

As autumn advances, the Tsuchimikado mansion looks unutterably beautiful. Every branch on every tree by the lake and each tuft of grass on the banks of the stream takes on its own particular colour, which is then intensified by the evening light. The voices in ceaseless recitation of sūtras are all the more impressive as they continue throughout the night; in the slowly cooling breeze it is difficult to distinguish them from the endless murmur of the stream.

Her Majesty listens to her ladies-in-waiting engaged in idle gossip. She must be in some distress, but manages to hide her feelings as if nothing were amiss; perhaps this calls for no comment, and yet it is quite extraordinary how she can cause a change of heart in someone so disenchanted with life as myself and make me quite forget my troubles — if only I had sought solace for my unhappiness by taking service with her much earlier.

It is still the depth of night. The moon has clouded over, darkening the shadows under the trees. There come voices: 'Can we open the shutters?' 'But the servants will not be ready yet!' 'Attendant! Open up!' Then the bell for the dawn watch suddenly wakes everyone up and the Ritual of the Five Great Mystic Kings begins.¹ The voice of

¹ The ritual took place in the east wing of the mansion and involved a row of five altars behind each of which was placed a statue of one of the five great deities (*Vidyādevī*): Fudō (*Acala*), Gōzanze (*Tailokya*), Gundari Yasha (*Kūjō*), Daitoku (*Yamāntaka*) and Kongō Yasha (*Vajrayakṣa*), who symbolized the wrathful energies of the Five Buddhas of Esoteric Buddhism. In this case the object of the ritual is to pray for a safe birth and to bless certain objects that belonged to the mother-to-be. See ground-plan 2 (Appendix 1).

each priest as he tries to best his neighbour can be heard near and far, solemn and awe-inspiring. Then, the ritual over, the Archbishop of the Kannon in leads twenty acolytes in procession from the east wing over to the main building to cast magic spells; as they cross the bridge, their thundering feet sound strange and unfamiliar. When the Abbot of the Hosshōji and the Bishop of the Jōdōji return to their lodgings in the stable lodge and the library, both accompanied by retinues dressed in priestly robes, I follow them in my mind's eye as they pass over the magnificent Chinese bridges and disappear into the trees. Preceptor Saigi remains prostrate before the statue of Daiitoku deep in prayer.

As the maids and servants all assemble, dawn breaks.

I look out from my room at the head of the corridor into the light morning mist.² Dew is still on the ground, but His Excellency is already out in the garden ordering his attendants to clear the stream of some obstruction. Plucking a sprig from a large cluster of maiden-flowers that blooms there on the south side of the bridge, he peers in over the top of the curtain frame. The sight of him, so magnificent, makes me conscious of my own dishevelled appearance, and so when he presses me for a poem, I use it as an excuse to move to where my inkstone is kept:

Now I see the colour of this maiden-flower in bloom,
I know how much the dew discriminates against me.

'Quick, aren't we!' says he with a smile and asks for my brush:

It is not the dew that chooses where to fall:

Does not the flower choose the colour that it desires?³

² See ground-plan 2 (Appendix 1). Murasaki's room was probably in the back corridor or gallery that ran between the main building and the east wing. These galleries were often partitioned with sliding screens, panels and curtains about four feet high so as to form small rooms. Not much privacy could be expected with such an arrangement.

³ A typical exchange of short poems with a premium placed on wit and the ability to improvise. It is common to find personal feelings expressed by oblique reference to objects in this way. His Excellency's reply thereby manages to be equivocal: is there blame or praise here?

One quiet evening as Lady Saishō and I are talking together, His Excellency's eldest son pulls up the bottom of the blind and seats himself down. He is very grown-up for his age and looks most elegant. The earnestness with which he talks of love – 'Ah women! Such difficult creatures at times!' – it gives the lie to those who dismiss him as a callow youth; I find him rather unsettling. We are still talking in generalities when suddenly he is off, murmuring something about there being 'too many maiden-flowers in the field'; I remember thinking how like the hero of a romance he seemed.⁴

How is it that a little incident like this suddenly comes back to one, whereas something that moved one deeply at the time can simply be forgotten with the passage of the years?

I was absent from the mansion the day the Governor of Harima gave a banquet as a forfeit for losing a game of *go*, and it was only later that I was given the opportunity to see the tray made for the occasion. The Chinese stand was exquisitely fashioned, and at the edge of the water was written:

Picked up from the Shirara sands of Ki, they say,
May these pebbles grow to mighty rocks!

The women had the most beautiful fans on that occasion.⁵

⁴ His Excellency's son Yōrimichi is here quoting from a poem by Ono no Yoshiki, which can be found in the first imperial collection, the *Kokinshū* ('A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern', c. 905): *If I tarry in this field so full of maiden-flowers, I am in danger of gaining a bad reputation*. The change of tense in the translation is deliberate, for it is at this point that the descriptions become more specific in time and place. This is also where we encounter the first use of the auxiliary verb *haberi*, which suggests a certain distance in the narration, occurring as it does in passages where Murasaki is clearly commenting on something that she has written, or that has happened, much earlier.

⁵ Elaborate trays were made, often with miniature land- or seascapes in them, to act as the centrepiece at competitions and banquets. In this case we have a beach scene and the poem has been written on the silver 'water' that represents the sea. The game itself was probably a form of jackstones rather than the modern game of *go*, and the poem plays on the 'stones'. The idea that pebbles would eventually grow into rocks was a common conceit and often linked to felicitations for a long reign. Through its phrasing,

Sometime after the twentieth of the eighth month, those nobles and senior courtiers whose presence was required at the mansion started to stay the night. They would take naps on the bridge and the veranda of the east wing, and play music in desultory fashion until dawn. The younger members, who were as yet unskilled in either *koto* or flute, held competitions to see who was best at chanting *sūtras* and they practised the latest songs together; it was a perfect match for both place and occasion.

