

# A Creditable Performance under the Circumstances? Suematsu Kenchô and the Pre-Waley *Tale of Genji*

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## Introduction

Prior to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, information available in the West about the early 11<sup>th</sup>-century masterpiece that is widely known in English today as the *Tale of Genji* was not only sketchy but also highly erroneous. It had been misrepresented by the British diplomats and officers who were the first foreigners to encounter it as “a collection of histories” and its Japanese title of *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語) literally and nonsensically rendered, character by character, as “History of Affairs of the Original Families” (Dickins, 1888, p. 31). From the French at around the same time, we read of “[...] la plus célèbre de toutes [les poétesses], la belle Murasaki,” but her fascinating work of fiction—which details a long series of love affairs involving the son of an emperor, set in a time of great peace and stability—is bizarrely dismissed as “une sèche chronique d’une guerre civile qui a ensanglanté le pays pendant un siècle” (Bousquet, 1877, p. 357). It was not until 1882 that anything more than a brief scene or two was translated into any European language, and that the *Genji* was finally made available to be read and appraised from a somewhat more informed standpoint.

The text in question is a very long tale that was authored by a woman we know as Murasaki Shikibu at around the mid-point of the Heian period (8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> centuries), Japan's great period of cultural flourishing. Several well-known English translations exist, such as Arthur Waley's from 1925-1933, Edward Seidensticker's from 1976, and Royall Tyler's from 2001. The first, however, was by Suematsu Kenchō (末松 謙澄: originally transcribed as Suyematz Kenchio); his late-19<sup>th</sup> century version comprised 17 of a total of 54 original parts, published in London by the English press Trübner & Co. under the title *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語, *the Most Celebrated of the Classical Japanese Romances*). Reprinted in Japan by E. F. Morgan & Co. in 1898, it was brought out again in 1900 through the Colonial Press of London and New York as part of a 2-volume set containing the deliberately exotic pairing of *Persian and Japanese Literature*, which promised, in the latter case, to “furnish readers with a very fair idea of what the most interesting and enterprising of Oriental nations has done in the domain of imaginative literature” (Wilson, 1900, p. 224). Just over a decade later, a German rendition of the English, done by Maximilian Müller-Jabusch, was published in Munich,<sup>1</sup> and Suematsu's three opening chapters also appeared as a separate volume in 1934 by Tokyo's San Kaku Sha. Although long superseded by the efforts of Waley, Seidensticker, and Tyler in English, or René Sieffert and Oscar Benl in French and German respectively, and rarely accorded any significant status by critics, this early translation nonetheless remains readily accessible even today, in a cheap paperback edition regularly reissued by Tuttle.

Our translator was among an elite group of young Japanese men who were sent abroad to study and represent their country in the decades after it had opened to the West in 1853. This exciting period of rapid change, roughly corresponding to the Meiji era (1868-1912), followed some two centuries of self-imposed national isolation known as *sakoku* (鎖国). Suematsu's introduction for what he refers to as the “Romance of Genji”

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1 Interestingly, the first colloquial Japanese modernization of this premodern and thus very difficult-to-read text, namely the *Shinshaku Genji Monogatari* (新釈源氏物語), done by four former students of Tokyo University, was also published in 1911 (see Rowley, 2000, p. 63ff.).

(Suyematz 1882, p. ix, fn.; all quotations from this translation and its translator's introduction, with one exception, as noted below, will be from this edition) reveals how seriously he took the responsibility of participating in his country's negotiations vis-à-vis the West. His two main objectives in translating this text into English were ostensibly to improve Japan's status on the world stage by demonstrating something of its long and extremely rich literary tradition, and to make known to those Westerners eager to understand the Japanese worldview what is in effect the nation's "cultural scripture" (Rowley, 2000, p. 63). Nonetheless, Suematsu's relationship with his text is an ambivalent one, as he adopts an apologetic posture regarding the "effeminacy" and lack of "true morality" (p. xiii) of the age in which it was written, and justifies his extensive abridgements as being of only "superfluous" material (p. xv). His version is problematic in many respects, for example: in spite of being the initial rendition into English, it was produced by a Japanese native; although constantly reprinted, it remains little studied; and in spite of being the first European translation of this Eastern masterpiece, its foundational place within the *Genji*'s reception history has been neglected. This article will focus on the circumstances that made possible this early (re-)presentation of Japanese literature, while paradoxically keeping the *Genji* from being widely read and admired by the West until Arthur Waley's much more famous translation would appear some 40 years later. My aim is not to provide a detailed analysis of the translation itself, but rather to examine the broader issues underpinning its production as well as its reluctant reception by an audience that was clearly ill-equipped to judge its worth or to accept so exotic an interpreter.

## **Life and Times**

Suematsu is recognized within Japan as a pathbreaker in making the country's classical literature known abroad, primarily through this particular translation. He is far from being as well-known in the West, however, although a certain amount of material on his life and career has been published in English, such as in Koyama Noboru's study of the pioneering Japanese youths who studied at Cambridge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (translated by Ian Ruxton in 2004), and a handful of important articles such

as those by Ruxton (2005), Margaret Mehl (1993), and R.H.P. Mason (1979), to all of whom I am indebted for many of the biographical details mentioned here.

The fourth son of Suematsu Sichiueemon—who has been described as “an important village headman” (Ruxton, 2005, p. 63)—and his wife Nobuko was born on August 20 in the second year of Ansei, according to the old Japanese era system. In the Gregorian calendar, this corresponds to September 30, 1855, a date that pleasingly enough happens to be the feast day of Jerome, patron saint of translators. His birthplace was Maeda (now part of the city of Yukuhashi) in Fukuoka prefecture. Suematsu received a solid education in the Chinese classics from Murakami Bussan, an important scholar and poet and then, in 1871, moved to Tokyo, where he served for a year as house boy to a high government official and tutored a friend in Chinese in exchange for English lessons. In 1872, he studied briefly at the Tōkyō Shihan Gakkō, and then began earning his living as a freelance journalist with newspapers such as the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*.<sup>2</sup> Suematsu is said to have early demonstrated “an outstanding gift for writing” (Matsumura, p. 2), in not only his native language, but also *kambun* (a specialized, annotated style of Chinese traditionally written by educated Japanese males) and English.

