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Calligraphy, Aesthetics, and Character in *The Tale of Genji*

TOMOKO SAKOMURA

INTRODUCTION

Alongside poetry and music, calligraphy was fundamental to a proper upbringing at the imperial court, where Murasaki Shikibu served as lady-in-waiting to Second Empress Shōshi and wrote *The Tale of Genji*.¹ Calligraphy binds Murasaki Shikibu's world at Emperor Ichijō's court with the fictional one she created in its historical, cultural, and social relevance. Marks produced with a pliable brush and ink function practically as records of thought and intent but also perform aesthetically. In the world of *Genji*, which is fundamentally characterized by the "aestheticization of everyday life,"² the aesthetic

1. Calligraphy came *first* among what was expected of good education. See Yoshida, "'Genji monogatari' Umegaemaki ni kansuru ichikōsatsu" p. 258.

2. This phrase is taken from Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday," p. 40. For a discussion of an "other-regarding nature of aesthetic choices" and significance of aesthetically communicating one's moral status in the Heian courtly context, see Saito, "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics," pp. 164–65. I thank my colleague Richard Eldridge for generously sharing these and other key texts in philosophy for this essay and for his guidance through

aspect is expected from a character and accordingly judged. In Murasaki's world and in her tale, calligraphy is more than a means of communication; it is a means of cultivation of oneself and character evaluation of others. Calligraphy is recognized as encapsulating and manifesting one's moral experience, educational refinement, and aesthetic sensibility, and presented as a core cultivation fundamental to a meaningful existence in society.

Calligraphy in *Genji* demonstrates Stanley Bates's suggestion that literature "opens up the moral dimensions of life to readers"³ and offers a useful lens to explore the idea of an aesthetics of existence,⁴ especially in that calligraphy was an essential practice throughout premodern times and the extent in which *Genji* served as a guiding text for and beyond its immediate readership, again through the premodern period. From *Genji*, we learn how calligraphy revealed a sense of self and of others, how calligraphy was an object of aesthetic and moral judgment, and what role it served in intersubjective relations. All the same, care should be applied to recognizing that the link between calligraphy and character serves the moral universe and infrastructure of *Genji* and should not be taken as a direct reflection of historical realities of the time.

Calligraphy in *Genji* offers an example of "the multimodal, embodied forms of address," in Monique Roelofs's words, that "help shape social and material affiliations and disconnections we inhabit. [These affiliations and disconnections] suffuse the desirability of aesthetic experience, as well as the turmoil it provokes in the ethical, ecological, epistemic, and political planes."⁵ Calligraphy as a form of address has potency in the Heian context, and by extension in *Genji*,

the writing process. I am indebted to Melissa McCormick and Ryūsawa Aya for their thoughtful comments.

3. Bates, "Character," p. 409.

4. Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," p. 451.

5. Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, p. 1.

since upper-class women of the court typically remained rarely seen behind bamboo blinds (*misu* 御簾) and standing curtains (*kichō* 几帳). Handwriting was used to gauge an individual, leading to scrutiny and judgment of the morphological quality of one's brush-writing for any suggestion it might reveal of the person doing the writing.⁶ Richard Bowring writes, "The 'hand' reveals sex, age, status, and taste. . . . Relationships often begin solely on the basis of hand-writing, and graphology becomes an essential talent, and integral part of sexual mores. So strong is the mystique of the written sign that it becomes *the* mark of certain identity."⁷ It should also be noted that since everyday handwriting had the potential to be extraordinary, though "calligraphy" means beautiful writing in English, qualitative distinctions suggested by the English terms "handwriting" and "calligraphy" mean less in discussion of *Genji*.⁸

SCRIPT AND STYLE

Although brush-writing has fallen out of daily practice in Japan today, throughout premodern times the pliable brush was the primary tool for writing. Furthermore, until the late nineteenth century, when the Western, or Renaissance, conception of art—painting, sculpture, and architecture—was introduced to Japan, calligraphy reigned supreme as a cultural practice and artifact. During the early eleventh century, when *The Tale of Genji* was written, brush-writing encompassed personal correspondence (letters, poetry), government documentation

6. Komai, *Genji monogatari to kana*, pp. 254–55.

7. Bowring, "The Female Hand in Heian Japan," p. 53.

8. In tracking every reference to calligraphy in the tale, the scholar Sugioka Kason demonstrates the centrality of calligraphy in interactions among characters. See Sugioka, *Genji monogatari to shoseikatsu*, pp. 381–87, for calligraphy references in *Genji*. On calligraphy in *Genji*, see also the chapter "The Cult of Beauty" in Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, pp. 183–87.