There were also evenings when Tadanobu, Master of Her Majesty's Household, Tsunefusa, Adviser of the Left, Norisada, Commander of the Military Guards, and Junior Captain Narimasa, Governor of Mino, sat and played music together. A formal concert was not held, however, presumably because His Excellency had decided it would have been inappropriate. Those who had left Her Majesty's service some years ago were suddenly reminded of their long absence and crowded back, so with all the bustle and activity we could find not a moment to ourselves.

On the twenty-sixth, the blending of the incense balls was finished and Her Majesty distributed them to her women.⁶ Those who had helped prepare them all gathered round. Returning to my room, I looked in at Lady Saishō's door, only to find her asleep. She lay with her head pillowed on a writing box, her face all but hidden by a series of robes – dark red lined with green, purple lined with dark red – over which she had thrown a deep crimson gown of unusually glossy silk. The shape of her forehead was enchanting and so delicate. She looked

the poem alludes to another poem produced on a similar but rather more formal occasion that was held some thirty-five years previously in 973. It is this allusion that explains the enigmatic statement about fans that follows, because the record of the 973 event (a record that still remains) specifically refers to the exquisite fans that had been given out as prizes. 'On that occasion' therefore refers to 973 rather than 1008. Murasaki is quietly showing just how erudite she can be, and in the process gives us an example of the way memory can move in unpredictable fashion.

⁶ Incense was carefully mixed and put into containers, which were then buried in the ground, preferably in a sunny area near water, for a number of days. In this case they were allowed to cure for twelve days and were tested on the ninth of the following month. The testing would take the form of a competition.

just like one of those princesses you find depicted in illustrations. I pulled back the sleeve that covered her face.

'You remind me of a fairy-tale princess!' I said.

She looked up with a start.

'You are dreadful!' she said, propping herself up. 'Waking people up like that without a thought!'

I remember being struck by the attractive way her face suddenly flushed. So it is that someone normally very beautiful can look even more beautiful than ever on occasions.

On the ninth of the ninth month Lady Hyōbu brought me floss-silk damp with chrysanthemum dew.

'Here,' she said. 'Her Excellency sent it especially for you. She said you were to use it carefully to wipe old age away!'

I was about to send it back with the poem:

Chrysanthemum dew:

I brush my sleeve to gain a little youth,

But let she who owns the flower have the thousand years they bring.

But then they told me that Her Excellency had already returned to her apartments; there was no point, I told myself, so let the matter drop.⁷

As night fell, I went to attend Her Majesty. It was a beautiful moon-lit night. Lady Koshōshō, Lady Dainagon and the others were sitting at their respective places near the veranda, the hems of their long trains cascading out from beneath the blinds. The incense was brought in and placed on a burner for Her Majesty to test. We discussed how beautiful the garden was looking and how unreasonably long it was taking for the vines to show their autumn colours, but Her Majesty

⁷ The ninth of the ninth month was the day of the Chrysanthemum Festival. It was believed that to wipe one's face with material that had been left out on chrysanthemums overnight to protect the flowers and soak in the dew would bring rejuvenation. There may be more to this little episode than meets the eye, but if there is ironic intent on the part of Her Excellency and sarcasm in Murasaki's reply, it is difficult to recover with any certainty.

seemed to be in considerable discomfort. When it came time for the priests to perform their rites, I went in with her feeling most uneasy.

I was called away and returned to my own room. Intending to rest for a while, I fell asleep and about midnight I awakened to a scene of great bustle and noise.

As dawn approached on the morning of the tenth, they changed all the furnishings and Her Majesty was moved to a white-curtained dais.⁸ His Excellency was in charge, and his sons, together with other courtiers of fourth and fifth rank, were milling about hanging up curtains and bringing in mats and cushions. It was all extremely noisy. Her Majesty was very restless all day and clearly in great distress.

Loud spells were cast in order to transfer evil influences. All the priests who had been at the mansion for the last few months were present, of course, but they were now joined by everyone worthy of the name exorcist who had been ordered down from the major temples. As they crowded in, you could imagine every Buddha in the universe flying down to respond. Those famed as Ying-Yang diviners had also been asked to attend. Surely not a god in the land could have failed to prick up his ears, I felt.

All day long there were messengers leaving to request the reading of sūtras; and it continued on throughout the night.

The ladies-in-waiting sent from the Palace were seated in the eastern gallery. To the west of the dais were the women acting as mediums, each surrounded by a pair of screens. Curtains had been hung at the entrance to each enclosure, where sat an exorcist whose role it was to intone loud spells. To the south, the archbishops and bishops of greatest importance sat in rows; it was most impressive to hear their hoarse voices, now in prayer, now in censure, loud enough, I felt, to

⁸ See ground-plan 3 (Appendix 1) for the layout at this point. The dais itself was about a foot high, covered with mats and cushions, and surrounded by a series of curtains hung from a standing frame. As we find out later on, the usual dais was not dismantled but simply pushed into another part of the main room.

call up the manifestation of Fudō in living form.⁹ When I counted later, there must have been over forty people crammed into that narrow space between the sliding screens to the north and the dais itself. Hardly able to move an inch, they were all in a trance, quite carried away by it all. Unfortunately there was no room for those who had just arrived from home. No one could find the hem of her train or her sleeves in the crush, and the older women, whom one expected to set an example, were beside themselves trying as best they could to hide their tears.