Following this precocious start to his career, Suematsu entered public life and “[...] in an age given over to new methods, new ideas and new opportunities, [...] took the lead in advocating, exemplifying and implementing change” (Mason, 1979, p. 3). In addition to displaying a lifelong interest in politics broadly speaking, he was active in contemporary movements to reform not only Japan’s poetry and theatre, but also its script. There was strong popular feeling among many Japanese of the day that they should Romanize the writing system and thus make their language and literature more accessible to foreigners, as a

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2 This newspaper would later become the well-known *Mainichi Shimbun*. Although Ruxton claims that Suematsu was doing translations into English at this time (Ruxton, 2005, p. 63), it seems more logical to assume that this freelance work was in the other direction, namely translating articles from the English press into Japanese.

preliminary step to abolishing extraterritoriality and assuming what was deemed to be a more suitable international standing (see Kornicki, 1999, p. 75). And, as G.G. Rowley correctly reminds us, Suematsu's work on the *Genji* must be seen in the context of Meiji Japan's *kokugaku* (国学) or the National Literature movement, which considered this canonical text very much as a cornerstone for constructing a more exalted idea of the Japanese nation to present to the world. And, indeed, his contribution in this line was formally recognized in 1888, when Keio University awarded him Japan's first Doctor of Arts degree for his translation (see Matsumura, 2004, p. 4). Mason notes that he was doomed "always to be a 'second-ranker' but [nonetheless remains] a person of considerable historical interest" (Mason, 1979, p. 3). Although on certain levels "a geographical outsider as well as a class outsider" (Mason, 1979, p. 5), because his family was neither samurai nor originating in one of the politically important Restoration fiefs of Satsuma, Chōshū, Tosa or Hizen, Suematsu was in reality intimately connected with many of the most powerful and influential figures of his day within Japan.

In 1875, Suematsu's mentor and future father-in-law Itō Hirobumi (who would eventually serve four terms as the Japanese Prime Minister) secured him a position as clerk in the Council of State secretariat and had him sent on a diplomatic mission to Korea.<sup>3</sup> When the Satsuma Rebellion, pitting pro-Imperial and anti-foreigner forces against the Shogunate government and effectively bringing to an end the 700-year-old feudal system, erupted in 1877, Suematsu acted as adjutant to Yamagata Aritomo, the commander of the government troops who would himself later serve two terms as Prime Minister. The following

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3 In earlier years, Itō had himself spent six months studying in England, having fled Japan illegally (still a capital crime at the time) after a terrorist career that included burning down the British legation and killing a native scholar merely because he (the scholar) had been asked by the shogun to prepare a report on historical precedents for removing the emperor. Itō returned to Japan sooner than he had intended in order to try and tell his faction that British naval power was such that there was no way to defeat them. He also served as interpreter for the first public audience given by Emperor Meiji and was friends with the great British statesman and interpreter Sir Ernest Satow.

year saw him embark for England for the first time, staying eight years, for part of which time he was enrolled at St. John's College, Cambridge. Upon returning to Japan in 1886, he rose to senior official rank in the Home Office and also served as tutor to the Korean crown prince. With the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Suematsu returned to Britain, remaining a further two years in a propagandist's role, his goal being:

[...] to influence politicians and "manipulate the British press" into an attitude of sympathy toward Japan [...] His mission was a success, although it would be seventeen more years until someone—Arthur Waley—came to appreciate his *Tale of Genji*. (De Gruchy, 2003, p. 24)

Although this last statement is not fully accurate—as can be seen from one or two of the contemporary reviews discussed below, which do offer some positive (albeit problematized) responses to the translation—De Gruchy is right to underscore Suematsu's success in various areas of endeavour. His career is certainly worthy of examination, particularly:

[...] because of the way it constantly spilled over from a main course of bureaucratic, clique and parliamentary politics into the other side-channels of scholarship, diplomacy and cultural innovation. Diverse manifestations of individual talent were by no means rare in the Meiji era; but Suematsu's achievements in this respect are outstanding. He made his mark as a successful diplomat and well-known (in his own time) man of letters, in addition to gaining a degree of eminence as a bureaucrat and politician. (Mason, 1979, pp. 3-4)

It is Suematsu's first sojourn in England, beginning on April 1, 1878, when he was just 22 years old, that is relevant to us here. While not among the initial generation able to study abroad, he was nonetheless just the second Japanese to graduate from Cambridge and only the third ever registered there to that date. The *Genji* translation appeared less than four years after his initial arrival. While this text would seem to be Suematsu's first and only foray into literary translation from Japanese, he did translate fairly extensively into his mother tongue. For example, he published poems by Byron and Shelley, as well as Charlotte Brontë's (a.k.a. Bertha M. Clay) novel *Dora Thorne*,

a wildly successful melodrama concerning an ill-matched marriage originally published ca.1883. One of the tasks to which he devoted his later years was the rendering into Japanese of canonical Western legal texts, such as Justinian's *Codex*.

