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GENJI AND THE GARDENS OF MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

In The Tale of Genji, gardens are frequently loci for the advancement of romance, and function in some respects as gardens of love. This chapter compares the literary gardens of love in The Tale of Genji with traditions of medieval romance in Europe and Persia. Literature in several major cultures throughout the world reveals a common concern with love, courtship and sexual encounters during the medieval. These directions were often set in an ironic, or contrapuntal relationship with the central religious doctrines of their time; in addition, they quite frequently evoke, or ironize, gnostic ontologies of spiritual union. Establishing a locus of irony with regard to the ideal form of love is found to be a common trope in these medieval works, and invites further interrogation of the subversive potential of romantic love and its literature. C. S. Lewis was the first to explore this theme in 1936, and it has been much expanded by Ernst Curtius, Peter Dronke, John Fleming, A. C. Spearing, David Hult, Maria Rose Menocal, Julie Scott Meisami and others. The expression of such tropes required some degree of accommodation with the dominant religions of each culture. In Europe medieval scholars were rediscovering via Arab translations and commentaries the major elements of the distant, pagan canons of Greece and Rome. Arab culture was also responding to those same classical traditions as preserved and re-interpreted by Arab scholars. And out of this blend, particularly in Muslim southern Spain, al-Andalus, the foundations of the new love literature emerged.

The love literatures of the medieval showed an increasing preference for the vernacular language, as opposed to hitherto hallowed canonical languages, such as Latin, or Chinese. Japan developed a love literature couched in the vernacular language, found in the lyric verse of waka poems. The validation of the vernacular in the new love literatures is highlighted by Dante in Vita nuova, where he observes that his audience were ‘ladies, for whom it was difficult to
understand Latin verses'; this may be read, globally, to mean the classics or auctoritates of ancient tradition.5 Read in generic terms, the object of romantic love and literary homage was a real person (not sainted, or a figure of the imagination), who was unlikely to be wooed successfully with literary homage in a canonical or classical language such as Chinese. Japan was among the first of medieval cultures to validate to a substantial degree love lyrics in the vernacular, as seen in Imperial waka anthologies like Kokinshū (905), or Ise monogatari.6

MEDIEVAL ROMANCE: GLOBAL MARKERS

In these several and distinct medieval cultures, romantic love, the central topic for romance literature, presented a potentially subversive subject, one often condemned by the religious orders of these cultures. Associated with these challenges, and possibly a form of response, is the reification and deification of the feminine, especially as seen in the increasing tendency to worship Mary as an icon of purity, or as Queen of Heaven, as seen in the works of St Bernard of Clairvaux. From Bernard to Dante, we encounter an increasingly classicized image of the feminine, one of holiness, purity and beauty. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, feminine or feminized images also emerge from Buddhism in China and Japan, as seen in the merciful icon of the white-robed Guanyin.7 By Dante’s time the purest symbol of this nature was the white rose, symbolizing the Host and much more, as seen in Paradiso 1.

The poetry of romantic love is found in these cultures to be couched quite frequently in various forms of allegory, ranging from the veiled truths or ‘integumenta’ of William of Conches, to the figures discussed by Dante in Convivio,8 offering a religious justification for writings on romantic passion. Further, such allegory – especially when empowered by Platonic anagogy (a figure alluding to heaven, or the afterlife) – provided a sanctioned position from which to validate the discourse on and dramatization of what clerics might otherwise consider to be corrupting topics: this took the form of allegorizing or ‘medievalizing’ Plato, Ovid and Homer.9 For romance writers in these medieval cultures, it was evidently problematic to write about romantic love unless such passion could be shown to be in part an anagogic ‘path to divine love’.10 Whether in medieval Persia, Europe or Japan, allegory was a favoured, at times almost necessary, literary strategy, largely, it seems, because of pressures from the dominant faiths. In effect, allegory was a key tool in the validation of medieval love literature and its romances. The Tale of Genji has been seen as, in some respects, a lightly veiled Buddhist allegory which ironizes the relation of monogatari (old tales) to truth, and provides gentle reminders of current religious canons.11 While the Genji is not truly an instructive ‘mirror for princes’,12 the extensive use of pervasive mists and metaphors of illusion in the final ‘Uji’ chapters highlights the polarizing of blindness and illusion as against vision and truth. This trope, effectively the antithetical ‘symbol’ codes, is presented still more dramatically in the painted Genji Illustration Scrolls (Tokugawa and Gotoh...