(edicts, records), and religious writing (sutra copying), with each of these categories governed by stylistic and formal conventions and precedents, including paper format, script type, textual formatting, and phrasing. Awareness of and ability to distinguish such conventions and precedents were expected and adherence to them scrutinized and fodder for discussion.

The physical aspect of calligraphy is the sum of brushed traces, paper vehicle, type of script, and mode of writing. Brush traces encompass ink tonality and quality of line, and mode of writing includes attention to spacing and arrangement of text. Like typography, calligraphy simultaneously acts as a record of semantic content and mark of visual expression. W. J. T. Mitchell describes this presence of verbal and visual expression as a "double face" to the eye and the ear: "One face is that of an articulate sign in a language; the other is that of a formal visual or aural gestalt, an optical or acoustical image."⁹ As a visual representation, calligraphy draws attention to the morphology of the text.

The Japanese writing system was adapted from the Chinese one, in a gradual process over the mid-fifth to early sixth century. Although grammatically distinct from Chinese, Japanese adopted Chinese characters. Chinese characters are known as *kanji* 漢字 (Han letters) today, but in Heian times they were called *mana* 真名 (true name). Furthermore, there are three established script types, denoting *how* a character is written (in technical language, its "ductus"), also adopted from the Chinese system: standard script (*kaisho* 楷書) retains all strokes of a given character, running script (*gyōsho* 行書; also called semi-cursive script) abbreviates some of the strokes, and cursive script (*sōsho* 草書; also called grass script) drastically reduces the number of strokes in writing out a character. *Sho* 書, the common term in all three, stands for "script" as well as "writing" and "calligraphy."

9. Mitchell, "Word and Image," p. 51.

The Japanese syllabary, or *kana* 仮名 (provisional name), emerged in distinction to and out of *mana*. In the Japanese hybrid writing system, *kana* employs Chinese characters for phonetic value. The Chinese character 和, for example, does not denote “harmony” in *kana* but is used solely for its phonetic value, “wa.” The *kana* syllabic system developed in stages and contains variations. In its initial phase, in the fifth to ninth centuries, it was variously termed *man'yōgana* 万葉仮名 (after the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集, an eighth-century anthology of Japanese poetry that was written using this method) and *otokode* 男手 (*otokode*), or “masculine hand,” since it was used primarily by men in official settings. The style called *sōgana* 草仮名, or “grass *kana*,” gives a special distinction to the way the characters are written in cursive script; the strokes are abbreviated within individual characters, but the characters do not connect with one another.

Further cursiveness gradually developed into a style known as *onnade* 女手 (feminine hand), translated as “women’s style” in Royall Tyler’s *The Tale of Genji*. This is the fully fledged form of *kana* (*hiragana* 平仮名), with the form abbreviated and simplified to the point that only a hint of the original Chinese character is discernible. A petition of 867 to change a surname illustrates the mixture of Chinese text, grass *kana*, and *onnade* (Figure 5.1). Chinese text inscribed in Chinese characters, *mana*, served as the official mode of writing in the male realm of government, whereas personal communication was primarily conducted in *kana*. It was used when women wrote to men and other women, and when men wrote to women. Compared with blockish *mana*, *onnade* is fluid in form. The continuous ligatures that connect the syllables in the mode of writing called *renmen* 連綿 (literally, continuation) facilitate the impression of downward movement and enhance fluidity. A fragment of a dedication record of 1018 for a calligraphy screen illustrates this formal distinction, with two lines of Chinese poetry written in *mana* with each character rendered within its own rectangular boundary and one line

Figure 5.1 Petition to change a surname (detail). 867. Sheet of paper mounted as a handscroll, H. 30.0 cm. Tokyo National Museum. National Treasure. Image: TNM Image Archives.

of Japanese poetry written in *onnade* with ligatures connecting several syllables (Figure 5.2).

