

Annotation and Reading Practices: The Tale of Genji and the Kakaisho

Kanako Yoshimori, University of Tsukuba, Japan

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Abstract

My paper will shed light on the heretofore understudied but important critical work entitled *Kakaisho*, which is an earliest annotated edition of Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*. The *Kakaisho* was written by Yotsutsuji no Yoshinari in the late medieval period. I will argue that this critical annotated edition significantly changed the ways in which one read *The Tale of Genji*. The *Kakaisho* is characterized by its abundant comments on historical facts to interpret the story. In modern scholarship, historical facts are assumed to serve as precedents that the author Murasaki Shikibu drew on in creating events in the novel. However, my paper shows that the *Kakaisho* as an annotated edition of *The Tale of Genji* does not explain past events in their pastness, but instead creates a connection between reader and text and historical event, linking past and present within and without the text. The *Kakaisho* invites us to not only read *The Tale of Genji* in a way that is different from the way modern scholars read the text, but to critique our own practice of reading.

Keywords: *The Tale of Genji*, *Kakaisho*, historical narrative

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Introduction

The Tale of Genji, by Murasaki Shikibu, is the most famous Japanese classic novel and the world's oldest existing novel by a woman. My paper sheds light on the heretofore understudied *Kakaisho* (c. 1368), the earliest annotation of all the volumes of *The Tale of Genji*, written by the scholar Yotsutsuji no Yoshinari (1325? –1402) in the late Middle Ages. This text is characterized by its abundant commentaries on historical facts to interpret the story. In modern scholarship, historical facts are assumed to have served as precedents that Shikibu drew on in creating the events in the novel. Yet, interestingly enough, some of the historical events that the *Kakaisho* makes note of in order to add context to *The Tale of Genji* actually took place after Shikibu's death. How are we to make sense of this?

This paper reconceptualizes the relation between fiction and history. Yoshinari read *The Tale of Genji* in a way that is different from the way modern scholars approach the novel as a fiction. Rather than reading the novel as fiction, Yoshinari's *Kakaisho* arguably mutated the fictional story into a history through the act of annotating, linking past events that appear in *The Tale of Genji* with the present time of the author. For Yoshinari, annotating was no simple act of providing commentary or explanatory notes to better understand the original text. Rather, it was a literary practice of rereading and rewriting the classic novel *Genji* into a historical text of his own.

The *Kakaisho* and Historical Precedents

The *Kakaisho* provides comprehensive annotations on the historical events in *The Tale of Genji*. Traditional *Genji* scholarship such as Tamagami (1966), Shimizu (1966), and Shimzu (1960) has typically understood the events annotated in the *Kakaisho* as historical precedents that Shikibu drew on when creating her own fictional story. However, some events that the *Kakaiso* furnishes in its explanatory notes could never have been sources for the fictional events in *The Tale of Genji* because in actuality they took place after *The Tale of Genji* was written. Hence, in no way could these events have inspired Shikibu. Although we assume that history precedes fiction, not vice versa, Yoshinari's *Kakaisho* creates a discrepancy in the chronology.

Though it may sound unlikely to modern literary scholars, the *Kakaisho* fused the genres of history and fiction. Yoshinari accomplished this fusion by using *junkyo*, a practice common in the Middle Ages from the end of the 12th century to the end of the 16th century. The term literally means to follow precedents that function as standards. In medieval aristocratic society, acting according to precedents was standard for approved behavior and was an important protocol. Deviating from precedent or creating the unprecedented was socially and psychologically unthinkable. Yet, despite—or rather because of—this protocol, there were situations where it became possible to create something unprecedented, precisely by claiming that one was following his or her own precedents. Existent historical records tell us that sometimes people even used events that in the strict sense of the word had never been precedents, claiming that they were “equivalent” to precedents, if not precedents themselves.¹

¹ See, for instance, Toin Kinkata, *Entairyaku* (14th century) and Sanjyonishi

Yoshinari also uses this practice of *junkyo*. As mentioned above, some historical events that the *Kakaisho* notes to add context to *The Tale of Genji* took place not before but after the novel was written. Let us consider one example from chapter 33, entitled “New Wisteria Leaves” (“Fuji no Uraba”), in which Genji is promoted to the status of Honorary Retired Emperor (equivalent to Retired Emperor). Genji had been born to Emperor Kiritsubo and to a low-ranking concubine. The emperor gave him the surname Minamoto, which meant he was removed from the line of succession and was reduced to the rank of subject. Even so, in chapter 33, Genji attains a rank equivalent to that of a retired emperor and his glory reaches its peak (Murasaki, 2001, p. 570).

The *Kakaisho* cites four historical precedents for Genji’s appointment as Honorary Retired Emperor: Kusakabe no Miko, Toneri Shinno, Shiki no Miko, and Koichijoin. In historical actuality, the first three men were posthumously given the title because their children were enthroned as emperor. These men were not emperors themselves but, as fathers of the newly enthroned emperors, they were promoted to Honorary Retired Emperor after their deaths. But this is not the case with Genji, who is designated Honorary Retired Emperor while he is still alive. Among the four historical precedents cited in the *Kakaisho*, only Koichijoin could have served as a precedent for Genji, because, Koichijoin, like Genji, became Honorary Retired Emperor during his lifetime despite never having been an emperor. Yet here we encounter a chronological problem as this event took place in 1017, about fifteen years after *The Tale of Genji* was written.

