamashiki* (contemptible), with poems to demonstrate each of these character traits. The implication is that the various characters provide examples or models for how to respond sensitively (or insensitively) to certain situations.

The second tale, or "romance" discussed is *The Tale of Sagoromo* (Sagoromo monogatari, ca. 1080). As much as the women discussing the *monogatari* praise *The Tale of Sagoromo*, which is often seen as second only to *Genji* among Heian tales, they find fault with its fantastic ending. In the tale, the hero Sagoromo rises to become emperor, and his father is given the honorary title of the Horikawa Retired Emperor, a fact that the women find absurd. Other works, such as *The Tale of the Hollow Tree* (Utsuho monogatari, 10th c.) and *The Tale of Matsura* (Matsura no miya monogatari, late 12th c.) are similarly criticized for being "fantastic" or "devoid of realism." One of the women goes so far as to remark, "I feel that this is the work of someone without a grain of common sense and I feel utterly disappointed. His father, the Minister, also became a Retired Emperor, and is called the Retired Emperor Horikawa, no less! A novel is surely absurd if it isn't realistic" [*Otodo sae in ni narite, Horikawa-in to mōsu to yo na. Monogatari to iu mono, izure mo makoto shikarazu to iu naru ni, kore wa koto no hokanaru koto domo ni koso anmere*] (Marra 1984, p.295; Kuboki 1999, p. 234).

By contrast, there exist a handful of texts that, for lack of a better term, were known throughout most of their history as "non-fictional *monogatari,*" a genre distinct from both traditional tales and historical fiction. The women in *The Nameless Book* show that they are keenly aware of the difference between a piece of fanciful fiction and a narrative that was "based on a true story" as it were. In the following, one of the women suggests that *Tales of Ise* (Ise monogatari, 10th c.) and *Tales of Yamato* (Yamato monogatari, 10th c.) are categorically different from the other works they have been talking about because they describe things that really happened: "A certain lady in the group raised her voice and declared, 'When I think about these novels, I feel that they are nothing but fabrications, full of falsehoods. So let's talk about literary works that report things that really happened. I've heard it said that *Tales of Ise* and *Tales of Yamato* both describe actual events, and so they must be marvelous works'" [*Rei no wakakigoe nite, 'omoeba mina kore wa, sareba itsuwari, soragoto nari. Makoto ni arikeru to o notamaekashi. Ise monogatari, Yamato monogatari nado wa, ge ni aru koto to kiki haberu wa kaesugaesu imijiku koto habere'*] (Marra 1984, p.418; Kuboki 1999, p. 258).

The woman observes that it is precisely because these tales describe things that really happened that "they must be marvelous works." Furthermore, and this is a key transition in the *The Nameless Book*, they are marvelous because they have good poems that are included in imperial anthologies. On the topic of these two "true" tales, she continues, "If you want to know whether the poems in these tales are good or bad, then you have only to look at *Kokinshū*, and you'll find that all the good poems in these two tales have been included in the anthology" [*Sono uchi no uta no yoshi ashi nado wa,* Kokinshū *nado o goran ze you. Kore ni yoki to oboshiki uta wa iri haberu beshi*] (Marra 1984, p.419; Kuboki 1999, p.259).

There is a definite connection here between *monogatari* that are based on true events, the poetry composed upon those occasions, and the real-life collection of what is probably the single most important poetry anthology in the Japanese literary tradition—the work that includes the most-cited definition of what Japanese poetry is all about. The argument that women should be given a commission to compile an anthology builds from this point in the text. Shunzei's Daughter proceeds through several subsequent sections that serve to express a desire for permanence, convey a wish to bequeath works to posterity, and articulate an aspiration to have one's name remembered in future generations. All of this lays the groundwork for a central proposition of the text, as made explicit in the following two quotes:

> "If only I were given the chance to be like the Lay Priest of the Third Rank and to assemble an anthology!" [*Aware, ori ni tsukete, san'I nyūdō no yō naru mi nite, shū o erabi haberabaya*] (Marra 1984, p. 421; Kuboki 1999, p. 262]. Here, the lay priest refers to the author's adoptive father Fujiwara no Shunzei and the compilation referred to is the seventh imperial anthology, *Senzaishū* (Collection of a Thousand Eras, ca. 1187).

> "There is nothing more deplorable than the fate of being a woman. From olden times there have been many of us who have loved emotions and studied the arts, but no woman has ever been chosen to compile a collection of poetry. This is really a great shame" [*Ide ya, imijikeredomo, onna bakari kuchi oshiki mono nashi. Mukashi yori iro o konomi, michi o narau tomogara ōkaredomo, onna no, imada shū nado erabu koto naki koso, ito kuchi oshikere*] (Marra 1984, p. 421; Kuboki 1999, p. 263).

