Genealogy and Cross-Gendering in *Le Roman de Silence* and *Ariake no Wakare [Parting at Dawn]*

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Le Roman de Silence and the twelfth-century Japanese court tale *Ariake no Wakare [Parting at Dawn]* feature similar constellations of themes, narrativization and reception history. They link aristocratic inheritance anxieties and female-to-male crossdressing with extraordinary musical abilities and services to a sovereign, reflecting parallel preoccupations. (ROK)

A compelling medieval court tale exists in a unique manuscript discovered earlier in this century. The text was only established in a modern edition in the 1960s and 1970s; even then, critical attention was somewhat delayed, starting in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s. This blossoming of critical interest is hardly surprising, given that the text in question includes—in fact, integrates—themes of considerable contemporary critical, social and cultural interest, regarding both the Middle Ages and our own times: the constructedness or essentialness of gender and the political implications for prevailing gender roles; the relative import of nature and culture; gender identity and its interaction with cultural expression; gendered aspects of genealogy and inheritance; the interplay of gender and genre; same-sex desire and sexuality.

A high-ranking but childless aristocratic couple produce a daughter; however, this daughter is raised as a son out of concerns for maintaining inheritance and lineage. The crossdressing subterfuge is exceptionally successful, and the daughter turns out to be remarkably proficient at key male courtly pursuits.

Complications arise at adulthood, when the outstandingly attractive young protagonist becomes the object of romantic attentions at court. This precipitates a crisis, one heightened by the protagonist's own sense of gender dysphoria: maintaining the male role is precarious, yet there can be no 'return' to a female role which the protagonist, having been raised as a male from birth, has never experienced. Some solace comes from musical pursuits, at

which the protagonist has an outstanding, seemingly supernatural ability, but the musical role eventually intensifies the crisis by being instrumental in key confrontations in the plot.

The crossdressing gender crisis is finally resolved by an 'unmasking,' aided by supernatural intervention. The protagonist abruptly adopts the female gender role conventionally associated with her biological sex, but is also invited to assume the preeminent social role for a woman, as consort of the sovereign, for services rendered in resolving the sovereign's marital dilemma up to this point.

Recent criticism seems divided on the original intention and reception of this text: is it primarily an exploration of the constructedness of gender roles? Is it even an outright feminist gender role appropriation, a critique of medieval gender roles and relations? Is it a ludic gender/genre inversion that may have been considered quite humorous? Is it even more profoundly subversive of gender categories, celebrating the blended gender elements in both male and female, perhaps betraying a fundamental social anxiety at such category collapsing?

Most scholars of medieval French literature would immediately recognize this plot, and the textual and critical reception history outlined above, as that of the thirteenth-century Arthurian verse romance by Heldris de Cornualle (otherwise unknown). However, the plot description and outline of textual and critical history given above also describe accurately, *in every particular*, the late twelfth-century Japanese court tale or *monogatari* (lit. 'telling of things,' thus quite properly 'tale'), *Ariake no Wakare* [*Parting at Dawn*].[1] True, I have elided certain plot elements in the summary, but those I highlighted are also those privileged by modern commentators of both texts as constituting the core interest of the plot and its dominant themes. I will elaborate below on some of the differences, and attempt to show that some plot differences are actually culture-specific stratagems to reinforce themes shared by both texts, though perhaps not the themes most generally focused on by critics. Nevertheless, given the geographical and cultural distance separating *Le Roman de Silence* from *Ariake no Wakare,* differences are what one would expect, and it is rather the co-occurrence of both so many plot elements and this constellation of themes which is rather remarkable.

The similarity of the textual and critical reception of both texts is arguably of equally intense interest for the light it may cast on recent research modalities, preconceptions and preoccupations, and here there is an important *décalage* between the histories of the two texts. The critical reception of *Ariake no Wakare* is neither as extensive nor as multifaceted as

that of *Le Roman de Silence*, and I have found the range of critical approaches exemplified in *Silence* criticism to be extremely provocative and useful in developing critical approaches to *Ariake*. I hope that *Ariake* criticism will in turn provide a stimulus to *Silence* criticism. Thus, while attempting to account for some of the clustering of plot and theme elements in both texts, I intend also to touch on metacritical matters that may help to refocus the debate on the meaning of these texts, and to add more plurivocal readings to the prevailing ones.