Indeed, a significant number of such post-*Genji* historical annotations appear in the *Kakaisho*, inviting us to wonder about the reasoning behind such a practice. Rather than compiling an annotated edition that is subordinate to the original novel *The Tale of Genji*, in the *Kakaisho* Yoshinari fused historical facts with the original text to create his own original work of history. The citations of both pre- and post-*Genji* incidents enable Yoshinari to expand historical space and time so that the past comes to contain the events of *The Tale of Genji*. Through this style of annotation, the *Kakaisho* re-creates *The Tale of Genji* as a historical text. Put another way, the *Kakaisho* historicizes *The Tale of Genji* and makes the novel a kind of historical “precedent,” using the practice of *junkyo*, or following precedents that function as standard—this is in spite of the fact that *Genji* is a fiction, hence cannot serve as a historical precedent in the strict sense of the word.

At this point, it is instructive to observe that post-*Genji* historical incidents in the *Kakaisho* are taken primarily from the era of Emperor Gosuzaku within the decades following the completion of *The Tale of Genji*. The fictional events depicted in *The Tale of Genji* were—so history proved—later materialized into fact, and thus became actual precedents, just as Yoshinari’s *Kakaisho* had presented them to be.

The *Kakaisho*’s reading of the relationship between *The Tale of Genji* and history is not as farfetched as it may first appear. Circumstantial literary evidence points to people in the Middle Ages actually reading *The Tale of Genji* as a history. For instance, In *The Tale of the Heike*, an epic, it is written that some people “recalled the ancient romance of Prince Genji and went out to wander along the shores of Suma

and Akashi” (Kitagawa, Tsuchida & Seidensticker, 1975, p. 297). Further circumstantial evidence can be found in other *Heike*-related works in which characters conceptualized *The Tale of Genji* as an ideal world coterminous to their own.² The *Kakaisho* accomplishes this historicizing by way of annotation and the practice of *junkyo* (Yoshimori, 2003).

The *Kakaisho* became an object of criticism in the early modern period as new annotations of *The Tale of Genji* were produced. Scholars such as Keichu, Kamo no Mabuchi, and Motoori Norinaga did their own historical research and pointed out the *Kakaisho*'s historical inaccuracies—and this attitude has generally continued on into the present.³ This comes as no surprise, given the widely held assumption that the *Kakaisho* cites historical events as “precedents” that Shikibu drew on in creating the fictional events in the novel, though, as I have discussed, the *Kakaisho* in fact uses *The Tale of Genji* as its precedent through the practice of *junkyo*. In any case, as a result of these critiques, the *Kakaisho* has long been neglected in literary history.

The *Kakaisho* is no typical annotation of *The Tale of Genji* and is very different from other works from the Middle Ages. Take for instance an annotation by Ichijyo no Kaneyoshi, entitled *Kachoyosei* and compiled in 1472. Scholars have often observed that the two annotations—despite their relative temporal closeness—make a contrast in terms of their contents and interpretations. Unlike the *Kakaisho*, this text notes few historical events to give context to *The Tale of Genji*.

To illustrate this point, I want to return to the aforementioned chapter in which Genji is promoted to the rank of Honorary Retired Emperor. The *Kakaisho* is interested in translating this fictional event into a precedent and thus a part of the historical record. By contrast, the *Kachoyosei* is not interested in the world outside the text. The reading by the *Kachoyosei* is entirely dissociated from history and reads this episode only in terms of *mifu*, that is, as a reward given to Genji. This reading is certainly tenable, because Shikibu clearly indicates that the promotion in status was simply a matter of reward in the novel: “Although [Genji] enjoyed the same emoluments and so on as a Retired Emperor, he did not insist on the degree of ceremony proper to one, and he kept his train discreet despite the high regard in which he was universally held” (Murasaki, 2001, p. 586). The reading of this event in the *Kachoyosei* is certainly reasonable and entirely different from the *Kakaisho*'s annotation, which makes the latter even clearer as a peculiar practice. This shows how Yoshinari's unique approach allowed the author to accomplish a rewriting of *The Tale of Genji* as history.

Conclusion

As I have discussed, the *Kakaisho* reads *The Tale of Genji* as a story coterminous to historical actuality. When considering this alongside the practice of *junkyo*, we can see that this reading had interpretive power during the aristocratic period in Japan. However, with the demise of the aristocratic society, the *Kakaisho* lost its power, and history and the narrative of *Genji* were dissociated. This accounts for the interpretive

² See, for instance, *Angen onga no ki*, *Takakura in shokaki*, and *Kenreimoninukyonodaibu shu*.

³ Keichu, *Genncyu-syui*, Kamo no Mabuchi, *Genjimonogatari-Shinsyaku*, Motoori Norinaga, *Genjimonogatari tamanoogushi*.

differences between that arise in the short period from the *Kakaisho* to the *Kachoyosei*. There is clearly a fault line between these two texts. The latter sees *The Tale of Genji* as an object of analysis and reads it as a literary work that is closed and self-contained.

This paper has argued for the reevaluation of the *Kakaisho*. Yoshinari recreated *The Tale of Genji* as a historical narrative through *junkyo*, a practice that lent the text interpretive power. Thereby, the *Kakaisho* produced an entirely new reading of *The Tale of Genji*, which is different from *The Tale of Genji* that we think we know. Considering the *Kakaisho* in this framework, we might begin to call into question our presumed dichotomy between fiction and history in literary studies. In the end, the research on annotation in the Middle Ages challenges us to rethink our own reading practices in the present.

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Contact email: yoshimori.kanako.fn@u.tsukuba.ac.jp