At dawn on the eleventh, two sets of sliding screens on the north side were taken away and Her Majesty was moved into the back gallery.¹⁰ Since it was not possible to hang up blinds, she was surrounded by a series of overlapping curtains. The Archbishop, Bishop Jōjō and the Bishop for General Affairs were in attendance performing rites. Bishop Ingen, having added some portentous phrases to an invocation composed by His Excellency the day before, now read it out slowly in solemn and inspiring tones. It could not have been more impressive, especially when His Excellency himself decided to join in the prayers. Surely nothing could go wrong now, I thought; and yet such was the strain that none of us could hold back her tears. No matter how much we told ourselves how unlucky it might be to cry like this, it was impossible to refrain.

His Excellency, concerned that Her Majesty might feel even worse with so many people crowded around, made everyone move away to the south and east; only those whose presence was considered essential were allowed to remain. Her Excellency, Lady Saishō and Lady Kura were in attendance inside the curtains, as were the Bishop of the Ninnaji and the Palace Priest from the Miidera. His Excellency was

⁹ One of the five guardian deities mentioned in note 1, Fudō (*Acala* or the Immovable One) was of particularly ferocious mien. He was equipped with a rope in his left hand, a demon-quelling sword in the right, sported two large fangs, and had flames springing from his back.

¹⁰ This move was presumably dictated by the soothsayers. There seems to have been no veranda at the back of the building, so this was as far north as Her Majesty could be moved. See ground-plan 3 (Appendix 1).

shouting orders to all and sundry in such a loud voice that the priests were almost drowned out and could hardly be heard. In the remaining section of the back gallery sat Lady Dainagon, Lady Koshōshō, Miya no Naishi, Ben no Naishi, Lady Nakatsukasa, Lady Tayū, and Lady Ōshikibu – His Excellency's envoy, you know.¹¹ It was only to be expected that they should seem distraught, for they had all been in service for so many years, but even I, who had not known Her Majesty for long, knew instinctively how very grave the situation was.

Another group of women, among them Nakatsukasa, Shōnagon and Koshikibu, who had been wet nurses to His Excellency's second, third and youngest daughters, squeezed their way in front of the curtains that hung as a divider behind us, with the result that people could barely pass along the narrow passage at the rear of the two daises, and those who did manage to push their way through could hardly tell whom they were jostling.

Whenever the men felt like it, they looked over the curtains. Somehow one expected this kind of behaviour from His Excellency's sons, and even from Kanetaka, Adviser of the Right, and Junior Captain Masamichi, but not from the Adviser of the Left or the Master of Her Majesty's Household; they were usually much more circumspect. We lost all sense of shame being seen in such a state, our eyes swollen with weeping. In retrospect it may have been amusing, I suppose, but at the time we must have presented a sorry sight, rice falling on our heads like snow and our clothes all crumpled and creased.¹²

When they started to snip Her Majesty's hair and made her take her vows, everyone was thrown into confusion and wondered what on earth was happening. Then in the midst of all this despair, she was safely delivered. Everyone, priests and laymen alike, who was crowded into that large area stretching all the way from the main room to the

11 This little interjection, using the colloquial particle *yo*, occurs more than once in the diary. It is one of a number of signs that the text is layered: such remarks seem to have been added at a later date, perhaps during the process of copying.

12 The rice is being thrown in the air as part of the rituals to keep all evil influences at bay.

southern gallery and the balustrade, broke once more into chanting and prostrated themselves in prayer until the afterbirth appeared.

The women in the gallery to the east seem to have become mixed up with the senior courtiers with the result that Lady Kochūjō came face to face with First Chamberlain Yorisada. Her embarrassment later became the source of some amused comment. Very elegant and always most particular about her appearance, she had made herself up in the morning, but now her eyes were swollen with weeping and tears had made her powder run here and there; she was a dreadful sight and looked most odd. I remember what a shock I had when I saw how Lady Saishō's face had changed too. And I hate to think of how I must have looked. It was a relief that no one could actually recall how anyone else had looked on that occasion.

At the moment of birth what awful wails of anguish came from the evil spirits! Preceptor Shin'yo had been assigned to Gen no Kurōdo, a priest called Myōso to Hyōe no Kurōdo, and the Master of Discipline from the Hōjūji to Ukon no Kurōdo. Miya no Naishi's enclosure was being overseen by Preceptor Chisan; he was thrown to the ground by the spirits and was in such distress that Preceptor Nengaku had to come to his aid with loud spells. Not that his powers were on the wane, it was just that the evil proved so very persistent. The priest Eikō, brought in to help Lady Saishō's exorcist, became hoarse from shouting spells all night. There was further chaos when not all of the women managed to accept the spirits to whom they had been assigned.¹³

It was already midday, but we all felt just as if the morning sun had risen into a cloudless sky. Our delight on hearing Her Majesty had been safely delivered knew no bounds, and how could we have been anything but ecstatic that it was a boy. Those ladies who yesterday had wilted and this morning had been sunk in a mist of autumn tears all

13 Since at least some of these women have already just been described as serving close by Her Majesty, it is doubtful whether they themselves were acting as mediums. It is more likely that, as high-ranking ladies-in-waiting, each of them was made responsible for an enclosure and that the gruelling work of being a medium had been entrusted to professional substitutes. An exorcist has been assigned to each medium, but in some cases further help was obviously necessary.

took their leave and retired to rest. The older women, who were best fitted for the task, were in attendance on Her Majesty.

