

Doris G. BARGEN, *A Woman's Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji*. xx + 380 pp. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. Paper \$24.95. ISBN 0-8248-1858-x.

FOR ENGLISH-SPEAKING READERS, who are likely to know it chiefly as the dream-like romance spun in Arthur Waley's euphonious and rhythmical prose, *The Tale of Genji* has suddenly become a battlefield of interpretative controversy, thanks to a number of stimulating books (PEKARIK 1982; SHIRANE 1987; FIELD 1987). Doris G. Bargaen's erudite and fascinating addition to this literature faces head-on questions that usually are left to slumber vaguely in readers' minds: questions about the psychological motivation of the characters, the ethical judgments their behavior may elicit, the relation between the authorial voice and the characters' viewpoints, the presence of an overall plot architectonic, the significance of the complex familial interrelationships, as well as many local puzzles, notably concerning the episodes of spirit possession.

An assessment of Bargaen's answers to these questions would demand checking her retelling of the *Tale* against the original text, chapter by chapter. I shall confine myself, at the risk of some injustice, to general impressions of her methodology. Bargaen has opened vast and promising new avenues in *Genji* scholarship. She has shown that the text demands to be illuminated by contemporary narrative theory, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and religious studies. However, I cannot help suspecting that she has gone too far, too fast. Each of the four approaches just mentioned has to negotiate a vast hermeneutical gulf between the modern Western and the medieval Japanese horizons. The first step in a literary-critical appropriation of such a text is to enter imaginatively into the horizons governing medieval Japanese narrative,

psychology, religious belief, and sense of female identity. That involves, initially, a suspension or bracketing of one's modern pre-understanding, a recognition of how it can impede insight into the world of the ancient text. I have the feeling that this hermeneutical process has frequently been short-circuited in Bergen's discussion.

As regards narrative theory, Bergen seems to impose a tight coherence in characterization and theme that sits ill with the more relaxed texture of the medieval tale. The total narrative control she attributes to Lady Murasaki, and which assumes depths within depths of unspoken irony behind the deceptively simple surface, is a quality that begins to emerge in Western prose fiction only around 1800 (Laclos, Austen). It seems anachronistic to present Murasaki as a Heian period Virginia Woolf, as in the following statement: "Since Murasaki Shikibu's complex narrative technique involves the distribution of knowledge among several fictional characters, none of whom is aware of the whole truth, she requires us as readers to piece together fragments of information in order to arrive at a more complete picture of 'reality' than that available to any single character in the narrative" (p. 171). Given such a premise, one is obliged to build on fragmentary suggestions in the text to construe a complex pattern which is nowhere made explicit. The fluid navigation between points of view in *Genji* does recall *To the Lighthouse* (see STINCHECUM 1980), but there is no evidence that Murasaki anticipates Woolf's modernist concerns with the fluid frontiers of personal identity and the integration of fragmentary moments into the stasis of artistic form.

Murasaki is indeed a highly sophisticated literary artist and student of psychology. But we need to recover the specific texture of a medieval sophistication, as we fill out the horizon of understanding within which it operated, a horizon that should be expected to be in constant tension with the modern horizons that we bring to it. We must allow Murasaki the freedom to compose what James called Tolstoy's novels: "loose baggy monsters." Her early readers who devoured *Genji* as the longest-running soap opera of the day were perhaps more in tune with her intentions than the acute detective whom Bergen visualizes as the ideal reader. It is perhaps a mistake to seek a tight resolution of the story's unanswered questions. Murasaki's characters are a mixture of good and bad, "as we see in real life," and her ethical judgment of them, whether tacit or explicit, does not aim to be comprehensive and definitive.

Turning to the psychological or psychoanalytical sophistication that Bergen finds in *Genji*, one is gripped by the sense that Murasaki's characters indeed enact a fascinating panoply of complex psychological states and situations. Oigimi, for example, can well be regarded as a case study in anorexia, and the neuroses of Kaoru and Ukifune (noted by Waley) invite the reader to much brooding and puzzlement. But Murasaki may not have intended to clear up the puzzles. Some of the "motivational undercurrents" (p. 221) Bergen uncovers are more reminiscent of the pontifications of an unchastened Freudian than of anything we can plausibly imagine Murasaki to have conceived: "Kaoru's anxieties are the result of symbolically incestuous behavior that can be traced to his pursuit of Ukifune as a *hitogata* [replica] for her half-sisters (especially Oigimi), her father, and, ultimately, his own father,

Kashiwagi" (p. 225). Perhaps Bergen would say that all of this is implicit in the tale even if Murasaki herself would not have put it that way; but this of course sets off a new batch of hermeneutical hares.