The textual history of *Ariake no Wakare* is perhaps even more intriguing than that of *Le Roman de Silence*, especially given the background history of the *monogatari* genre, its writers and readers. Accordingly, some contextualization will help to make the comparison with *Silence* more meaningful.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of premodern Japanese literature to strike the modern non-Japanese reader is the fact that, as early as the beginning of the eleventh century, this literature was already producing a prose fiction form—the *tsukuri–monogatari* or long court tale[2]—of such psychological and narrative complexity that there is good reason to describe it as a 'novel.' The golden age of this genre is considered to be the eleventh and twelfth centuries, approximately the latter half of the Heian period (794–1185), beginning with what has since its appearance been regarded as the genre's masterwork, the early eleventh-century *Tale of Genji*,[3] the most canonically central text of all Japanese literature. Even more remarkably, the production and consumption of this genre seem to have been largely dominated by aristocratic women. By the end of the period, this form, initially considered frivolous and unworthy of serious consideration, had a place in the canon of Japanese literary forms that approached that of the most highly regarded genre: poetry in the *waka* or 31–syllable form.

For these reasons alone, the genre is especially important to the literary critic. Criticism begins as early as the opening of the thirteenth century, with the *Mumyô–zôshi,* literally 'The Nameless Book,' of c. 1201.[4] This text describes an evening's conversation of a group of noblewomen and their female attendants, during which they discuss in detail the *monogatari* they read and what they think of them. However, this and comparable texts reveal an unfortunate fact: although from these references we know the titles of more than 200 *monogatari* composed from the tenth century through the thirteenth, scarcely 20 have survived in anything more than tiny fragments.

It was with this in mind that in 1938 Matsuo Satoshi wrote a series of articles in the journal *Bungei Bunka* called 'On the Lost *Monogatari* of the Heian Court,' in which he tried to piece together what was known of some

of these lost texts. Two of these articles were devoted to an attempted reconstruction of *Ariake no Wakare*. Nothing whatsoever was known about the author or the circumstances of composition, but this tale is briefly mentioned in the *Mumyô–zôshi* as 'a contemporary novel,'[5] so presumably it was written in the late twelfth century. The late thirteenth-century court poetry anthology known as the *Fûyôwakashû*[6] consists of 1418 poems culled exclusively from *monogatari*. This text is our other major source for names and details of lost tales of the period; it contains 21 poems from *Ariake*, each accompanied by a *kotobagaki* (headnote) which gives a few plot details to fill in the circumstances of composition of the poem. Compared with the number of poems from other tales available to the compilers, this puts *Ariake* in seventh place, or safely into the 'top ten' *monogatari* of the mid–thirteenth century. These headnotes and poems were the raw material for Matsuo's reconstruction of the plot of *Ariake no Wakare.*

The plot that Matsuo came up with must certainly have raised a few eyebrows in 1938: the daughter of an imperial minister is dressed as a man and performs music brilliantly in a manner usually restricted to men. After an affair with the Emperor, who seduces the young courtier before discovering the secret of her sex, the protagonist is compelled to assume the conventional gender role of her sex, but then is made Empress. The tale also apparently contained a magic cape of invisibility, spirit possession scenes, and the descent to earth of heavenly maidens in response to the music. Some readers must surely have been skeptical of Professor Matsuo's reconstruction.

Imagine the general surprise then, when shortly after the Second World War a unique manuscript of *Ariake no Wakare* came to light, a mid-Edo period (eighteenth-century) manuscript in Heian calligraphic style, and Matsuo's hypothesis was shown to be true. In fact the full plot is even more fanciful than Matsuo's reconstruction, and bears presenting in some detail to indicate both its complexity and the range of themes that it encompasses.

