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Critique on *Yugao*

*Yugao* is a retelling of a chapter of *The Tale of Genji* by the same name (sometimes titled “Evening Faces” or variations) about the main character, Genji’s, amorous affair with a mysterious lady. In this retelling, the lady is a man, and Genji himself is bisexual. The writer uses the names of the main characters but sets the story in a modern university setting. The text is broken up by images representing text-message dialogue in the story, as well as by artwork depicting the scenes made in the style of Yamamoto Shunsho, a Kyoto artist from 1650. It takes on the fanciful, “alternate universe” imaginings of the classic fanfiction genre, but seems to refocus the original novel’s center entirely.

The writing aims to be fresh and young, though also wrapping its story in a traditional view of the world. The college students apparently frequently visit each other to “sit in” on classes on Chinese poetry; they flirt through glances, Facebook stalking, and shy, cryptic texts; there is an air of repressed sexuality and arranged marriage among the relationships that doesn’t quite ring a bell to those young people living in a post-Obama university atmosphere. The tensions in the time periods give Genji the air of a man plucked mysteriously from a dream, and plopped into the 21st century to effortlessly dominate it anyway.

The short story chiefly examines the effects of class on the elite members of the story: Genji, his girlfriend (originally wife) Aoi, and his cousin To no Chujo. The less fortunate character in this story, Yugao, is sort of abducted by Genji for a month because he is too polite to turn down expensive airplane tickets. While there, he comments that “The pallor of money

settled on everything”, an unusually straightforward line about the state of things. Yugao’s growing anxiety over Genji’s manipulation lasts half a page before the narrative plunges back into Genji, who is grieving in the aftermath of Yugao’s mysterious disappearance.

Aside from such disturbances, the writing itself is understated and indirect, leading to no direct conclusions and often leaving the reader confused in its wake. An example is the classic Chinese poetry class: a professor lectures on the politics of homosexuality in the poem being analyzed (“the loved object [is] performing their desirability”). The writer, mysteriously, does not follow up on this. This may be a deliberate imitation of Murasaki Shikibu’s original understated and mysterious text, often shedding less light on the actual effects of events on its characters than it does to the general beauty and opulence of their turbulent lives. Or perhaps the writer has been overambitious, and hoped to carry a message through this scene that wasn’t resolved in the second half of the story. Several moments like this follow, like a fleeting grasp at some greater picture.

The artwork itself is spare and explicitly lacks the elaborate backgrounds and landscape scenery of typical Genji artwork, much like the story itself. While a fitting vehicle to carry the narrative itself, the short story often lacks in background and what seems to be vital information about the characters, the setting, and occasionally, events that transpire. This lends to the foggy, ethereal, mysterious atmosphere of the tale; reminiscent of Henry James’ *Turning of the Screw*, in which something scandalous and disturbing is told to the reader without the reader seemingly being told anything at all.

Finally, the decision of the writer’s part to move away from the loved object as a woman is extremely significant. *The Tale of Genji* is chiefly a work of great feminist study because it

was written by a woman about a deeply unjust patriarchal society. The debate over whether Shikibu meant to criticise the society she wrote so carefully has rather taken scholars; the same question remains here about Jiang's short story. Does the story still comment on masculinity and patriarchy as a destructive force, as many reading *The Tale of Genji* feels it does? Aoi is mentioned briefly, but seems much healthier and stronger in this telling (she boxes her feelings out with her signature move "The Two Timer", ostensibly about Genji). Does this in fact exculpate Genji of his wrongs? The only other female character, Ukon, serves the role of the swooning supportive character and barely corrects Genji on his opinion of himself. What does the short story lose in moving away from women and moving towards masculinity?

Additionally, sexuality is subtly touched upon, but, as per the writing style, very indirectly so. Does this mean the author shies away from the subject, or does she mean to create a pervasive but unobtrusive message on sexuality in her piece?

Overall, a mysterious piece that either feels somewhat incomplete, or rather ethereal.