While at university, Suematsu produced a historical thesis entitled *The Identity of the Great Conqueror Genghis Khan with the Japanese Hero Yoshitsune*, which he had published at his own expense. Yoshitsune, a major figure from Japan's history, is one of the principal case studies around which Ivan Morris would later make a case for a uniquely Japanese phenomenon centering on what he characterized as the "nobility of failure" theme. Although Yoshitsune was defeated in battle and presumed dead, certain legends have him fleeing north to Hokkaido (Yezo), and subsequently crossing over to the Asian mainland. According to Mehl, Suematsu spent months in the British Museum reading up on Japanese, Chinese, Mongolian and Persian history, to bolster his argument that Yoshitsune and the Mongol leader were in fact the same person. This basic thesis had apparently been advanced by students at Tokyo University some half-dozen years earlier, with the support of the American editor of the *Tokyo Times*, E.H. House, but Mehl is rightfully dismissive of the scholarship in this regard. She writes:

Suematsu relies heavily on legends, reports on "Japanese" things in Central Asia (never asking at what time they came to be there) and dubious speculations about names. That the scarce evidence (if it can be called so) is far outweighed by the improbability of the assumption does not seem to have troubled him. (Mehl, 1993, p. 186)

*The Identity of the Great Conqueror* was translated into Japanese by Uchida Yahachi in 1885 and went through several editions (see Mehl, 1993, p. 186); Matsumura (2004, p. 9, fn. 8) suggests that Uchida may well have been one of Suematsu's pseudonyms.

Suematsu's other books in English are *The Risen Sun* and *A Fantasy of Far Japan, or Summer Dream Dialogues*, both published in 1905. In a chapter of the former titled "Arts and Letters," he rather oddly defines some of the characteristic features of Heian literature as inherent shortcomings, while simultaneously establishing an analogy with other great classical civilizations:

True it is that the writers had not yet devised a mode of dividing one word from another, so that readers may see at once every word separate; but this was similarly the case with the ancient Greeks. Neither did they know how to make use of the signs, such as the full-stop, the comma, and the exclamation stop, etc., so as to make reading easy, and at the same time to give the reader some kind of sense and idea beyond the words themselves. (Sematsu, 2005, p. 230)

Suematsu draws attention to the *Genji* and the *Makura no Sôshi* (known in English as the *Pillow Book*, written by Murasaki Shikibu's contemporary Sei Shônagon) as "generally considered the best" of the "light literature" (Suematsu, 2005, p. 230) of Heian times, but devotes no time to discussing them here. Later in the book, he does, however, quote from both of these classical works to support his arguments as to the highly evolved state of Japan's literary and other arts in this period.

### Suematsu's *Genji*

The preface to Suematsu's translation that was written by Terence Barrow for the 1974 Tuttle edition manages to imply that foreign readers would necessarily find it "inconvenient" to read the *Genji* in its entirety:

The complete *Genji* story covers fifty-four lengthy chapters, all of which have been translated into English by Arthur Waley. The translation presented here, however, is that of Kencho Suematsu, who abridged the original for the convenience of readers. (Barrow, 1983, p. 9)

Decades earlier, namely in a 1921 article in which he announces his own intention to eventually translate the *Genji*, Waley claimed that Suematsu had likely "used one of the numerous abridgments of the work rather than the romance itself" (Waley, 1921, p. 286), but from what is now the distance of some 125 years, it is very difficult to say what his predecessor's source text may have been or precisely why he chose to render only these particular sections.<sup>4</sup> In any case, while acknowledging that his

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4 A close study of Suematsu's translation against any of the source texts likely to have been available to him would no doubt raise fascinating



translation is only a partial one, Suematsu strives somehow to leave his readers with the impression that they are getting more or less all of what is important from a work that is simply “too voluminous”: “In translating I have cut out several passages which appeared superfluous, though nothing has been added to the original” (p. xv). Although this volume is referred to as merely “the first installment” (Dedication, n.p.), it seems as though he never returned to the project.

Suematsu’s *Genji* translation is dedicated to his patron, Tokugawa Jūshimune, whose son Iesato he had tutored at Cambridge. Several reasons for the dedication are explicitly listed: the clan’s support of previously neglected literary culture in general; the fact that his own early education was indebted to Tokugawa rule; and the friendship and kindness from which he had personally benefited. This clan that had ruled Japan as Shōgun for generations, bringing “peace and prosperity” (Dedication, n.p.) to its people, in fact also subsidized the publication of his *Genji* translation.

The points that Suematsu opts to include in his introduction, and the manner in which he chooses to present them, are highly revelatory of his aims with this book. For instance, because the growing, if still infinitesimal, numbers of European tourists to his country would all be visiting the ancient capital, he is quick to underscore that it is in “Kioto, the old capital where the principal scenes of [Murasaki Shikibu’s] story are laid” (p. x), as a selling point to stir up interest among potential readers. Also, although many cases of his use of first-person plural pronouns can be read as inclusive of a Western readership, at other times, he is clearly proclaiming some sort of native ownership over Murasaki Shikibu and her work. Phrases such as the following overtly remind readers of the position of authority he enjoys as a Japanese national: “our country” (p. ix and *passim*), “our authoress” (p. x and *passim*), “these traditions [...] have come down to us”

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points of comparison. Nonetheless, as explained above, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article, which is specifically interested in questions of reception rather than translational quality *per se*.

(p. xii), “our lacquer work” (p. xii), and “our appreciation of true classical works such as that of our authoress” (p. xv).

Of even greater significance, however, is the way he is at pains to contrast the respective relationships that the ancient Heian and modern Meiji eras enjoyed with an external imperial power. Much can be read as a direct criticism of British colonialism. For example, he notes of the age in which his author was writing:

[...] for some centuries before this period, our country had made a signal progress in civilization by its own internal development, and by the external influence of the enlightenment of China, with whom we had had for some time considerable intercourse.  
(p. xiii)

He continues, with a barely contained barb at Commodore Perry’s forcible opening of Japan and the subsequent unequal treaties, as well as the recent history of civil unrest, various conflicts with the new hordes of foreigners on her soil: “No country could have been happier than was ours at this epoch. It enjoyed perfect tranquility, being alike free from all fears of foreign invasion and domestic commotions” (p. xiii). In conclusion, nonetheless, he feels compelled to acknowledge what he assumes his audience will take to be a certain moral weakness in the society in which Murasaki Shikibu lived and wrote:

Such a state of things, however, could not continue long without producing some evils; and we can hardly be surprised to find that the Imperial capital became a sort of centre of comparative luxury and idleness. Society lost sight, to a great extent, of true morality, and the effeminacy of the people constituted the chief feature of the age. Men were ever ready to carry on sentimental adventure whenever they found opportunities, and the ladies of the time were not disposed to discourage them altogether.  
(p. xiii)

The sexual mores depicted in the *Genji*, while quite decorous in and of themselves, were something at which those first Victorian readers to peruse the original had immediately balked. Suematsu could not help but join many other Japanese in being embarrassed by and effectively apologizing for the relatively free expression

of female sexuality in traditional literature, given the degree to which it was misrepresented by Westerners.