A young noblewoman is born into a very highly placed court family, that of the Sadaijin (Minister of the Left). Since the family has no son and heir, her parents, upon divine instructions, raise her as a boy. He becomes the most distinguished and handsome young man at court, over whom all the ladies (and not a few of the men) swoon. This one crossdressing motif is overlaid by another, since the protagonist, whom I shall call Ariake,[7] is also endowed with the power to become invisible at will, an ability conferred by the oracle that had recommended the crossdressing. On nightly excursions to spy into the bedchambers of the nobility, Ariake witnesses several pathetic scenes of women ill-treated by men, including one extreme case of a young girl being molested by her new stepfather. Ariake does what he can to counsel

and comfort these women, eventually abducting the abused stepdaughter, now pregnant, and using his own family's position at court to force an official marriage. This has the useful expedient of also providing a next-generation male heir to Ariake's parents.

Just at this point, the reigning Emperor, who also is without an heir, and is attracted by Ariake's looks and brilliant musical abilities, can no longer contain his desire for the stunningly attractive young guardsman Ariake, and forces his affections on the young courtier once they are alone together. Only when the last robe is pulled open does he realize the Captain's biological sex, but with an aplomb that may be considered revealing of twelfth-century aristocratic Japanese notions of sexuality, including perhaps even the primacy of gender over sex, the Emperor proceeds to the consummation without the least hesitation.

Subsequently, life becomes rather complicated for Ariake. A subterfuge is arranged by Ariake's parents to overcome the evident concern caused by an ongoing secret gender-crossing relationship with the Emperor: they have always let it be known that they also had a younger daughter who was too shy to be seen in public and was being raised in a subsidiary residence. It is now announced that Ariake has suddenly died, and after a suitable delay, Ariake, now in the identity of the younger sister, is formally presented to the Emperor as a concubine and is elevated to Empress upon bearing the Emperor's long-awaited son. The genealogical problems of both the Minister of the Left and the Imperial Family are thus resolved by Ariake's cross-gendering adventure, though the protagonist's adoption of the conventional female gender role is not without misgivings. There are also some highly interesting later regrets and a temporary reassumption of the male role in dealings with other women.

Surprisingly enough, this is only the midpoint of the tale. This of course, is the part that corresponds in a number of ways with *Le Roman de Silence,* and it virtually constitutes a tale in itself. The tale would have had near-complete closure had it stopped here, and maybe it did for some of its reception history, perhaps before the author decided to take up her brush again and continue it, following an enthusiastic reception. Such a composition process would correspond to that described by Murasaki Shikibu, the author of the *Tale of Genji*.[8] I will have more to say on the question of closure and interpretation later.

The second half of *Ariake* deals with the problems of the next generation, which derive from this already elaborate plot. Although this second part diverges greatly from *Silence*, there are important thematic links. The abused stepdaughter rescued by Ariake bore two children who, although acknowledged by Ariake, were, of course, necessarily fathered by others. A

son was fathered by the abusive stepfather, and a daughter by the stepfather's libertine son by a previous marriage. Both of these children flourish as the years pass, despite the apparent early death of their presumed father, Ariake. The son rises to ministerial level himself, and the daughter even becomes Empress. The only one who knows the truth of their parentage is Jijû, the lady-in-waiting of their mother who has watched aghast as the whole saga has unfolded. The second half of the tale traces in a leisurely fashion, with other births, marriages, and deaths, banquets, spirit possessions and rural excursions, the process by which the truth of their parentage is finally revealed to both of Ariake's children, and, in the case of the young Empress, to the father who never acknowledged her, and who promptly dies, overcome with shame and regret.