Their Excellencies moved through to another part of the mansion to distribute offerings of thanks both to those priests who had carried out rituals and chanted *sūtras* for months past and to those who had come in response to more recent demands. Gifts were also presented to those doctors and diviners who had shown special skill in their respective arts. I assume that preparations for the ceremony of the first bathing were already proceeding at the Palace.¹⁴

In the women's apartments servants brought in new dresses in large bundles and packages. Both the embroidery on the jackets and the hem-stitching with mother-of-pearl inlay on the trains had been grossly overdone, and the women tried to hide them from each other, concentrating on their powder and their dresses and fussing about why the fans they had ordered had not yet arrived.

Looking out as usual from my room at the end of the corridor, I noticed the Master of Her Majesty's Household waiting by the side door in the company of Yasuhira, Master of the Crown Prince's Household, and various other nobles. His Excellency emerged and gave orders that the stream be cleared of the leaves that had been blocking it for some days past. Everyone was in high spirits. In the general atmosphere, which must have allowed even those with private worries to forget their troubles for the time being, it was only natural that Tadanobu, as Master of Her Majesty's Household, should find it hard to hide his own particular delight, although he tried not to smile too broadly. Kanetaka was sitting on the veranda of the east wing exchanging jokes with Takaie, Middle Counsellor Elect.

¹⁴ These preparations included making the bathtub and other ceremonial objects. Murasaki's assumption here is incorrect. The bathtub was made at the Tsuchimikado mansion rather than at the Palace and the order was not given until the baby had been safely delivered. His Excellency Michinaga's diary has the following entry for this day: "The boy was safely delivered about noon. Presented gifts to the priests and diviners who had been present, each according to rank. At the same time the child had his first feed, the umbilical cord was cut, and they began to make the bath tub." The carpenters were given less than six hours to complete the task.

First Chamberlain Yorisada, who had brought the ceremonial sword from the Palace, was charged by his Excellency to return and report the safe birth to the Emperor. That day was the day the imperial messenger left for Ise, so he would not have been allowed to enter the Palace itself, being obliged to report standing outside instead.¹⁵ He received gifts from His Excellency, but I was not present.

The ceremonial cutting of the umbilical cord was done by Her Excellency, and Lady Tachibana performed the first offering of the breast. Lady Ōsaemon was chosen to be the wet nurse since she had been in service for some time and was known and liked by all. She is the daughter of Michitoki, the Governor of Bitchū, and wife of Chamberlain Hironari.

The first bathing took place at about six in the evening, I think.¹⁶ Torches were lit and Her Majesty's servants, wearing white vestments over short green robes, carried in the hot water. The stands that held the tubs were covered in white cloth. Chikamitsu, Chief of the Office of Weaving, and Nakanobu, the Chief Attendant, bore the tubs up to the blinds and passed them in to the two women in charge of the water, Lady Kiyoko and Harima; they in turn made sure it was only lukewarm. Then two other women, Ōmoku and Muma, filled up sixteen pitchers, emptying what remained straight into the bath tub. They were all wearing gauze mantles, with trains and jackets of taffeta, and had their hair done up most attractively with hairpins and white ribbons. Lady Saishō was in charge of the bathing itself, with Lady Dainagon acting as her assistant. Dressed in unusual aprons, they both looked extremely elegant.

¹⁵ A messenger was regularly dispatched on the eleventh of the ninth month from the court to Ise, sacred centre of the Imperial cult. Shintō treated blood as a pollutant. Having been to the Tsuchimikado mansion, Yorisada is now defiled from contact with the birth and cannot enter the Palace for fear of infecting the messenger.

¹⁶ Was Murasaki perhaps not present at this and the following ceremonies? Later on, for instance, she is unsure as to who performed the readings. In any case, she was clearly trying to be as careful as possible in what she recorded. For a sense of what is going on at this juncture, see ground-plan 4 (Appendix 1).

His Excellency carried the baby prince in his arms, preceded by Lady Koshōshō with the sword and Miya no Naishi with the tiger's head.¹⁷ Her jacket was decorated with a pine-cone pattern and her train had a wave design woven into it, giving it the appearance of a printed seascape. The waistband was of thin gauze embroidered with a Chinese vine pattern. Lady Koshōshō's train was decorated with autumn grasses, butterflies and birds sketched in glittering silver. We were none of us free to do exactly as we pleased because of the rules about the use of silk, so she had obviously tried something unusual at the waistline.

His Excellency's two sons, together with Junior Captain Masamichi and others, scattered rice around with great shouts, trying to see who could make the most noise, so much so indeed that the Bishop of the Jōdōji, present in his role as Protector, was forced to protect his own head and face with a fan for fear of being hit; this greatly amused the younger women.

The Doctor of Letters who read out the text from the classics was Chamberlain Hironari. Standing below the balustrade, he read out the opening passage from the *Records of the Historian*,¹⁸ while behind him in two lines stood twenty men, ten of fifth and ten of sixth rank, twanging their bows.

What is known as the evening bath was really only a formal repetition of the first bath, and the ceremony was as before. I think there was a different reader: it may have been Munetoki, the Governor of Ise, reading the usual text from the *Classic of Filial Piety*. Takachika, I

¹⁷ Tigers are not indigenous to Japan, so this had probably arrived at court as a gift from either Korea or China, at least two hundred years before this event. It is probable that the head was held over the bath, its face reflected in the water to scare away evil influences, although there are some commentaries that suggest this is a skull actually dipped in the water. Whatever the case, it should be understood to be an extremely rare, talismanic object.