In his introduction to the *Genji*, Suematsu makes very little mention of specific difficulties of translation. He comments on “the concise description of scenery, the elegance of which it is almost impossible to render with due force in another language” (p. xv). The only other instance occurs in his final sentence, which refers vaguely to help received during his work on the project: “I have now only to add that the translation is, perhaps, not always idiomatic, though in this matter I have availed myself of some valuable assistance, for which I feel most thankful” (p. xvi). Aside from these two comments, there is a single footnote in the body of the text remarking on the challenge of turning Classical Japanese poetry into English, and the perceived need for translational license:

A line of an old ode about the beacon in the bay of Naniwa, at the same time expressing the desire of meeting with a loved one. It is impossible to translate this ode literally, as in the original there is a play upon words, the word beacon (in Japanese) also meaning “enthusiastic endeavor.” The word “myo-tzkushi” (=beacon) more properly means “water-marker” though disused in the modern Japanese. In the translation a little liberty has been taken. (Suematsu, 1983, p. 209, fn.)<sup>5</sup>

A shadowy but significant figure with regard to the Suematsu *Genji* is William Mason Morrison, with whom several Japanese exchange students had boarded and from whom our translator and others received private English lessons. Koyama rightly points out that this tutor almost certainly helped Suematsu with his English for the *Genghis Khan* text. Interestingly, Morrison’s granddaughter Ozaki O’yei Theodora (whose mother was the product of the first recorded intermarriage between an Englishwoman and a Japanese) has claimed that he is really owed co-translator credit for the *Genji* (see Koyama, 1995, pp. 121-122). It is true that Suematsu does bring his comments to a close

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5 Intriguingly, in my copy of the 1882 edition, this footnote ends at the word “endeavour”; the remainder of the quote is found only in the modern Tuttle edition.

by thanking an unnamed assistant, as cited above. How much, if any, Japanese Morrison actually knew remains a debatable point, however, and his involvement was likely limited to revising the English for fluency; any more exaggerated claim should probably be dismissed as just that.

There are throughout the text quite a number of translator's notes<sup>6</sup> (although these tend to be very brief) designed to explain foreign terminology relating to titles, rituals, musical instruments, articles of dress, and botanical references, as well as foreign customs. The majority have a clearly didactic purpose, for example: "Cremation was very common in those days" (p. 5, fn.) or "In China and Japan handwriting is considered no less an art than painting" (p. 33, fn.). Certain of the notes suggest that Suematsu is eager to show how many traditional practices that may have shocked or disconcerted Westerners had recently been discontinued, such as: "An old custom in Japan for girls when married, or even betrothed, is to blacken their teeth. This custom, however, is rapidly disappearing" (p. 146, fn.).

One element of particular interest in Murasaki Shikibu's original Japanese is that her characters do not have personal names as such, the general practice being to rely on context and degree of honorific language choice to identify who is speaking to whom. Where an explicit reference is made, it is often to someone's title or place of residence, which tend to be in a more or less constant state of flux throughout the narrative as successive promotions are awarded and households move due to fire or other causes. Others may be closely identified with a line of a poem and thereafter allusively indicated by that reference, if not in the text itself then certainly in the nomenclature readers throughout the centuries have devised in order to keep the characters straight in their own minds. Intriguingly, Suematsu refrains from altering these identifiers in all but one case: he gives the heroine Murasaki

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6 The notes are, of course, a function of translating any text from such a foreign culture, especially from such a distant time as well. Suematsu employs just over 200 notes, compared with the astonishing number of almost 1000 provided for the first 17 chapters in the most recent English translation, by Royall Tyler. (Both Waley and Seidensticker provide slightly under 300 notes for these chapters.)

(literally “wisteria”) the more acceptably British name of Lady Violet.

In *Genji Days*, a sort of diary that Seidensticker kept during the decade he was working on his own translation, the sole mention of his first predecessor refers to this very feature of the 1882 version:

Yesterday I was glancing at a copy of the Suematsu translation of the early chapters. I laughed to see Murasaki called Violet [...] and was taken by a rare inspiration. I once considered translating *aoi* as “heartsease.” If I return now to that thought and make it operable, why then I can call Aoi Pansy! (Seidensticker, 1977, p. 215)

Joking aside, Suematsu’s rationale for assigning the *Genji*’s heroine such a strongly domesticated name must be seen as stemming from a desire to draw attention to her as “a most modest and gentle woman” (p. x), just like his author herself, the true Japanese female who can hold her head high in relation to proper Englishwomen. It is clearly a bid to counter the *musumé* or geisha-girl stereotypes all too commonly seized upon by the first (overwhelmingly male) European visitors to Japan and that still had plenty of currency. As I have argued in a recent article (see Henitiuk, 2008), Suematsu does elide much that a Victorian audience would be likely to find titillating or objectionable, as he seeks to redress earlier misrepresentations of Japanese promiscuity and instead emphasize the chastity of his countrywomen. It is interesting to note here that the Tuttle preface even aligns the empress whom Murasaki Shikibu served with the doughty British monarch:

The Heian period is notable for an unprecedented brilliance of court life, but in actuality there were courts and courts. Unfortunately for Lady Murasaki, the empress Akiko had a puritanical and narrow character that has caused her to be likened, in recent years, to Queen Victoria of England. (Barrow, 1983, p. 7)