This text clearly casts some very interesting light on twelfth-century Japanese attitudes in regard to gender roles and relations, sexuality, genealogy, and the supernatural and 'natural,' as does the *Roman de Silence* vis–à-vis thirteenth-century France. Exactly what position each text takes on these matters has elicited a wide range of critical responses to both texts. In both cases the presumed gender of the author has been problematized,[9] though both internal and external evidence is generally assumed to point to a female author for *Ariake*, and a male author for *Silence.* Similarly there have been arguments, more extensively in the case of *Silence,* for a reading of the text that reinforces the status quo of the gender system[10] and also for one that destabilizes it.[11] Another reading suggests that the text is irreducibly plurivocal.[12] The theme of genealogy, and especially its significance for kingship, is also central to both texts; indeed, given the relative salience of issues relating to gender and genealogy in medieval and modern times, the question of genealogy and kingship may well have figured more prominently in medieval readings of these texts than in modern ones.

A brief overview of the most salient differences between these texts reveals, interestingly, that differing plot elements and cultural practices may still focus on themes common to both texts. The archetypal courtly male differed greatly between twelfth-century Japan and thirteenth-century France. Heian-era Japan observed a very considerable distinction between courtier and warrior. Despite honorary military titles, the courtier was characterized largely by non-military, capital-focused cultural activities such as poetry, calligraphy, clothing, political intrigue and ceremonial observance. Provincial warrior clans were engaged by the court for military services, and despite their usurpation of political power (which was to endure for seven centuries) following a series of military coups in the latter part of the twelfth century, the warrior and military deeds are conspicuously absent from nearly all

twelfth-century courtly literature, including the court tales. Unlike the western European cult of chivalry, then, courtly culture in Heian Japan observed a notable cleavage of cultural and military activities, although following the ascendancy of the military clans a samurai code that combined aesthetic, spiritual and military accomplishments was soon to emerge. Nevertheless, if cultural activities are strongly gendered, Ariake's flute-playing or making social visits rather than waiting to receive them can signify a similarly transgressive role appropriation to Silence's knightly quests and combat. In addition, *Ariake,* like *Silence,* is significantly concerned with music, language, and writing.

In fact, even the protagonists' tasks and quests are not as different as they may seem. *Ariake no Wakare* focuses on the rescue of women, provision of heirs to parents and Emperor, and revelation of paternities. The *Roman de Silence* focuses on knightly service to the king, inheritance rights, and ultimately on a quest for Merlin which results in the 'fixing' of both the king's marriage and the inheritance problem of the protagonist's family. In both texts the beneficiaries of the action are the protagonist's family, the sovereign, and the protagonist herself. Both texts have a two-generational structure, as befits a focus on genealogy, though the cross-gendered protagonist belongs to a different generation in each text.

Two notable differences between the texts lie in their treatments of same-gender and same-sex desire, and the supernatural. It has been argued that *Silence* takes up strong positions against both male and female same-sex desire,[13] in keeping with prevailing cultural debate in France. On the other hand, *Ariake* and its contemporary commentators seem almost oblivious to both male and female same-sex or same-gender desire as problematic. The extent to which this should be regarded as a major difference depends on how salient the sexuality issue is seen to be in these texts, compared, for example, with issues of genealogy and sovereign authority. Both texts seem to have critical adherents with a preference for one or the other of these interpretations.

In both texts the protagonist has a physical perfection and outstanding skills that seem beyond the ordinarily human. However, Ariake has outright supernatural abilities (though granted by external agency), the invisibility and summoning of supernatural phenomena by musical performance, whereas Silence's abilities are merely a perfection of the human. The supernatural element in the *Roman de Silence,* beyond the allegorical figures that grant Silence her merits, resides primarily in the person of Merlin, but it is by the very essence of her gendered nature as a woman that Silence is able to capture Merlin against all expectations, in an episode whose length

and position in the overall narrative indicate its climactic focus.[14] Now, one might maintain that the more 'supernatural' a protagonist is, the less an 'exemplary model for human behavior' they can be, which undercuts a strong 'feminist' reading for both texts. Yet it might also be argued that in *Silence* we find that a man with supernatural powers (that seem to have nothing to do with being specifically male) who is, perhaps by his own complicity, no match for a woman's inherently gendered ability, though this does not ultimately change the significance of this male/female competition. This reading seems much closer to the impression of the female condition that one takes away from *Ariake,* in which the provision of heirs and the knowledge of paternity secrets seem to be the female ability and knowledge par excellence.