The act of compilation is, of course, not an end in itself. It is a part of a process of presenting models, defining aesthetics, and influencing the practical composition of future poetry. *The Nameless Book* even suggests as much: one of the women notes that because anthologies contain poems on topics (*dai*), "they are very useful when you are suddenly called upon to write a poem quickly" [*Sore wa dai no uta bakari nite, ki to monono yō ni tachinubeki tokaya*] (Marra 1984, p. 421; Kuboki 1999, p. 262]. It is perhaps ironic that the women in this text known as *The Nameless Book,* a generically humble title, seem to have a preoccupation with making a name for themselves.

**Character Assessment as Criticism**

To conclude the discussion of the framework of *The Nameless Book,* one other model must be mentioned: the so-called "Rainy Night Discussion" [*amayo no shinasadame*]

from the "Broom Tree" chapter of *The Tale of Genji.* When one reads these two texts carefully, the parallels are quite specific and unmistakable. Both Genji and the old nun in *The Nameless Book* become listeners in a group discussion about character traits of women and men. The following passage from *The Nameless Book* is clearly patterned on the "Rainy Night Discussion" form *the Tale of Genji*:

> "One of the ladies asked, 'Among the men, who is the most wonderful?' A lady answering, 'It would be hopeless to try to establish now whether Minister Genji's behavior was good or bad. There is no need even to bring the matter up. Still, there are many places in the novel where we may wonder whether it would have been better for Genji to have acted otherwise.' 'The Palace Minister was close to Genji from his youth and never parted from him. He began the Rainy Night Discussion by reciting the poem,
> Though we left / The Palace / Together, / The moon of the sixteenth night / Does not show me where you are going'
>
> [*Mata, rei no hito, otoko no naka ni wa daredare ka haberu to ieba, Genji no otodo no ongoto wa, yoshiashi nado sadamemu mo, ito koto atarashiku katawara itaki koto nareba, mōsu ni oyobanedomo, sarademo to oboyuru fushibushi ōku zo haberu. Mazu ōuchiyama no otodo. Wakaku yori katami ni hedate naku naremutsubi omoikawashite, amayo no onmonogatari o hajime, Morotomo ni / ōuchiyama o / idetsuredo / yuku kata misenu / isayoi no tsuki*] (Marra 1984, pp. 142-43; Kuboki 199, p.198).

The "Rainy Night Discussion" is both modeled and referenced in this scene, which opens a segment of *The Nameless Book* known as the "appraisal of men" (*dansei-ron*). The contexts, however, exhibit a significant role-reversal. In *Genji*, a group of young men discuss the types and characteristics of women, whereas in *The Nameless Book,* the ensuing discussion has a group of older women discussing the types and characteristics of men. I shall unfortunately have to relegate to another venue the several other aspects of this text that characterize it as a powerful work of feminist criticism.

**Conclusion**

Like the "Defense of Fiction" from the "Fireflies" chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, the "Rainy Night Discussion" from the "Broom Tree" chapter also looms large in the imagination of the author of *The Nameless Book*. As mentioned at the outset, *The Nameless Book* is, on a fundamental level, not just a pioneering work of criticism, but also a defense of fiction in its own right. To take the argument a step further, one could even categorize *The Nameless Book* itself as a *monogatari.* While acknowledging the other models noted above, the narrative framework is most closely identified with the fictional world of a romance or tale. The patterning after the "Rainy Night Discussion" is clear, and that discussion itself has been referred to as "A Tale on a Rainy Night" (*amayo no onmonogatari*).

Thus allow me to suggest that *The Nameless Book* is a meta-*monogatari,* a tale about tales, and as such is advocating the potential of these fictional romances. It is proposing that *monogatari* are an entirely appropriate genre for offering literary criticism—for appraising and assigning value to poems, to character traits, and to other *monogatari*. It argues a defense of fiction, but also *embodies* a defense of fiction by exemplifying the fact that *monogatari* can serve as a vehicle for literary analysis. It takes Murasaki Shikibu's argument, that fiction can be useful, to a new level of discourse by showing not only that tales are worthy of focused criticism, but also that tales can be the vehicle of that focused criticism. Just as Murasaki asserts that fiction offers insights that can have an effect on real life, Shunzei's Daughter makes the rather ingenious move to use this same framework to suggest change, to argue for an anthology collected by women, and to offer compelling reasons for this proposal as well. It is perhaps not a surprise that two of the oldest extant manuscripts of this *The Nameless Book* actually refer to it as a *monogatari*. The Shōkōkan Library manuscript is titled *Kenkyū monogatari* (after the era name during which it was produced), and the Tenri Library manuscript is titled *Mumyō monogatari*, or "The Nameless Tale."

To conclude, I return to the notion that *The Nameless Book* is a *monogatari,* and the power of fiction to effect change in the real world. The fact that eventually, an anthology known as *Fūyōshū* (Collection of Wind-Blown Leaves, ca. 1271) is complied by a team of women under the direction of the Empress Dowager Ōmiya-in, and that *Genji* and other tales do indeed become the focus or serious study from the 12th century onward, I think speaks, on several levels, to the power of fiction.

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