## Critical Response

Contemporary reaction to Suematsu's translation was mixed. Reviewers are generally less unkind than puzzled; while intrigued by the previously unsuspected literary world presented to them, they struggle to comprehend and find points of reference. I have located four reviews written shortly after this first English *Genji* appeared. The review appearing in the April 29, 1882 issue of *The Spectator* comprises a mere 200 words, so it is quoted here in full:

It is, perhaps, as well that Western readers should have the opportunity of seeing what the translator, doubtless with truth, describes as "the most celebrated of the classical Japanese romances." It is probable, however, that they will be satisfied with a slight acquaintance. To speak the plain truth, the story, if story it may be called, when there is not a vestige of anything like a plot, is exceedingly tedious. Genji is the son of a Japanese Emperor by an inferior marriage; he gets into disgrace (why, we cannot exactly make out) and is restored to favour for reasons equally obscure. The story of his life is very little more than the record of his intrigues. There is little or no impropriety in the narrative, but the general impression left is that intrigues were the whole business of life in the aristocratic circles of Japanese life. The manners described are wholly conventional, and, excepting a few words here and there of description of scenery, there is not a glimpse of nature from beginning to end. The best things in the book are the scraps of verse, which are sometimes really pretty. The translation does credit to the skill and English scholarship of Mr. Kenchio, who is an attaché to the Japanese Legation in this country. (Anon., 1882c, p. 571)

This negative reaction in what was a widely read periodical to both the content and style of the *Genji*, despite that condescending nod to the foreign translator's mastery of English, must have discouraged many from picking up Suematsu's work and actually reading it for themselves.

Two other British reviews date from the same month. Here is the much briefer and more positive verdict delivered in *The Academy*, a few weeks earlier:

The Japanese language not being so familiar in the West as Japanese art, we can only say of *Genji Monogatari* that it is very

interesting in itself, and that the translator shows a remarkable command of English. The work now given in an English dress is the most celebrated of the classical Japanese romances, and its author was evidently gifted with unusual powers of description and observation, and a plastic imagination. As regards Mr. Kenchio, it may be stated that he has filled several high offices in Japan, and that he is now attached to the Japanese Legation in London. He will deservedly receive commendation for devoting his leisure to such literary undertakings as the present. (Smith, 1882, p. 228)

The reference to art reminds us that by the time this translation appeared, the visual and decorative arts (woodblock prints, lacquerware, ceramics) of Japan had long found a ready and appreciative audience abroad, while its prose and (to a somewhat lesser extent) its poetry remained mostly unknown. Other contemporary voices were also underscoring the marked reticence toward Japanese literature, noting the immediate popularity enjoyed by “those ballads in blue porcelain, those sonnets in chased silver, those poems in old gold lacquer that first drew the attention of westerners to the Land of the Sunrise” (Riordan and Takayanagi, 1896, p. v) as opposed to the neglect of those for which linguistic mediation was required.

For yet another response, this one fortuitously touching on the central issue of women’s writing, as well as the text’s supposedly predominant folkloric value, we can look to the April 8 issue of *Notes and Queries*, which reads in part:

As a mere story, the *Romance of Genji*, like most Oriental fictions, is somewhat insipid; but it offers a curious picture of the state of Japanese society nine hundred years ago, especially as regards the position occupied by women. The literary capacities of the ladies in *Genji’s Romance* are very remarkable, most of them being apparently able to improvise verse with the utmost facility. In fact, “poetical composition was then a necessary branch of a young lady’s education.” To many readers the notes with which Mr. Suyematz Kenchio has supplied the novel will be found the most attractive part of the book, for they contain much valuable information regarding Japanese folk-lore. (Anon., 1882b, p. 279-80)

And on July 29, Suematsu's translation was also noticed across the Atlantic, in a New York periodical titled *The Critic*, which argues for taking virtually an anthropological approach toward reading it. Below is an excerpt:

[This] romance has only one hero, but many heroines, the author having seen fit to portray many shades of feminine character, the more strongly to emphasize the selfishness of man. Proper names are very seldom given, the male characters being known by their titles, and the females by nick-names, somewhat in the manner of American Indians. Nor were the chapters (Mr. Suyematz has thus far translated only seventeen of the fifty-four) originally numbered, although each had a descriptive heading. The translator's style is hardly idiomatic, though quite sufficiently clear; and the volume, which is curiously interesting, deserves a place by the side of Mitford's renderings of Tales from Old Japan. (Anon., 1882a, p. 201)<sup>7</sup>

One cannot help but wonder whether the reference here to the translator's "unidiomatic" English, which in reality is unexceptionable, is simply parroting Suematsu's own humble verdict of his level of linguistic skill, or whether it is based on the ethnocentric assumption that no foreigner, especially a Japanese, could possibly have mastered the language of this Imperial power. The most striking feature of this reviewer's response, nonetheless, is that quite fascinating attempt to establish a cultural analogy between Japan's ancient aristocracy and what are apparently viewed as the equally exotic Indians of North America.

Aside from formal reviews, Suematsu's translation does get mentioned in passing by a handful of renowned Japanologists. Three years after its publication, Basil Hall Chamberlain remarks quite harshly: "the volume entitled *Genji Monogatari* published by Mr. Suematsu Kenchô is scarcely even a paraphrase of the original," asserting that he cannot help wishing for a more accurate "European help toward reading it" (Chamberlain, 1885, p. 97). The slightly more generous W.G. Aston manages little

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7 While this appears to be the only contemporary US review, I have also located a bibliographical reference to Suematsu's *Genji* under "Recent Publications. British." in both the January 1, 1882 and April 1, 1882 issues of *The American Journal of Philology*.



