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MURASAKI SHIKIBU

A NIGHT IN HEIAN-KYO

On a night around the year 1000, in the imperial capital of Heian-kyo - the city now called Kyoto - a lady-in-waiting wrote down which of her colleagues bored her. She served EMPRESS SHOSHI, whose father, Fujiwara no MICHINAGA, was the regent who governed by marrying his daughters to emperors. Her diary catches him teasing her about draft pages he had picked up. Those pages became The Tale of Genji, written near the middle of the Heian period, the age of aristocratic rule that ran from 794 to 1185.

SPELL Spell: MICHINAGA

MICHINAGA

SPELL Spell: SHOSHI

SHOSHI

KNOWN The lady-in-waiting served the emperor's wife at court. What title went in front of Shoshi's name?

EMPRESS

OPEN Michinaga teased her about the unfinished draft pages he had picked up. What would you have said back to him?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

THE WOMEN'S HAND

Men at that court wrote in Chinese, the language of government and scholarship. Women wrote in the VERNACULAR - ordinary spoken Japanese, set down in the flowing phonetic script called KANA, so tied to women that it was nicknamed the women's hand. Prose FICTION, the genre called monogatari, was dismissed as light amusement, which left it unpoliced; nobody bothered to rule on what a tale could do. Sei SHONAGON, whose Pillow Book came out of a rival empress's household, worked the same territory; the diary judges her insufferably pleased with herself.

SPELL Spell: SHONAGON

SHONAGON

SPELL Spell: VERNACULAR

VERNACULAR

KNOWN What is the flowing phonetic script for writing ordinary spoken Japanese, so tied to women that it was nicknamed the women's hand?

KANA

KNOWN Prose writing of one kind was dismissed at court as light amusement, which left it unpoliced. What kind of writing was that?

FICTION

OPEN Two women at rival courts wrote about the same world, and one thought the other insufferable. What is a book you would want to read alongside its rival?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

THE TALE ITSELF

The Tale of Genji runs 54 chapters. Its hero is the son of an emperor by a low-ranking CONSORT, one of the palace's secondary wives, and is pushed out of the succession into a life of love affairs. Nearly 800 short poems, called WAKA, are stitched into the prose, because Heian COURTSHIP was conducted in verse. Nobody stays fixed: characters age, lose beauty, and regret. The last 10 chapters, set in the villages at Uji, leave the hero dead and follow KAORU, NIOU, and UKIFUNE.

SPELL Spell: CONSORT

CONSORT

SPELL Spell: COURTSHIP

COURTSHIP

KNOWN What is the name of the short poem form, nearly 800 of which are stitched into the prose of The Tale of Genji?

WAKA

SEMI_OPEN The last chapters leave the hero dead and follow three younger figures at Uji - name two of them.

NEEDS 2 OF KAORU / NIOU / UKIFUNE

OPEN If you had to send someone a message as a short poem instead of plain words, what would you want your poem to be about?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

MATH The Tale of Genji runs 54 chapters, and the last 10 of them are set at Uji. How many chapters come before the story reaches Uji?

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ARGUING ABOUT THE FIRST NOVEL

Calling it the first novel invites argument. Greek and Roman prose romances came centuries earlier, and Japan already had tales like The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter. What its defenders mean is narrower: psychological REALISM, characters whose inner lives shift over time and whose motives go unexplained. The author is half-hidden too. Murasaki Shikibu is a nickname built from her father's post in the ministry of ceremonial; her personal name went unrecorded. When EMPEROR ICHIJO praised the tale's learning, a jealous colleague nicknamed her Lady Chronicle, and she began pretending she could not read Chinese.

SPELL Spell: ICHIJO

ICHIJO

SPELL Spell: EMPEROR

EMPEROR

KNOWN What is the term for the quality of characters whose inner lives shift over time and whose motives go unexplained?

REALISM

OPEN She hid how much she could read to escape a nickname. What is something you have played down so people would leave you alone?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

READING HER IN SOMEONE ELSE'S ENGLISH

If you pick it up now, you are reading someone's English as much as hers. Arthur Waley turned it into a lush Edwardian romance and cut freely; Edward Seidensticker pared it back toward the plainer original; Royall Tyler kept the courtly **INDIRECTION**, where people are called by rank instead of name. Change translators and the hero changes temperament. What survives all three is what she pioneered: **INTERIORITY**, the sense that the person across from you carries a private weather you can only guess at - the reason her thousand-year-old **COURTIERS** still read like people.

SPELL Spell: **INTERIORITY**

INTERIORITY

SPELL Spell: **INDIRECTION**

INDIRECTION

SPELL Spell: **COURTIERS**

COURTIERS

OPEN If someone tried to guess at your private weather, what would they get wrong?

Open response - use practitioner judgment