In Chapter 32 “Umegae,” Genji masterfully uses these varied modes of writing. Genji is preparing a residence and a respectable dowry for his daughter, Akashi no Himegimi, who is eleven years old. A book chest was an essential part of the furnishings, and to fill it Genji “chose books that could serve her straight off as calligraphy models. They contained a great many examples that had made the best masters of the past famous in later generations” (t552). In addition, he sends blank books, brushes, and ink of the highest caliber to people in his circle, with the expectations that they will fill them with model-worthy calligraphy to serve as a model book (*tehon* 手本).¹⁰ He himself brushes calligraphy for her:

The cherry blossoms were over, the sky was a tranquil blue, and he wrote out the old poems as he pleased, just as they came to him in astonishing numbers, some in running script, some in plain, and some in the woman’s style. He had a few gentlewomen with him, just two or three to grind his ink—women worth talking to when weighing one poem or another from some old and noble collection. All the blinds were up, and lost in thought that way near the veranda, with the book on an armrest before him and the tip of the brush in his mouth, he made a sight too marvelous for one ever to tire of watching. For anyone with a discerning eye it was a wonder simply to see the way he addressed himself to the sharply contrasting red or white of the paper, adjusted his hold on the brush, and applied himself to the task. (t553–54)

10. Historically, a good proportion of calligraphy heirlooms was *fragments* of calligraphy from books, scrolls, and letters, further illustrating the point that brush traces held significance over recorded textual content.

Figure 5.2 Calligraphy by Fujiwara no Yukinari (972–1027). Fragment of a 1018 dedication record of a calligraphy screen, included in the calligraphy album *Kanbokujō*. MOA Museum of Art, Shizuoka. National Treasure.

Figure 5.3 Calligraphy attributed to Ono no Tōfū (894–964). Inscription of poem. Heian period, tenth to eleventh c. Poem sheet mounted as a hanging scroll, 12.8 × 25.6 cm. Tokyo National Museum. Important Cultural Property. Image: TNM Image Archives.

This passage celebrates Genji's effortless ability to recite and inscribe poetry with due sensitivity. The tale positions Genji as the aesthetic standard, his cultivation and understanding of beauty unmatched to the point that his very act of writing becomes an aesthetic experience.

Premodern Japanese is written vertically, from top to bottom, with the text read from right to left. A work of calligraphy would be appreciated on the character/letter level, in how individual strokes form the character or letter; on the column level, in how characters and letters interact with one another; and on the level of the sheet or page, in how the overall text is laid out. Like a musical performance, this final point involves spatial pacing of brush traces. When written in *renmen* mode, ligatures connect multiple graphs and add a visual sense of flow. Scattered writing (*chirashigaki* 散らし書き) is an art of spatially arranging columns of text (Figure 5.3).¹¹ Whereas prose text is written

11. Nagoya Akira makes an important point that “scattered writing does not make the start flush, the space between lines also differs—it is a structure based on irregularity; it may

with columns of equal lengths, poetic text is often executed in elegant *chirashigaki*, manipulating column breaks and indentations.

Soon after the previous passage, Genji receives a visit from his brother His Highness of War (Hotaru Hyōbukyō no Miya), delivering his finished book. Here is Genji's reaction as he looked through it:

His visitor's hand was not inspiring, but it was his little accomplishment, and he had written very cleanly indeed. The poems he had chosen from the old anthologies were distinctly unusual ones, and he had given them just three lines each, with pleasantly few Chinese characters. Genji was surprised. "I never imagined such wonders from you!" he exclaimed ruefully. "I shall have to throw all my brushes away!"

"I thought I might as well do my best, as long as I was shamelessly to introduce my writing into such company," His Highness lightly replied. (t554)

In Genji's judgment, though the calligraphy was done "cleanly," it lacked inspiration, akin to a piece of music performed without flaw but lacking musicality. In Genji's assessment, His Highness makes up for that in content with his unusual selection of poems and in the orchestration of calligraphy in breaking the poem into three lines and inscribing mostly in *kana*.