¹⁸ All the readings were from the Chinese classics. It is likely that a 'reading' in fact consisted of a formalized recitation in Sino-Japanese pronunciation, which would not have been readily understood without reference to the text itself, even without the twanging of the bows. The *Shih-chi* ('Records of the Historian') is the first Chinese Standard History, compiled by Su-ma Ch'ien and covering events in China from the beginnings to 100 BC.

heard, was the reader for the 'Emperor Wen' chapter from the *Kecoras*, the three men taking turns over the seven-day period.¹⁹

The whole spectacle, with Her Majesty in spotless white setting off in contrast the vivid shapes and black hair of her ladies-in-waiting, seemed like a skilful black-and-white sketch that had come alive. I myself felt very ill at ease and self-conscious, so hardly ventured out during the day at all. Resting indoors, I observed the ladies as they passed from the rooms in the east wing over to the main building. Those who were allowed the forbidden colours²⁰ had mantles made from the same figured silk as their jackets, which gave them elegance, but no individuality. Those to whom the colours were forbidden, especially the older ones among them, had been careful to avoid anything out of the ordinary and had dressed simply in beautiful robes of three or four layers, mantles of figured silk, and plain jackets; some had robes decorated with damask and gauze. Their fans were not gaudy in any way, and yet they had a certain elegance. They were inscribed with appropriate phrases, almost as if the women had all discussed the matter between themselves beforehand. Now, as they looked at each other, they suddenly realized how, although each one of them had tried to show some originality, those of a common age are bound to have common tastes. There was a strong atmosphere of rivalry. Their trains and jackets had, of course, been embroidered. The jackets had decorated cuffs; the silver thread stitched down the seams of the trains had been made to look like braid; and silver foil had been inlaid into the figured pattern on the fans. You felt as if you were gazing at mountains deep in snow in clear moonlight. It was so bright, indeed,

¹⁹ Murasaki again makes a point of telling us that she was not present. Her reference to the 'Emperor Wen' chapter here may be a mistake for the section on Emperor Wen in the *Chronicles of the Han*. We know this because other records of this event survive: see Appendix 2 for details.

²⁰ The rules governing who could wear what colour were complicated and subject to constant change. According to the earliest specialized source we have, dated c. 1150, only women of a certain rank were allowed to wear yellow-green or red, but this restriction was limited to jackets of figured silk and printed trains. On this particular occasion, however, everyone is dressed in white, so the term may simply govern the type of material allowed.

that you could hardly distinguish anything, as if the room had been hung with mirrors.

On the evening of the third day,²¹ the members of Her Majesty's staff, led by the Master of the Household, Tadanobu, took charge of the first celebration. Tadanobu presented Her Majesty with the food: a small aloes-wood table and silver bowls – I was not close enough to see more. Middle Counsellor Toshikata and Fujiwara no Sanenari presented clothing and bedding for the prince. Everything – the lining in the clothes chests, the wraps for the clothing itself, the chest covers and the stands – was of the same white material and the same design, and yet care had been taken to leave some individual trace. I presume that Takamasa, Governor of Ōmi, had taken care of all the other arrangements. The nobles were seated in the western gallery of the east wing, ranked in two rows from north to south; the senior courtiers sat in the southern gallery, ranked from west to east. Portable screens of white damask had been erected facing outwards along the blinds that divided the gallery from the central chamber.

The celebrations for the evening of the fifth day were arranged by His Excellency. It was the fifteenth of the month with a bright moon in a cloudless sky. Even the sight of the lowest menials, chattering to each other as they walked round lighting the fire baskets under the trees by the lake and arranging the food in the garden, seemed to add to the sense of occasion. Torchbearers stood everywhere at attention and the scene was as bright as day. Standing here and there in the shadow of the rocks or under the trees were those whom I took to be retainers of visiting nobles. They were wreathed in smiles and looked very pleased with themselves, as if they somehow felt that their own private prayers for the birth of this bright light into the world had come to fruition. Hardly surprising then that His Excellency's own retainers – even men

²¹ Celebrations were held on the third, fifth, seventh and ninth days after the birth, each time with a different group of courtiers in charge of the arrangements.

of minor importance among them such as those of fifth rank and below – were to be seen scurrying back and forth, bowing to everyone in sight and clearly very much aware of their own good fortune.

When the order was given for the food to be brought in, a procession of eight ladies dressed in white, their hair done up with white ribbon, carried in a series of white trays. The lady in charge of serving Her Majesty this evening was Miya no Naishi. She always had great presence, but with her hair combed up so that it fell over her shoulders she looked even more striking than usual; I remember in particular that part of her profile not hidden by her fan. The eight ladies who had their hair done up, Genshikibu, Kozaemon, Kohyōe, Tayū, Ōmuma, Komuma, Kohyōbu and Komoku – the most attractive young women – sat in two rows facing each other. It was certainly a sight to remember. It is in fact quite normal to have to put up one's hair when serving Her Majesty, but these women, who had been specially chosen by His Excellency for the occasion, could do nothing but complain about how dreadful it was to be so exposed; I thought they made themselves ridiculous.

The sight of thirty or more women sitting in rows in the double-span area to the east of the dais was most impressive. Servants carried in the ceremonial food. In front of the screens that now partitioned off the bath by the side door another set of screens had been set up facing south, and the food was arranged there on a pair of white cabinets.²²

In the moonlight, which increased in intensity as the night wore on, sat servants, kitchen staff, hairdressers, maids and cleaners, some of whom I had never seen before. There were others, possibly the women in charge of the keys, who, despite somewhat inadequate dress and powder, fairly bristled with combs and looked terribly stiff and formal. They were all crowded on to the veranda, between the entrance to the back corridor and the bridge, making it impossible for anyone else to pass through.