more than to note that “Suematsu’s version . . . though a creditable performance under the circumstances, is not only incomplete, but unsatisfactory” (Aston, 1897-1898, p. 285). Neither of these scholars sees fit to accord any significant respect or attention to Suematsu’s literary efforts, but comments by others prove even more perfunctory. V.F. Dickins, another important early translator, does mention the *Genji* in 1888, with a footnote to the effect that “[...] many chapters of this history of a Japanese Don Juan have been recently translated by Mr. Suyematsu” (Dickins, 1888, p. 37). Ishikawa Takéshi, whose 1909 doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne focused on the uniquely Japanese genre of *zuihitsu*, including Sei Shônagon’s *Pillow Book*, offers merely the terse comment that “M. le baron Souématsou, conseiller privé de l’empereur, a traduit en anglais les 17 premiers volumes” (Ishikawa, 1909, p. 134), leaving us to speculate as to why he may have felt it expedient not to laud his fellow countryman’s groundbreaking work. Michel Revon, whose highly influential *Anthologie de la littérature japonaise* from 1910 readily acknowledges many other pioneering translators of works of Japanese literature into Western languages, ignores Suematsu completely. Seidensticker has called this 1882 version “the first somewhat ambitious English translation,” but concludes that it “was little noticed, and the eminences in Western studies of Japanese literature did not exactly form a clique in support of it” (Seidensticker, 1982, p. 48). It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that this disregard was coloured by ethnocentrism or even, to make the point more bluntly, racism toward the ethnic Japanese usurper of Western privilege. Those “eminences” certainly knew and commented at length on translations by their fellow Westerners—see, for example, de Rosny on Dickins or Revon on Aston, Chamberlain, and others.

It should be borne in mind that the general consensus in the pre-Waley years, albeit with certain dissenting voices such as (usually) that of Aston, is that the *Genji* hardly qualifies as decent reading material, much less a masterpiece of literature. Dickins’ backhanded praise, typical of his day, was unlikely to inspire a great many new readers to turn to the text:

Among [the] early romances, unsurpassed, probably unequalled, in literary quality, by the later fiction of Japan, the *Genji-monogatari* holds the chief place in the estimation of native

critics [...]. To European readers, however, the record of Genji's love-adventures soon becomes wearisome, despite the clever dialogues upon the virtues and failings of women regarded as ministers to men's sensuous or aesthetic pleasures that relieve the monotony of the narrative—dialogues, by the way, that wear a strangely modern air, and might, with a few necessary changes, be transported bodily into a drawing room novel of nineteenth-century London. (Dickins, 1888, p. 37)

Further, an evident misogyny denigrating Japan's ancient and unique tradition of women's writing makes its predictable appearance with comments such as that by Chamberlain: "[...] much of the Classical Prose is 'feminine' prose in the most disparaging sense that can be given to that term" (Chamberlain, 1885, p. 97).

One would expect the Japanese born and bred Suematsu to contradict such negative verdicts, out of national pride if nothing else, but in fact his translator's introduction explicitly states that the *Genji's* socio-historical value takes precedence over any purported aesthetic worth:

On the whole my principal object is not so much to amuse my readers as to present them with a study of human nature, and to give them information on the history of the social and political condition of my native country nearly a thousand years ago. They will be able to compare it with the condition of mediaeval and modern Europe. (p. xvi)

As a contrast, consider Waley's judgement only two decades later, delineated in the prefaces to each volume of his translation, in which Murasaki Shikibu is described as having crafted a complex narrative architecture on a par with Hugo's or Tolstoy's, and as being of the caliber of Proust or Madame de la Fayette. The positive things that Suematsu does have to say about the work, namely that it is "one of the standard works of Japanese literature" and "a national treasure" (p. ix), are repeatedly undermined in the latter part of his introduction by such assertions as that it "affords fair ground for criticism" (p. xv) and by an underscoring of its "salient faults" (p. xvi). Interestingly, a distinct unease with the Japanese female who does not remain silent in the background

as an object or, at best, a muse, can be extrapolated from the comments of both Chamberlain and our translator.

For the Morgan reprinting of Suematsu's rendering, done in Yokohama some 16 years after the first edition, we have an unsigned review titled "A Japanese Romance" in the *New York Times* dated April 16, 1898. This again is brief enough to quote in full:

Any romance of 1000 A. D. would be curious rather than interesting. When it happens to be Japan, if not precisely impossible, it is difficult to appreciate. In "Genji Monogatari" Suyematz Kenchio gives the history of this story, which "is one of the standard works of Japanese literature" and "regarded for centuries as a national treasure." The author was a woman, "generally called Murasaki Shikib," and she was a lady attached to the Court, and the period to which the story relates is contemporary with her own life. The translator tells of the golden age of Japan, which was prior to the year 1000, and says that when "Genji Monogatari" was written decadence had set in. "Society lost sight to a great extent of true morality, and the effeminacy of the people constituted the chief feature of the age."

The romance relates to the life and adventures of Prince Genji. As a lady attached to the Court the author presents all the strange ceremonials of the time. The text carries with it innumerable verses, which are to us utterly meaningless. After a certain lapse of time, we now understand the wonderful art of Japan, but perhaps it will be never given to us to appreciate her fiction, or at least a considerable part of it, and yet the story of the Ronins is an admirable one. Commentators say, however, that in the original it would have scarcely been understood by us. The volume has an original colored illustration in it, admirably printed. (Anon., 1898, p. 257)

Even setting aside the apparently obligatory comment about that "effeminate" society, this is an obviously perplexed and exoticizing review. The odd juxtaposition above of the 47 *Ronin* story, based on actual events dating from the 1700s, with the *Genji*, which dates from seven centuries earlier than that, is

richly indicative of how few examples of Japan's great wealth of literature were available to English readers at the time.