In turn, His Highness of War's reactions to Genji's calligraphy pay close attention to style and script and the relations between paper and hand:

Genji could not very well hide the books he had been filling, so he took them out. They examined them together. His running

appear to be irregular, but as a whole it needs to possess a balanced beauty." Nagoya, *Nihon no sho, Bessatsu Taiyo* 191, p. 5.

script on stiff Chinese paper struck His Highness as a miracle, while his quiet, perfectly self-possessed woman's style on soft, fine-grained Koma paper, lovely yet unassertive in color, was beyond anything. His Highness felt his tears gathering to join the flow of these supple lines that he knew would never pall, and the poems in expansively free running script, on magnificently colored papers from Japan's own court workshop, gave endless pleasure. (t554)

This assessment illuminates the idea of calligraphy as an object of admiration and connoisseurship. The three styles executed by Genji—running script, women's style, and free running script—were miraculous, “beyond anything,” and the source of “endless pleasure.” It is clear that Genji's calligraphy possessed the “inspiration” that was dearly lacking in His Highness's example, moving him to tears. Furthermore, due attention is given to the discussion of paper, such as color, types of media—thin paper (*usuyō* 薄様), poem sheet (*shikishi* 色紙), and fans (*ōgi* 扇)—and places of origin—China (Kara 唐), Korea (Kōrai 高麗), and Japan, specifically referencing high-quality paper made in Michinoku 陸奥 (an area in northern Japan encompassing Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, and a section of Akita prefectures today).¹² Keen attention to morphological and material aspects of expression and meaning were important for the calligrapher and viewer (and sender and recipient, in the case of letters), informing a holistic idea of calligraphy in *The Tale of Genji*.¹³

The significance of connoisseurship in judging calligraphy appears further in the chapter:

12. The China–Japan dialectic appears also in discussions of paper. Kawazoe Fusae discusses paper–calligraphy relationships connected to appreciation of *karamono*. See Kawazoe, *Genji monogatari jikūron*, pp. 45–48.

13. Sugioka, *Genji monogatari to shoseikatsu*, p. 387.

Genji also immersed himself then in connoisseurship of *kana* writing, and he sought out everyone at all known for that skill—high, middle, or low—so as to have each write out whatever might be most congenial. He placed nothing of base origin in his daughter's book box, and he carefully distinguished the rank of each writer when he asked for a book or a scroll. Among all her wondrous treasures, some unknown even in the realm across the sea, it was these books that most aroused young people's interest. (t555)

This passage introduces social hierarchy into value judgment. On the one hand it shows that *kana* writing was a valued skill that had the potential of being recognized notwithstanding rank at the imperial court (high, middle, or low), but on the other hand the calligrapher's rank mattered when works of calligraphy were commissioned and assembled. Such careful attention to rank and deference to the system of rank permeated all aspects of life at the imperial court. Family rank played an immense role in status, promotion, and courtship, and it is evoked frequently by Murasaki Shikibu when establishing a character and assessing his or her calligraphy in *Genji*.

The passage also illustrates the practice of treasuring excellent calligraphy, often as family heirlooms. This is explicated further as conversations continue between Genji and His Highness of War:

They spent the rest of the day talking about calligraphy, and when Genji brought out a selection of poetry scrolls pieced together from different papers, His Highness sent his son, the Adviser, back to his residence for some of his own. There were four scrolls of the *Man'yōshū*, chosen and written by Emperor Saga, and a *Kokin wakashū* by His Engi Majesty on lengths of light blue Chinese paper pasted together, with a mounting paper strongly patterned in darker blue, rollers of dark green jade, and

flat cords woven in a Chinese ripple pattern, all to lovely effect. His Engi Majesty had wielded marvelous skill to change his hand for each *Kokin wakashū* scroll, and they brought a lamp close to examine them. "They never disappoint one, do they," Genji remarked in praise. "People now can manage only a contrived approximation."

His Highness presented them to Genji on the spot. "Even if I had a daughter, I would not want them to go to someone who hardly knew what to see in them, and as it is, they would just go to waste," he said. (t554–55)

