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Reginald Jackson

A Proximate Remove:
Queering Intimacy and Loss in The Tale of Genji

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reviewed by Holly Eva Allen

A Proximate Remove: Queering Intimacy and Loss in The Tale of Genji by Dr. Reginald Jackson is a work that requires some small degree of backstory due to a rather unwelcome reception by some scholars. At the very opening of his text, Jackson mentions that 'this project has met with more resistance than any other I've undertaken … I've noticed that the topic of performing queer readings of *Genji* tends to make many scholars of premodern Japanese literature uneasy' (xiii). Jackson details that many of these apprehensive academics are skeptical that a queer reading of *The Tale of Genji* is perhaps necessary or even justifiable given that 'Genji only has sex with the boy … once' (xiv). This would, of course, be a particularly narrow perception of the word 'queer.' In fact, such an understanding implies that the critic in question is limiting the academic applicability of queer theory to the very restricted usage of the vernacular. Perhaps this confusion and tendency to misconstrue is understandable given the innovative nature of Jackson's piece. As the author himself explains, 'this is because of the book's arguments and engagement with a varied conceptual archive unfamiliar to many scholars in the field of premodern Japanese studies, on the one hand, and a historiography alien to queer studies scholars, on the other' (xiv).

The question remaining, then, is whether or not Jackson successfully employs elements of queer theory and historiography, along with an expected dose of the usual literary analysis in accompanying forms, to successfully meet his ends without 'overdoing it' as some dubious scholars might sophomorically put it (xiv). So, what is Jackson's aim? In his own words, Jackson states that *A Proximate Remove* looks to prove that '*The Tale of Genji* is a queer text … *Genji* queers, where to queer is to press into question predominant logics of thought, feeling, and movement' (1).

Academics familiar with ground-breaking works in queer theory might immediately recognise that Jackson seems to be employing Sedgwick's definition of queerness in addressing complex heterodoxies and blurred lines beyond the most overt cases of the homosocial, homoerotic, etc. These academics would be correct in their assumption, as Jackson is sure to mention that Sedgwick's writings were concerned with constructing and exploring 'nuanced readings' that look to employ the term 'queer' in reference to 'a politics that values the way in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other, crossing all kinds of boundaries rather than reinforcing them' (35).

Working with this more inclusive and academic definition of queerness, Jackson begins his

analysis with the secretive visit that Tō no Chūjō pays to Genji at Suma's shore. The dedication, longing, solitude, and heart-felt goodbye between the two men might be described as homosocial by a reader looking to attribute a queer flavour to the text. Jackson, however, warns the reader against over-simplification: 'such a pre-modern portrayal of male-male affection also reveals our own proximate remove from the scene—removed because a millennium has passed, the characters are Japanese, and the scene is fictional' (32). This cautionary clarification is enough to deter more queer theorists and LGBTQ+ studies scholars who may overlook the importance of time, place, and culture. Still, Jackson continues with his warning, noting that such a remove is 'proximate because we'd like to think we know what true love (or at least sexual tension) looks like' (32). This quote simultaneously illustrates both the narrowness in likely attendance to Jackson's argument, as well as the strength it presents. The aforementioned narrowness refers exclusively to the rather small audience that might readily and easily follow Jackson throughout the course of his argument due to unfortunate presuppositions most readers might hold. Regardless, herein lies the true puissance of Jackson's argument—while one might read various scenes in *The Tale of Genji* as homosocial or homoerotic, a queering of positionality and denotation are also abundant throughout the source text.

Perhaps one of the greatest sources of this aforementioned queering throughout *The Tale of Genji* can be found in the many iterations of shame. Jackson introduces the concept of shame by reminding readers that Genji's own position is one coloured, in part, due to the shameful nature of his assumed lineage; that is to say that doubt where Genji's maternal background is concerned requires that he be a prince and not a crown-prince (52). The author supports his discussion by enumerating a plethora of additional examples of shame in *The Tale of Genji,* including 'when Genji crumples in an unlit aisle, emasculated by the wraith that kills his potential wife … it [shame] invades appraisals of Suetsumuhana's seeming disaffection … and Yūgiri feels it when he fails to play the perished Kashiwagi's flute adeptly' (52). The repeated use of shame throughout *The Tale of Genji* allows readers to question the purpose and importance of the social expectations and hierarchies that wield and assign shame as a tool with which to maintain social control. Jackson reminds readers that a major component of social expectation and control is compulsory heterosexuality, noting that shame has 'social utility within an ideological regime of romance geared toward ensuring heterosexual reproduction' (53).

The reoccurring usefulness of shame throughout *The Tale of Genji* explores social station and expectation, but the reworking and reframing of said stations are perhaps more fascinating still. Jackson adeptly illustrates how such reframing or queering of station might best be seen via the unusual relationship between the character of Genji and Koremitsu as they become particularly close and the lines blur as the reader wonders who truly relies on whom (85–86). Social station and positionality are further queered as the correlation between women as property and property in paternal inheritance create a notable chain in Genji's pursuit of princess Suetsumuhana (117). Notably, Tō no Chūjō's concurrent pursuit of Suetsumuhana functions almost solely as a means of getting closer to Genji (117). Jackson's employment of such peculiar situations helps the reader identify the many positions, from mistress to prince to rival and more, that might be called into question or exposed as fallible.

Though this particularly nuanced application of queerness is not what a contemporary queer theorist or layperson might expect, it makes excellent use of existing queer theory in such a way that it offers an entirely new and insightful analysis. Though, as Jackson himself noted in the introduction of *A Proximate Remove,* historiographers and analysts of premodern Japanese literature might be suspicious of Jackson's premise, such suspicion is founded on little more than a reductive understanding of queerness. Jackson's analysis is not only sound but ground-breaking and certainly a must-read for all scholars interested in skillful approaches to *The Tale of*

Genji.

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