When they had finished serving, the women went to sit down by the blinds. Everything was sparkling in the light of the flares but, even

²² See ground-plan 5 (Appendix 1) for a clearer picture of the layout at this point.

so, some women still stood out: Lady Ōshikibu wore a beautiful train and jacket, both embroidered with the Komatsubara scene at Mt Oshio.²³ She is the wife of the Governor of Michinokuni and His Excellency's envoy, you know. Lady Tayū had left her jacket as it was, but her train had a striking wave pattern printed on it in silver, not overly conspicuous but most pleasing to the eye. Ben no Naishi had a train printed with an unusual design, a crane standing in a silver seascape; as a symbol of longevity it was a perfect complement to the pine branches on the embroidery. Lady Shōshō's train was decorated with silver foil that was not quite up to the same standard as the others, and it became the subject of some adverse comment. By Lady Shōshō I mean the younger sister of Sukemitsu, the Governor of Shinano, a lady of long standing in His Excellency's employ.

Her Majesty looked so radiant this evening that it made one feel like showing her off, so I pushed open the screens which concealed the priest on night duty. 'I'm sure you will never be able to see the like again!' I remember saying. At this he left his devotions. 'Oh!' he murmured, rubbing his hands together and looking very pleased. 'You're too good, too good.'

The nobles left their seats and went on to the bridge where they began playing dice in the company of His Excellency. I hate it when they start betting. Poems were composed and we all prepared ourselves, reciting one just in case the cup should come round to the women:

As we hand it round under a full moon,
May this cup, shining with rare reflected light,
Bring everlasting blessings.²⁴

²³ Komatsubara was an area just north-east of the capital often used for its poetic associations. This particular design may well have been based on the following congratulatory poem by the poet Ki no Tsurayuki: *Ah Ōhana, and Komatsubara at Oshio: may the trees soon grow tall and show us the face of immortality* (*Gosenshū*, commissioned 951, Poem 1374).

²⁴ As the effect of this poem in Japanese relies on word-play (three examples in this case), it is difficult to reproduce in translation. Murasaki obviously thought it clever enough to record, despite the fact that she never had an opportunity to recite it.

We were whispering to each other how careful one had to be with not only the poem itself but also the recitation when in the presence of Major Counsellor Kintō,²⁵ but then in the end, perhaps because they were so busy and it was getting late, they retired before picking out any ladies.

Gifts were presented. The nobles were given robes for their women together with some of the prince's clothes and bedding, I think. Senior courtiers of fourth rank were each given a set of lined robes and trouser-skirts, those of fifth rank the robes only, and those of sixth rank just the trouser-skirts.

The next evening there was a beautiful moon and, as the weather was perfect, some of the younger women went out in a boat. Their black hair stood out in clear contrast against their white dresses – far more so than had they been wearing colours. Kodayū, Genshikibu, Miyagi no Jijū, Gosechi no Ben, Ukon, Kohyōe, Koemon, Muma, Yasurai, and the Lady from Ise had all been sitting near the veranda when Adviser of the Left Tsunefusa and His Excellency's second son Norimichi tried to entice them out on to the lake. Adviser of the Right Kanetaka was persuaded to pole them. Some of the women slipped away and stayed indoors, but they were probably a little jealous, for they kept on glancing outside from time to time. The shapes and faces reflecting the moonlight in the garden with its white sand were most intriguing.

We heard that a number of carriages had arrived at the northern guardhouse. It was the ladies from the Palace. I remember hearing that they included Tozanmi, Lady Jijū, Lady Tōshōshō, Lady Muma, Lady Sakon, Lady Chikuzen, Lady Shō and Lady Ōmi, but I may have been mistaken since I did not know them all by sight. The women in the

²⁵ This is Fujiwara no Kintō (966–1041), the arbiter of poetic taste at the time. It is interesting to note the importance placed on reciting poetry correctly. Sei Shōnagon has a similar passage, where she records her apprehension at having to reply to one of Kintō's poems. See I. Morris, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 120–21; Penguin Classics, 1971, p. 135). Kintō's own (far more mundane) poem on this occasion can be found in the collection of his own poems (*Kintōshū*, Poem 23034): *Ah! See the peaceful face of the autumn moon; it brings the promise of a lengthy reign.*

boat came in looking flustered. His Excellency emerged to sit with the ladies. Very much at his ease, he bade them welcome and indulged in a little banter. Gifts were presented in accordance with rank.

The celebrations on the evening of the seventh day were held under the aegis of the court. Junior Captain Michimasa, acting as Imperial messenger, presented Her Majesty with a willow box which contained a scroll listing the gifts. She accepted it, passing it straight on to her attendants. Then the scholars from the Kangakuin²⁶ entered in procession and a list of those present was also given to Her Majesty. This too she passed on. Gifts must have also been given in return. The ceremony that evening was extremely elaborate and dreadfully noisy.

When I peeped in through the curtains that surrounded Her Majesty, far from giving the impression of grandeur one expected from someone fêted as 'Mother of the Land', she was reclining listlessly and looked pale and drawn, even more fragile, young and beautiful than ever, I thought. In the clear light of a small lamp hung inside the curtains her lovely complexion was of translucent delicacy; I realized that when her mass of hair was tied up it did indeed set off her face to advantage. But all this hardly needs comment, so I shall write of it no more.