Discussed here are manuscript copies of two significant anthologies: *Man'yōshū*, an eighth-century collection that gathers poetry from the late seventh to late eighth century, and *Kokin wakashū*, the first imperially commissioned anthology of *waka* poetry compiled around 905. Many manuscript copies of these anthologies were made, as heirlooms and valued possessions. In this passage, they are examining manuscript copies by Emperor Saga (52nd emperor; r. 809–23) and Emperor Daigo (60th emperor; r. 897–930), two emperors renowned for their calligraphic prowess. His Highness's reasoning for giving them to Genji shows that one needs a connoisseurial eye for appreciation *and* execution. The notion of discernment and beauty dependent on the eye of the beholder is made clear in his statement that without the skill to discern what is good about the calligraphic traces they would "go to waste." The passage also notes that His Highness "who so loved fine things and cultivated such elegance was extremely impressed" (t554), suggesting that though His Highness's calligraphy skill was wanting, he possessed connoisseurial talent. As for execution, Genji's comment that his contemporaries "can only manage a contrived approximation" illuminates further that mastering the ability to replicate external form was not sufficient to achieve artistry.

In *Genji*, discussion of standards—both in execution and in appreciation—is anchored in temporal terms of past and present. The evocation of past calligraphers establishes calligraphy as a form of cultivation that has been and will be celebrated as a critical character/characteristic in one's moral existence. Looking closer at the past-present dialectic in *Genji*, two somewhat contradictory frames emerge. First is the idea of upholding works by calligraphers of several centuries prior, those comfortably of the distant past. For example, the text mentions four historical figures famed for their calligraphy: Emperors Saga and Daigo and courtiers Ono no Michikaze (894–966) and Ki no Tsurayuki (866?–945?) in another chapter.¹⁴ Furthermore, mention of these historical figures in the context of a fictional tale effectively lends weight and validity to the discussion of calligraphic standards in *Genji*.

On the other hand, while having the eye to appreciate the old, one was expected to possess the ability to be of the present, exposing a tension between established and emergent standards of beauty. This is illustrated in the more short-term past-present dialectic that manifests in a binary of things in fashion and things passé. As the *Genji* scholar Kawazoe Fusae notes, there is great emphasis on the concept of *imamekashi* (fashionable, up-to-date, modern) in *Genji*.¹⁵ A devastating example of a character lacking in fashion appears in Chapter 6 “Suetsumuhana.” We are introduced to Her Highness (Suetsumuhana), the daughter of the Hitachi Prince, who, though of high birth, Genji learns is living in “sad circumstances now that her father was gone” (t114). Genji courts her with numerous letters, though with no response, much to his impatience. The effect of

14. Although no description is provided of their writing, Chapter 17 “Eawase” discusses narrative picture scrolls featuring calligraphy by courtiers Michikaze and Tsurayuki.

15. Kawazoe, *Genji monogatari hyōgenshi*, pp. 406–09.

Genji's letters in Suetsumuhana's dire circumstances is described as follows:

The old place had been so antiquated even in her father's time that nobody went there, and now visitors struggled even less often through the garden's weeds, so that when, wonder of wonders, Genji's resplendent notes began to arrive, her pathetic gentlewomen broke into eager smiles and urged her, "Oh, my lady, do answer him, do!"

Alas, their hopelessly timid mistress would not even read them. (t118)

A determined Genji finds his way to the residence, whereupon Suetsumuhana embarrassingly admits that she does "not know how to talk to people" (t118). To this, Taifu, who originally piqued Genji's interest in Suetsumuhana, says:

"It pains me to see you behaving so much like a child, my lady. It is quite acceptable for the most exalted lady to retain a girlish innocence as long as she has her parents to look after her, but it simply is not right for you in your present unfortunate situation to remain shut up forever in yourself." (t119)

Following this, Suetsumuhana receives Genji, which leads to Genji unexpectedly breaking Taifu's trust in entering Suetsumuhana's room:

Her Highness herself was numb with shame and wounded modesty, for which Genji did not blame her, since she still led so sheltered and so virtuous a life; yet he also found her comportment peculiar and somehow pathetic. What about her could possibly have attracted him? Groaning, he took his leave late in the night. (t121)

After this encounter, Genji writes the requisite morning-after letter, albeit delivered late in the evening, a delay that was painfully acknowledged by Suetsumuhana's ladies-in-waiting. Suetsumuhana responds with a poem:

With the encouragement of all present, Her Highness wrote this poem out on *murasaki* paper so old that it had reverted to ash gray, in startlingly definite letters, antique in style and evenly balanced top and bottom. It did not deserve a glance, and Genji put it down. He did not like to speculate about what she thought of him. (t122)

In Genji's view, this letter fails on three counts: in the choice of paper, the style of calligraphy, and the manner of inscription. Suetsumuhana's writing in "definite letters, antique in style" meant that her strokes lacked cursiveness; "evenly balanced top and bottom" indicates that the letters and lines were not scattered in the manner fashionable of the day.¹⁶ This is the moment in which Suetsumuhana finally writes to Genji, and the narrative describes her moral character and social circumstance as tragically out of date.¹⁷ (Later in the tale, Suetsumuhana vindicates herself in her resolute commitment to her father's legacy and modes and manners that appear *passé*.)