Japanese prose as a whole is often disparaged throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example: “la littérature n’a, en somme, aucun monument qui signale de loin à l’attention” (Arthur de Claparède, cited in Beillevaire, 2001, p. 821). Verse normally fares better, but Dickins, in his 1866 translation of the great poetic classic *Hyakunin Isshu* (“one hundred poets, one poem each”; according to my research, the first book-length presentation of Japanese literature in English), likewise adds an apologetic note to the effect that his source text has value as only a socio-cultural curiosity:

Finally, I would remind the reader, that the Odes of which the following translation is offered in no way lay claim to any high poetic merit, and are but prettily and somewhat cleverly rendered metrical expressions of pretty but ordinary sentiments. But, whatever their intrinsic value may be, they are extremely popular with the Japanese, and on that account, rather than for any literary merit they may possess, have I ventured to offer this English version of them to the public. (Dickins, 1866, pp. viii-ix)

Several scholarly European works predating Suematsu's translation had indeed acknowledged the *Genji*'s high status within Japan, but because few Westerners could read much of the original, misperceptions were commonplace. A couple of these misunderstandings, dating respectively from 1866 and 1877, were cited at the beginning of this article. Another early reference dates from 1874, in an encyclopedia article by the renowned scholar and diplomat Sir Ernest Satow that ends on a decidedly negative note:

Of all these [Japanese] romances the most celebrated is the *Genji Monogatari*, in 54 books, by the poetess Murasaki Shikibu, who flourished at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the composition of the work being referred usually to the year 1004. It relates the amorous adventures of Hikaru Genji, the son of the mikado's favorite concubine. The titles of the various books into which it is divided are chiefly taken from the names of the women whom he loved. In point of style it is considered

to be far superior to all the other monogatari, being far more ornate; but the plot is devoid of interest, and it is only of value as marking a stage in the development of the language. (Satow, 1874, p. 559)

Léon de Rosny's seminal *Anthologie japonaise* from 1871, comprising a translation specifically of the *Sikasenyô* poetry anthology, makes no reference at all to the *Genji* in its introduction. Even more difficult to explain is the fact that G. de Claubry makes no mention of Murasaki Shikibu's text in his address on the masterworks of Japanese literature to the 1874 Congrès international des orientalistes, despite the fact that he does name other classical works such as the *Kojiki* and the *Heike Monogatari*.

In 1877, journalist Georges Bousquet reveals that he, like Dickins, had been seriously misinformed as to the content of Murasaki Shikibu's work, characterizing it as a dry and dusty record of a civil war: "la querelle de la maison des Faki contre celle de Hei" (Bousquet, 1877, p. 357). Many pages earlier, in a description of a tourism visit to Ishiyamadera, "où la célèbre poétesse Murasaki composa le *Genji Monogatari*," he rather jarringly characterizes it as "l'*Iliade* du Japon" (Bousquet, 1877, p. 185). While the text is indeed a fundamental one in its native canon, and may perhaps be compared to Homer on that level, because it is of course neither an epic, nor a poem, nor does it have anything whatsoever to do with warfare, the analogy remains highly problematic. Misleading as well is the entry in de Rosny's 1883 cataloguing of Baron de Nordenskiöld's Japanese library, where her narrative is listed as the "Histoire de la famille des Ghenzi" (de Rosny, 1883, p. 203). Even Aston describes the *Genji* in 1875 merely as "the acknowledged standard of the language of the period to which it belongs, and the parent of the Japanese novel" (Aston, 1875, p. 122).

Seidensticker (whose own complete 1976 translation would serve as the standard throughout the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) has written insightfully about early Western Japanologists and the limitations to what they were able to accomplish:

They were brave people and the beginnings they made were remarkable. But they could not do everything. Among the things they did not do was recognize the *Genji*. It did not immediately become an international classic. Acceptance was slow indeed. (Seidensticker, 1982, p. 48)

He goes on to posit that their low opinion of the *Genji* was at least partially rooted in the virtually insurmountable linguistic difficulties they faced at the time:

To decipher is not the same as to read. They who looked at the *Genji* in those early days had to decipher. Few of them can have gone all the way through it. An essential element in narrative literature is pace. An author must keep things moving if he or she wishes, as what writer of narrative does not wish, to keep the attention of the audience. The original pace is so slowed down when one deciphers as to seem no pace at all. Hence, in large part, the early view of the *Genji* as endless. (Seidensticker, 1982, p. 48)

A native speaker of Japanese and well-educated in the classics, Suematsu clearly was able to do much more than decipher, and he presented to an English audience the opportunity to read Murasaki Shikibu without any of the off-putting challenges Seidensticker describes. But, nonetheless, his version failed to find more than the most grudging acceptance from Western readers, reviewers, and scholars.

The late great critic Marian Ury once sniffed that “one is not quite sure why” (Ury, 1976, p. 267) Tuttle insists on keeping the Suematsu *Genji* in print, concluding elsewhere that the fact that it is out of copyright can be its only recommendation. She argues that:

[...] it would provide material toward any catalogue of Victorian affectations. It is Victorian sentiment as perceived by an ambitious young Japanese, eager to ingratiate himself. Suematsu [...] commanded an English not altogether flawless [...]. But mostly he understood what it was that his readers would find pleasing. (Ury, 1976, p. 267)

That cutting judgment cannot help but give me pause in its over-hasty dismissal of our sole native Japanese translator of this

classic. Ury is right to conclude that it is “outdated” and that “[...] between Suematsu’s time and Waley’s there was an alteration in taste” (p. 269), but she like so many others since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is unduly critical. Suematsu, in providing a readable, if admittedly partial, English rendition of this masterpiece, in fact performed a great service to World Literature.