As to feminist theory, its usefulness in dealing with *Genji* again depends on cautious reflection on the disparities between the medieval Japanese and modern American frames of reference. Bergen is confident that Murasaki is an ancient ally of modern feminists. But one could easily read her gallery of heroines as glorifying passivity and resignation, the only alternative being vengeful or suicidal pique. It would be interesting to study the influence of her text in empowering and/or disempowering Japanese women throughout the centuries. Meantime, to ascribe modern political correctness to any ancient author is liable to produce more obfuscation than enlightenment. When Bergen draws on the imagined responses of Murasaki's first women readers to fill out the unwritten story of Yugao's feelings, I feel she is prescribing an exemplary feminist script to all concerned: "For them, Yugao's largely unheard voice may have been nonetheless audible, her unrecorded thoughts and feelings palpable. Proficient in exercising their double consciousness, the female audience could 'read' the female author's unwritten or faintly spelled-out text about this and other female protagonists trapped in gender conflict" (p. 55). Even when Murasaki gives prominence to Genji's point of view at the expense of Yugao's, this is to be read as an ironic representation of "a gender-bound imbalance of power" (p. 55). It seems to be a requirement of Bergen's self-imposed orthodoxy that Murasaki follow a consistent feminist agenda.

When Ukifune shows such attachment to Niou, who has taken advantage of her in a manner that would today unquestionably be defined as rape, we cannot be sure that Murasaki is totting up the rights and wrongs of the situation with a feminist's vigilance. Nor can we be sure that in refraining from doing so she is showing some lofty Flaubertian detachment. When the heroine falls in love with her abuser, is that not an early example of the narrative trope that lives on in low-grade movies such as *Shinde mo ii?* When Ukifune later feels remorse for not resisting Niou, is that not an example of blaming the victim? To see what Murasaki is at, we need first to be versed in the conventions of moral judgment in her society, as well as the possibly different conventions of moral judgment in fiction of the time. Then we need to decide in what degree Murasaki is conforming to or contesting these conventions, and to what degree ethical concern (or possibly indignation) suffuses her task of telling an entertaining tale.

If spirit possession is indeed "a woman's weapon," it is a double-edged one; for is this view not tantamount to saying that an oppressed woman has to resort to psychotic breakdown? "Of the many modes by which Heian female discontent with *kaimami* and other insults to their integrity was expressed, she chose to emphasize the most complex: spirit possession" (p. 6). But Murasaki does not seem to be systematically critical of such institutions as *kaimami*. Credibility is strained when she is seen as avenging female integrity in scenes of reverse *kaimami*. For instance, when the Uji sisters observe the splendidly dressed visitors from the court, "this tantalizing display of male beauty" con-

stitutes a “gender reversal” in which “the charge of indecent exposure is no longer restricted to the woman... but can now be directed at the wantonly reveling men” (p. 198). This descant has no textual support as far as I can see.

A more powerful feminist reading of Murasaki would have to go far beyond such tit for tat thinking. Having reconstructed the thick weave of Heian court values and of Murasaki’s fictional treatment of them, one would have to assess the degree of her collusion in and resistance to these values in terms of the possibilities available to her in the mentality of the time. A modern feminist judgment on both the culture and the author could then be formulated.

Finally, the religious studies perspective on *Genji* again demands that, before undertaking a modern reinterpretation, we consider the full weight of religious tradition and belief in Murasaki’s culture and in her own life (see especially SHIRANE 1987, pp. 169–201). Even if the episodes of spirit possession have a plot-function as the response of women to situations of extreme pressure, in all probability Murasaki herself believed in spirit possession as the intrusion of uncanny, often incomprehensible forces. The obscurity of these episodes would be an essential hallmark of the preternatural and a source of fearful thrills to her readers. Bargaen chides “the critics who have limited their interpretation of spirit possession to the views held in Heian times and who have therefore rejected modern insights into the phenomenon of spirit possession and its function in polygenous societies past and present.” She claims that Murasaki “transcended her time’s largely unreflective perceptions” and “anticipated modern anthropological and psychoanalytical discourse” (p. 91). One might as well go to the limit and say that the possessed themselves are their own best analysts.

Again, though Murasaki occasionally makes fun of Buddhist clergy, I do not see any fundamental skepticism about the rituals such as exorcism or about the ideals of escape from the world espoused by the characters. The saintly clergyman who is Ukifune’s rescuer and mentor is clearly modeled on Genshin (Eshin Sōzu 942–1017), though Bargaen queries this (p. 229). Though he and his sister fail to protect the unfortunate Ukifune from the pressures of her society, Bargaen goes too far when she paints him as “the wanton Sōzu” (p. 236), whose administration of Buddhist vows to Ukifune is a sinister irony. Similarly, though the surfacing of the Eight Prince’s shoddy treatment of his illegitimate offspring Ukifune certainly dints the image we had formed of him as a saintly recluse, providing a piquant surprise for the reader, this does not necessarily discredit his religious aspirations as such. It is a question of Murasaki’s distribution of narrative emphases, not of what we might make of the characters if their behavior were being discussed in a modern court of law or in a psychoanalyst’s office.

I do not intend these cautionary remarks to take from the value and importance of Bargaen’s work, which is instructive even in its excesses, and which will be debated point by point among scholars for a long time to come. Rather I want to encourage a still richer contemporary response to the Heian masterpiece along the lines which Bargaen has so courageously opened up.

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