Genji's critique of calligraphy is informed by his lived experience as a privileged member of the court aristocracy with access to excellent examples. His response to various calligraphy examples above displays that extra-calligraphic factors such as time, person, rank, and

16. For references to Suetsumuhana, see also Sugioka, *Genji monogatari to shoseikatsu*, pp. 63, 101, and Uehara, ed., *Suetsumuhana*.

17. It should also be noted that there are ladies in *Genji* who write in the old style *but* are still admired.

context critically inform aesthetic judgment. Judgment is also closely aligned with moral values in that the real-time decisions of the calligrapher are interpreted as corresponding to one's moral character.

HAND AND CHARACTER

That an individual's calligraphy style is called "hand" (*te* 手) demonstrates the close confluences between the person and his or her writing style. We see this conflation articulated in Chapter 2 "Hahakigi," which features a famous critique of women. Genji, who is seventeen years old at this point in the tale and a captain in the Palace Guards, listens to older men discuss the arts: first joinery, then painting, then handwriting. Their common theme supports not the obvious but the studied. For joinery, someone who makes things "nicely attuned to fashion so that they pleasantly catch the eye" can be distinguished easily "from the true master who works with success in recognized forms" (t27). For painting, someone who can paint "startling renderings of what no eye can see" may amaze, but the greater artist succeeds in conception and technique in rendering "commonplace mountains and streams" (t27). So there is praise for the commonplace. As for writing:

"In the same way, handwriting without depth may display a lengthened stroke here and there and generally claim one's attention until at first glance it appears impressively skilled, but although truly fine writing may lack superficial appeal, a second look at the two together will show how much closer it is to what writing should be. That is the way it is in every field of endeavor, however minor. So you see, I have no faith in the obvious show of affection that a woman may sometimes put on." (t27)

This perspective echoes author Murasaki Shikibu's own reflections on calligraphy and moral life. In her diary, *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, she reveals her rivalry with Sei Shōnagon (ca. 966–ca. 1025), the author of the *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*). The point of Murasaki Shikibu's critique is that she felt Sei Shōnagon was *showing off* her own talent.¹⁸ She writes:

Sei Shōnagon, for instance, was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them?¹⁹

Murasaki's diary includes encounters with master calligraphers such as Fujiwara no Yukinari (972–1027). At the time of Murasaki Shikibu's writing of her diary and *Genji*, *Man'yōgana*, *sōgana*, and *hiragana* coexisted. Nanjō Kayo makes the key point that reference to calligraphy in Murasaki's diary is more about paper and manner of writing (*kakiburi*), due to the function of diaries as *factual* records. By comparison, *The Tale of Genji* has more descriptive characterization of calligraphy so that the reader will have a stronger sense and image of the characters.²⁰ She suggests that, though they are written

18. Nanjō, "Heian bungaku ni okeru kana shodō—'Makura no sōshi,'" p. 189.

19. *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, tr. Richard Bowring, p. 54.

20. Nanjō, "Heian bungaku ni okeru kana shodō—'Murasaki Shikibu nikki,'" p. 23.

by the same individual, this is a key difference between the diary and the tale.

Genji's own critique of women and calligraphy appears in Chapter 32 "Umegae." The following passage represents a critical attitude toward contemporary calligraphy by Genji and, by extension, the author, Murasaki Shikibu. Here is Genji discussing the hand of various women he has had relations with to Murasaki, the love of his life:

"Her Majesty's own writing has accomplished charm, but," he whispered, "it may lack a certain spark. Her Late Eminence's writing showed great depth and grace, but there was something weak about it, too, and it had little flair. His Eminence's Mistress of Staff is the one who stands out in our time, although hers has too many tricks and flourishes. Still," he concluded generously, "she, the former Kamo Priestess, and you yourself are the ones who really and truly write."