Speaking in 1898, the Chair of the Asiatic Society of Japan would graciously include Suematsu among the ranks of those influential scholars and writers (such as Dickins and the German Karl Florenz) who had “drawn the attention of students of things Japanese to subjects of wide and far-reaching interest” (cited in Aston, 1897-1898, p. 285), but—and surely this is significant—only in a “pioneering” or desultory way. In that article from 1921 mentioned previously, published just a year after Suematsu’s death, Waley laments that his “fragmentary version” has been “long unprocurable,” and recommends it be reissued because it is “well deserving of resurrection” (Waley, 1921, p. 287). Nonetheless, in not a single one of the translator’s introductions to his own multiple volumes does he make any mention of the pre-existing version. Seidensticker, for his part, in 1982 characterized the Suematsu *Genji* as “not a bad translation” (Seidensticker, 1982, p. 48), but again had declined to mention it in his own introduction, despite fully acknowledging his debt to Waley, as well as to several modern Japanese renditions by Yosano Akiko, Tanizaki Junichirô, and Enji [*sic*] Fumiko. As the back inside cover of the Tuttle edition rightly reminds its readers:

[...] of course, other translations exist, the most famous being that by Arthur Waley. It is both interesting and valuable, however, to have this translation by the native Japanese who introduced the novel to the West almost a century ago. (Suematsu, 1983, n.p.)

In the years subsequent to Suematsu’s publication, we find newly translated excerpts appearing in anthologies and scholarly works by such important Japanologists as Florenz, Aston, and Revon, but no one actually set out to supersede it until Waley, some four decades later. This is, therefore, a highly significant text for understanding the global circulation of the *Genji Monogatari* and indeed non-Western literature as a whole.

## Conclusion

A “Publisher and Bookseller” blurb reproduced in the unpaginated endpapers of *A Fantasy of Far Japan* writes of Suematsu as follows: “he has been able to a great extent to throw down the barriers of misunderstanding which have so long subsisted between the civilizations of the East and West” (Suematsu, 1905, n.p.). Despite its obvious shortcomings, Suematsu’s groundbreaking version must undeniably be termed “a great literary achievement” (Matsumura, 2004, p. 4). So why has it almost disappeared from the reception history of this great Japanese tale, with reviews of Tyler’s recent translation, for instance, routinely calling his only the third ever in English, after Waley’s and Seidensticker’s?

The survey offered in this article of the Suematsu’s *Genji*’s often conflicted reception by an audience enamoured of so much else within Japanese culture suggests that its lack of acceptance was due primarily to non-artistic factors. Murasaki Shikibu’s tale itself is fascinating, and his rendering is neither particularly flawed nor infelicitous, and so the answer may well lie in de Rosny’s prescient musing about “le danger d’offrir au public des specimens d’une littérature pour laquelle il n’est peut-être pas encore suffisamment préparé” (de Rosny, 1871, p. iii). Based on the majority of the early commentary and reviews, it is clear that Westerners were indeed ill-prepared in 1882 to appreciate the *Genji*, especially when presented to them by an interpreter so obviously not belonging to their own scholarly elite. Discomfited at having access solely through a native informant (an identification proudly claimed in Suematsu’s introduction), readers and critics were seemingly determined to treat the text as a curiosity until they had what Chamberlain termed a “European help” (1885, p. 97) toward its understanding. And Suematsu was himself conflicted with regard to the work he had determined to present to the outside world. Nonetheless, he and his translation did play a vital role in paving the way for the recognition, slow and grudging though it may have been at first, of Murasaki Shikibu and her masterpiece as firmly ensconced within any World Literature canon worthy of the name.

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**ABSTRACT: A Creditable Performance under the Circumstances? Suematsu Kenchô and the Pre-Waley Tale of *Genji*** — Before Suematsu's 1882 translation of the *Tale of Genji*, the information available in the West about Murasaki Shikibu's masterpiece was sketchy and erroneous. The main objectives of this translator were to improve Japan's political status by demonstrating that it has a rich literary tradition, and to make known to Westerners what is in effect that nation's "cultural scripture" (Rowley). Reaction to his version was conflicted: readers and reviewers are curious about the previously unsuspected literary wealth presented to them, but struggle to comprehend and find points of reference. My article focuses on the circumstances that made possible this early representation of Japanese literature, while paradoxically keeping the *Genji* from being widely read and admired until Waley's famous translation appeared some 40 years later. I argue that Suematsu, in using this book to critique Anglo-American imperialism, nonetheless reveals his own ambivalent relationship with the text and its author. Further,

Western audiences were ill-equipped to judge what they were reading, as well as reluctant to accept a non-European interpreter, and thus the reception of this world masterpiece was long stalled for reasons that had little to do with literary or translation quality.

**RÉSUMÉ : Projet réussi dans les circonstances? Suematsu Kenchô et *Le Dit de Genji* d'avant Waley** — Avant la traduction du livre *Le Dit du Genji* par Suematsu en 1882, l'information disponible en Occident sur ce chef-d'œuvre de Murasaki Shikibu était vague et erronée. Le traducteur s'était donné pour objectifs de redorer le statut politique du Japon en démontrant sa riche tradition littéraire et de faire connaître aux Occidentaux la véritable « cultural scripture » du pays (Rowley). Les réactions à sa version furent contradictoires : les lecteurs et les critiques se sont avérés curieux de ce monde littéraire auparavant insoupçonné, mais ils eurent du mal à le comprendre ou à y trouver des points de repère. Cet article se concentre sur les circonstances qui ont rendu possible cette première représentation de la littérature japonaise en Occident, mais qui, paradoxalement, ont empêché le *Genji* d'être lu et admiré à plus grande échelle, jusqu'à la publication de la célèbre traduction de Waley, environ quarante ans plus tard. Je considère que Suematsu, en se servant de cet ouvrage pour critiquer l'impérialisme anglo-américain, révèle toutefois son rapport ambivalent au texte et à son auteur. En outre, le public occidental n'était pas vraiment en mesure de juger ce qu'il avait sous les yeux ni prêt à accepter une interprétation non-européenne. Ce chef-d'œuvre a donc longtemps tardé à être reconnu comme tel pour des raisons qui, en fin de compte, avaient peu à voir avec la qualité littéraire de l'ouvrage ou celle de la traduction.

**Keywords:** Japanese, East-West, *The Tale of Genji*, Suematsu Kenchô, world literature

**Mots-clés :** japonais, Est-Ouest, *Le Dit du Genji*, Suematsu Kenchô, littérature mondiale

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