It is, of course, hardly surprising that patriarchal systems should invoke cross-gendering narratives in imaginative writing, because of the very salience of the category of gender. But how is one to interpret it in texts like *Le Roman de Silence* and *Ariake no Wakare*? Sandra Gilbert has stressed the different readings of crossdressing by male and female writers and readers of English modernist writing:[15] ludic inversion followed by euphoric return to the norm for males; narratives of appropriation and empowerment for females. Would the closure in the written text be the only narrative reception? What about partial reading or performances? The possibility of radically different male and female readings and authorial intentions seems considerable.

To return to the theme of genealogy, Sharon Kinoshita sees the feudal politics of lineage as much more important in *Silence* than has been credited by modern critics.[16] Not only does she support this by close reading of passages that have had less attention from other critics than those passages focusing on the detail and consequences of crossdressing, but she asserts that the romance 'redefines the function of the medieval nobility as not military service but genealogical reproduction' (398). She relates this to changes in the role of the feudal aristocracy in the late Middle Ages, and thus presents the text as a reflection of such historical preoccupations.

Interestingly, a similar reading can be given for *Ariake no Wakare*. In the past decade or so, historians of medieval Japan have presented documents that show increasing restrictions on female inheritance at precisely the period when *Ariake* was putatively composed.[17] The situation is complicated by the differences between Japanese courtier law and warrior law—women in warrior families seem to have exercised greater authority at this time and began to lose out in inheritance practices rather later[18]—but as a court-based text, *Ariake* may be responding to an awareness of this difference, since the warrior clans had recently come to power through the late twelfth-

century coup d'état. Given that the second half of *Ariake* (which has no analogue in *Silence*) is even more focused on genealogy, this apparent difference masks an underlying common thematic preoccupation which is plausibly an extremely important element in both texts, but one which has been rather overlaid by our slightly different interests and focus in contemporary gender-oriented criticism.

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NOTES

1 For a brief excerpt, see Khan 1996. For a more complete translation and study, see Khan 1998.
2 A term already in use in the twelfth century (Harper 1975).
3 Complete translations are available by Arthur Waley (1926); Edward Seidensticker (1976); Tyler (2001), and forthcoming in the Penguin Classics series.
4 For an analysis and translation, see Marra 1984.
5 *ima no yo no monogatari* (Marra 1984).
6 '*The Wind and Leaves Poetry Collection*,' commissioned by a consort of the ex-emperor Go-Saga in 1271. For further details see Miner 1985.
7 Most characters in court tales are referred to exclusively by their court ranks and titles, which frequently change as the individual advances in years and prestige. Even Heian period readers were apt to find this confusing, especially as different characters would sometimes be referred to by the same title at different points in the narrative. Within a few years of the completion of the *Genji* readers were referring to characters in the tale by sobriquets derived from associated imagery (cf. the *Sarashina Diary*).
8 As recounted in her diary the *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki* (trans. Bowring 1996).
9 For a discussion of potential readings of *Ariake* see Khan 1998. Some Japanese readings focus on the text's assertion of a Jungian integration of animus and anima (Ôtsuki 1991, Kawai 1991).
10 Gaunt 1991, Kinoshita 1995, Waters 1997, Blumreich 1997, Jewers 1997.
11 For more 'subversive' readings of *Silence,* focusing on the text's destabilization of language and meaning, or on female empowerment, or both, see Brahney 1985, Bloch 1986, Allen 1989, Gallagher 1992, McCracken 1994, Psaki 1997.
12 Krueger 1993.
13 Waters 1997, Blumreich 1997, Psaki 1997, etc.
14 See essays by Roche-Mahdi and Stock in this issue.
15 Gilbert 1980/81.
16 Kinoshita 1995.
17 Mass 1989, Wakita 1984.
18 Tonomura 1999.