"Surely I do not belong in such company!"

"Do not be too modest! For warmth and sweetness, you know, there is no one like you." (t552-53)

He is discussing the calligraphy by Her Majesty (Akikonomu), Her Late Eminence (Fujitsubo), His Eminence's Mistress of Staff (Oborozukiyo), the former Kamo Priestess (Asagao), and Murasaki.

These judgments are impressionistic and subjective. As Thomas LaMarre notes, discussions of calligraphy in *Genji* "describe a range of quite heterogeneous styles and judgements without attempting to develop a single consistent thesis."²¹ Akikonomu has "accomplished

21. LaMarre, *Uncovering Heian Japan*, p. 106. LaMarre continues on to describe "a grid of intelligibility for aesthetic judgment based on a loose competition between specific pairs," such as new versus old, *kana* versus *mana*, feminine style versus masculine style.

charm" but lacks "a certain spark." Fujitsubo shows "great depth and grace" but is "weak" and with "little flair." Yet in the next sentence, Oborozukiyo is praised as "standing out" in this time but with "too many tricks and flourishes." Murasaki's calligraphy is noted for "warmth and sweetness," and without qualification Genji states that Oborozukiyo, Asagao, and Murasaki are "the ones who really and truly write." In this elusive jumble of subjective evaluation, Genji confidently makes his aesthetic judgment, enabled by the fact that he is a "connoisseur," as described in the text. And here it is suggested to the reader that what makes a work good is clear to those in the know.

Another illustration of Genji's connoisseurship appears earlier in "Umegae," in a transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary:

"Everything is on the decline, compared to the old days," Genji confided to his love, "and this latter age of ours has lost all depth, but at least *kana* writing is superb now. The old writing certainly looks consistent, but it conveys no breadth or generosity and seems always to follow the same pattern. It is only later on that people began writing a truly fascinating hand, but among the many simple models that I collected when I myself was so keen on cultivating the 'woman's style,' a line quickly dashed off by the Haven, Her Majesty's mother—one she meant nothing by and that I acquired—struck me as particularly remarkable." (t552)

In this example by the Haven (Rokujō), something she wrote *in passing* captured Genji's attention. Genji does not reference the content of the missive, only that her hand was remarkable. In this case, judgment lies squarely with Genji, the connoisseur and ultimate arbiter of taste, who calls it good and worthy as a model for himself, notwithstanding the content or original intent. In this instance, an everyday letter (*fumi*) becomes a model by virtue of Genji's recognition. This distinction requires unpacking, because it means that Rokujō's

calligraphy represents her mastery of the art and her accomplishment as a person. Mitani Eiichi interprets Rokujō's casual writing as "free" and "expressive of character."²² Value is not absolute but resides in the discernment of the recipient.

Chapter 23 "Hatsune" offers another instance of a casual writing, this time by Akashi no Kimi, Akashi no Himegimi's mother, that captures Genji's attention:

[I]t seemed to him that *this* was where true distinction was to be found. She herself was not to be seen. He looked about him, wondering where she might be, and noticed papers and notebooks scattered beside the inkstone. He picked them up and glanced at them. . . . The scattered practice sheets displayed a writing of great interest and originality. Not that she had pretentiously shown off her learning by mixing in a lot of cursive characters; no, she had simply written naturally and pleasingly. . . . He had just wetted a brush and begun to write when she slipped in, and he thought how very discreet she still was in her deportment, indeed how pleasantly so, and how unlike anyone else. (t433-34)

What Genji observes here are scattered *practice* sheets (*tenarai* 手習), so again brush-writing not for any *formal* purpose. Genji's focus is therefore not on content but script, which displays "writing of great interest" (*yue*) and "originality" (*suji kawari*). "Mixing in a lot of cursive characters" here means to include Chinese characters in the composition. The passage suggests that people did this to "show off learning" (*zaegaru*), and this was considered "pretentious" (*kotogotoshi*) in Genji's milieu. A discussion of how *discreet* she is in her *deportment* follows, offering a reading and interpretation

22. Mitani, "Ōcho bungaku ni arawareta shodōbi," p. 15.

of calligraphic traces as representative of a desirable or undesirable character.

