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“Murasaki Shikibu and The Tale of Genji: Fate and Fiction”

In the “Fireflies” chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, supposedly completed by the court lady Murasaki Shikibu in the first decade of the eleventh century, we find a discussion of the merits and demerits of fictional tales as compared to historical chronicles.

In this often quoted passage the male protagonist Genji finds his stepdaughter Tamakazura busy reading various fictional tales. At first he expresses a negative attitude to this kind of stories without “hardly a word of truth” in them, read by women, who are “obviously born to be duped without a murmur of protest,” but he also acknowledges that they will make good entertainment and “among the lies” still have some “plausibly touching scenes, convincingly told.” When Tamakazura, however, retorts that it seems impossible to her that they should be anything other than simply true, Genji concludes that, after all, the historical chronicles “give only a part of the story. It is tales that contain the truly rewarding particulars!”*

The negative attitude Genji at first gives expression to reflects the prevailing Chinese attitude to fiction that was to dominate also in Japan for centuries to come, and which is also reflected in the legend of Murasaki going to hell because for the sin of writing fiction.

Tracing the reception of *The Tale of Genji* through the ages I will in my paper discuss ideas of fiction in a Japanese context.

*Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, translated by Royall Tyler, Viking Penguin, 2002, chapter “The Fireflies”/”Hotaru” pp 460-1