The arrangements for this ceremony were the same as for the previous occasion. Gifts for the nobles, in the form of women's robes and the Prince's clothes, were handed out from behind the blinds. The senior courtiers, led by the two First Chamberlains, came up in order to receive them. The presents from the court included dresses, bed clothes and rolls of silk. Lady Tachibana, who had given the Prince his first breast, was presented with the usual dresses, and in addition a long robe of figured silk contained in a silver chest which was also covered,

²⁶ The Kangakuin was a college founded by Fujiwara no Fuyusugu in 821 for the purpose of educating members of the clan. As will be seen from Appendix 2, most other sources in fact record this procession as taking place on the third day rather than on the seventh. This would make more sense, because it would have been far more appropriate for scholars from this private clan institution to have participated in an event sponsored by Her Majesty's Household, as was the case on the third.

if I remember correctly, in white cloth. I heard she was also given another special gift besides, but I was not close enough to her to be able to see.

On the eighth day we all changed back into our coloured robes.

The celebrations on the evening of the ninth day were arranged by Yorimichi, now Master Elect of the Crown Prince's Household. Food was placed on a pair of white cabinets and arranged in a most unusual, up-to-date fashion. There was also a silver clothes-chest inlaid with a seascape design of large waves and Mt Hōrai, in itself nothing out of the ordinary and yet delicately fashioned so it caught the eye – but I fear if I single out everything for comment, I will never finish.

That night everything returned to normal. The dais was rehung with curtains that had the 'decayed wood' pattern printed on the facing. We all wore gowns of deep crimson. It was a change to see colours again, quite bewitching. The sheen on the gowns could be seen through the translucent gauze of the jackets and you could clearly distinguish people's figures.

That was the night Lady Koma had her embarrassing experience.²⁷

Her Majesty was in convalescence until some time after the tenth of the tenth month. We waited on her night and day in rooms which lay to the west of the main hall.²⁸ His Excellency came to see the Prince at all hours, sometimes at midnight, sometimes at dawn. The wet nurse would be sound asleep; dead to the world, she would suddenly wake to find him rummaging around her breasts. I felt very sorry for her.

²⁷ As we know from the account of this incident in the *Shōyōki* (see Appendix 2), it actually occurred on the seventeenth rather than the nineteenth. A serving lady called Koma no Takashina was the butt of much drunken revelry. Michinaga going so far as to take off one of his robes and offer it to her. At first she refused, but in the end she was forced to accept the gift. A visit to her apartments presumably followed.

²⁸ The white dais had been removed on the eighteenth when everyone had changed back into colours, so only one dais remained. It was relocated to the western side of the eastern chamber. See ground-plan 6 (Appendix 1).

The child was really too small, but then it was only natural that His Excellency should want to lift the boy up in his arms and play with him to his heart's content. On one occasion the Prince went so far as to forget himself; His Excellency untied his cloak and hung it up to dry behind the dais.

'Look!' he chuckled. 'Peed all over me! Marvellous! And now to dry it – all our hopes come true!'

His Excellency was extremely persistent about the Prince Nakatsukasa business and kept pushing me, under the impression that I was in the Prince's favour.²⁹ I really had so many worries.

As the day for the imperial visit to the mansion approached, everything was repaired and polished. Rare chrysanthemums were ordered and transplanted. As I gazed out at them through the wraiths of morning mist – some fading to varying hues, others yellow and in their prime, all arranged in various ways – it seemed to me that old age might indeed be conquered. But then for some strange reason – if only my appetites were more mundane, I might find more joy in life, regain a little youth, and face it all with equanimity – seeing and hearing these marvellous, auspicious events only served to strengthen my yearnings. I felt downcast, vexed that nothing was turning out as I had hoped and that my misery simply seemed to increase.

'But why?' I asked myself. 'Now surely is the time to forget. It does me no good to fret, and besides, it will only make matters worse.'

As day dawned, I looked outside and saw the ducks playing about on the lake as if they had not a care in the world:

Can I remain indifferent to those birds on the water?

I too am floating in a sad uncertain world.

²⁹ Prince Nakatsukasa, Tomohira (964–1009), seventh son of Emperor Murakami, was forty-five at the time and the 'business' concerned a possible marriage between his daughter and Michinaga's eldest son, Yorimichi. The marriage is discussed in some detail in Chapter 8 of the *Eiga monogatari* ('A Tale of Flowering Fortunes'), but there is surprisingly no mention of it in Michinaga's own diary. Why he should think that Murasaki had influence over the Prince is not known.

They too looked as though they were enjoying life but must suffer greatly, I thought.

I was in the midst of composing a reply to a note sent by Lady Koshōshō, when all of a sudden it became dark and started to rain. As the messenger was in a hurry, I finished it off with: 'and the sky too seems unsettled.' I must have included a rather lame verse, for that evening the messenger returned with a poem written on dark purple cloud-patterned paper:

The skies at which I gaze and gaze are overcast;

How is it that they too rain down tears of longing?

Unable to remember what I had written, I replied:

It is the season for such rainy skies;

Clouds may break, but these watching sleeves will never dry.

On the day of the imperial visit, His Excellency had the boats poled over to where he could inspect them. They had been specially made for the occasion. They were most impressive; you could almost imagine that the dragon and mythical bird on the prows were alive.³⁰

As we heard that the procession was to arrive at about eight in the morning, we had been fussing about with our dress and powder since early dawn. The nobles were to sit in the west wing so there was none of the usual commotion on our side of the mansion, but I was told that the women who served His Excellency's second daughter had been obliged to be more than usually careful about their dress.

Lady Koshōshō arrived at dawn, so we dressed and did our hair together. As we knew these affairs were inevitably delayed, we dawdled somewhat and were still waiting for some new fans to replace our own rather uninspiring ones when suddenly there came the sound of drums and we had to hurry over in a rather undignified manner.