Genji's first encounter with Akashi no Kimi occurs during Genji's exile in Chapter 13 "Akashi," and the episode illustrates how calligraphy as expression of cultivation could trump social status. In the province of Akashi, Genji becomes acquainted with the Akashi Novice and his daughter, Akashi no Kimi. Genji sends a letter:

He was acutely aware that with her reputedly daunting standards the lady might be a startling rarity in these benighted wilds, and he did it very beautifully on tan Korean paper. (t266)

When Akashi no Kimi takes time to respond despite her father's urging, as "Genji's dazzling missive so awed her that she shrank from revealing herself to him," her father takes it on himself to write "on Michinokuni paper, in a style old-fashioned but not without its airs and graces" (t266). Genji is "mildly shocked" by his forwardness but follows with another letter:

He had made his writing very beautiful. If it did not impress her, she must, young as she was, simply have been too shy; and if it did, she no doubt still despaired when she measured herself against him, so much so that the mere thought of his noticing her enough to court her only made her want to cry. She therefore remained unmoved, until at her father's desperate urging she at last wrote on heavily perfumed purple paper, in ink now black, now vanishingly pale,

*"Your heart's true desire: hear me ask you its degree and just
how you feel.*

Can you suffer as you say for someone you do not know?"

The hand, the diction, were worthy of the greatest lady in the land. (t266)

In this exchange, we do not get information on the style of the young lady's calligraphy, but the text remarks that she wrote with a lovely mastery of ink tonality, "now black, now vanishingly pale," conveying her aesthetic delicacy. Throughout *Genji*, quality of lines and ink tonality (*sumizuki*) are given due attention, akin to discussions of line and tonality in abstract paintings.²³ As Sugioka Kason suggests, *Genji* is intrigued by the fact that this lady, who lives far from the capital city, can match the abilities of those with the highest caliber at the imperial court.²⁴

In the context of *Genji*, in most instances where assessment takes place, a person's character is closely related to his or her writing. This represents a different outlook from the notion of a constructed scribal or calligraphic personality, raised by John Carpenter. He notes, "Since calligraphy is the result of training and can be adjusted according to the needs of the occasion, it may be proposed that within courtly contexts that scribal personality is a construction closely related to social identity insofar as both are consciously created. A person can adopt different calligraphic personalities according to requirements of the function, and the models relied upon vary accordingly."²⁵ In *Genji*, the characters are not given a chance of this possibility.

CONCLUSION

Genji engages contemporary developments and fashions in handwriting—in *kana* and scattered writing—making clear to its readership what was considered stylish at the time. Whether one

23. Sugioka, *Genji monogatari to shoseikatsu*, p. 107. Sugioka also cites a passage in *Sagoromo monogatari* that discusses an example where letterforms were not particularly elegant but the beauty of ink tonality and *renmen* were superior.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

25. Carpenter, "Chinese Calligraphic Models," p. 157.

was stylish, like Rokujō, or not, like Suetsumuhana, led to consequences of greater magnitude. Readers do not see the characters cultivating their calligraphic skills but rather learn the implications of the consequences of cultivation as described in their characterization or in their actions. Calligraphy critique in *Genji* conflates forms of brush-writing with a person's moral character, framing calligraphy as direct manifestations of personhood and cultivation. Readers are made aware of the power of calligraphy as a means to lift oneself into meaningful existence. Values and suggestions conveyed through the actions of fictional characters no doubt spurred Murasaki Shikibu's readers to raise their own calligraphy game and consider their own writing through the lens of *Genji*. Indeed, standards and actions in the fictional world of *Genji* became points of reference—morally and aesthetically—for centuries to follow, exerting their sociocultural influence on everyday conduct in the real world. Stanley Bates's assertion resonates with calligraphy in *Genji*:

If it is the case that literature (or, more broadly, any art that represents actions of characters in fictional narratives) is a historically specific social practice that is related to the whole body of social practices, then it seems obvious that it will provide a major example of human self-understanding.²⁶

The Tale of Genji came to be read as a guidebook for conduct throughout premodern times, and therefore the ideals of calligraphy and character expressed in the tale had ramifications

26. Bates, "Character," p. 414.

outside the tale not only during Murasaki Shikibu's time but to the present day.

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