³⁰ Both these creatures had magic powers that prevented boats and ships from sinking in wind or waves. The fantastical shapes were copied from Chinese example. Here, of course, we are only talking of boats poled in the shallow garden lake. Once the ceremonies are under way, the musicians will play on the lake.

The water-music that greeted the Emperor was enchanting. As the procession approached, the bearers – despite being of low rank – hoisted the palanquin right up the steps and then had to kneel face down beneath it in considerable distress. ‘Are we really that different?’ I thought to myself as I watched. ‘Even those of us who mix with nobility are bound by rank. How very difficult!’

A space to the west of the dais had been reserved for His Majesty and his chair was set up in the eastern part of the southern gallery. One span away, at the east end of the gallery, blinds had been hung north-south for the ladies-in-waiting to sit behind. Then the blind by the southernmost pillar was raised slightly to allow two handmaids to step forward. They were elegantly dressed with their hair up for the occasion, just as you might find in an exquisite Chinese painting.

Saemon no Naishi carried the sword. She was wearing a plain yellow-green jacket, a train shading at the hem, and a sash and waist-band with raised embroidery in orange and white checked silk. Her mantle had five cuffs of white lined with dark red, and her crimson gown was of beaten silk. Her form, her demeanour, and that part of her face that you could just see round her fan, gave her an impression of vitality and freshness.

Ben no Naishi carried the Imperial Jewel in a casket. Over a crimson gown she wore a mantle of light purple, and a train and jacket similar to Saemon no Naishi’s. She was a petite, attractive woman and I was sorry to see her so embarrassed and nervous. She was by far the more stylish of the two, even down to her choice of fan. Her sash was of green and purple check. The sashes snaked and trailed around both women in dreamlike fashion; were those angels said to have descended from heaven to dance in ages past dressed like this? I asked myself.

The Imperial bodyguards, all impeccably dressed, were busy attending to the palanquin; they made a splendid sight. Chamberlain and Middle Captain Kanetaka it was who passed in the sword and jewel.

Looking around within the blinds, I could see those permitted the forbidden colours wearing the usual yellow-green and red jackets with trains of printed silk. Their mantles were mostly of dark red figured silk, except for Muma no Chūjō’s which was light purple, I

remember. Their gowns resembled a miscellany of autumn leaves of varying tints, and their lined robes were, as usual, of various colours: saffron of differing shades, purple lined with dark red, and yellow lined in green, some being of three rather than five layers.

Of those who were not permitted the colours, the older women wore plain jackets in yellow-green or dark red, each with five damask cuffs. Their robes were all of damask. The brightness of the wave pattern printed on their trains caught the eye, and their waists too were heavily embroidered. They had white robes lined with dark red in either three or five layers but of plain silk. The younger women wore jackets with five cuffs of various colours: white on the outside with dark red on yellow-green, white with just one green lining, and pale red shading to dark with one white layer interposed. They were all most intelligently arranged. I also noticed some specially decorated fans that looked very unusual.

At normal times of informality, you can usually identify someone who has been less than careful about her appearance, but on this occasion everyone had tried as hard as possible to dress well and to look as attractive as the next. Just as in a beautiful example of a Japanese scroll, you could hardly tell them apart. The only difference you could detect was between the older women and the younger ones, and then only because some had hair that was thinning a little, whereas others still had thick tresses. Yet, strangely enough, it seemed that one glance at that part of the face which showed above the fans was enough to tell whether or not a person were truly elegant. Those who still stood out among such women were indeed exceptional.

The five women from the Palace who had already been seconded to Her Majesty were in attendance: two handmaids, two palace ladies and one to serve the meal. When the order to proceed was given, Chikuzen and Sakyō, their hair done up in a bun, emerged from the same corner pillar as that used by the handmaids. They were not quite so angel-like. The latter wore a yellow-green jacket of plain silk with cuffs of white lined with pale green, and the former a jacket with five cuffs, white lined in dark red. They both wore the usual printed trains. The server was Lady Tachibana. I could not see her properly because she was hidden behind a pillar, but she too had her hair up and

...wearing a yellow-green jacket and, in place of a mantle, yellow robes of Chinese damask lined with green.

His Excellency picked up the Prince and presented him to His Majesty. His Majesty in turn took him in his arms and as he did so the Prince gave a little whimper. Lady Saishō approached to present the sword. Then the Prince was taken across the central passage to Her Excellency's quarters in the western chamber. As His Majesty emerged, Lady Saishō returned to her seat.

'It was all so formal. I felt dreadfully nervous,' she said, and indeed she looked very flushed as she sat down. It made her look most attractive. Her clothes too showed evidence of a unique sensitivity to colour.

As the sun went down, the music and other entertainment was enchanting. The nobles sat in attendance upon His Majesty. Various dances were performed – the 'Dance of Ages', the 'Dance of Peace', and the 'Hall of Felicitation', the finale being the tune 'Great Joy'.³¹ As the boats skirted the southern mound and receded into the distance, the sound of flutes and drums mingled with the wind in the pines deep in the trees to exquisite effect. The clear stream flowed pleasingly down to the lake, where the water rippled in the wind. It was a little cool by now and yet His Majesty wore only two underjackets. Lady Sakyō, obviously feeling chilly herself, expressed great concern for him; we all tried to hide our smiles.

'I remember,' said Lady Chikuzen, 'in the Dowager Empress's time there were so many imperial visits to the mansion. Ah such times!' and she broke into reminiscences. Fearing this was hardly a propitious way to behave in the circumstances, the others avoided responding, almost as if there were an invisible curtain hung between her and us. She certainly did look as though, given the slightest encouragement, she would have burst into tears.

³¹ These were some of the many *bugaku* court dances performed on such occasions. The provenance of each dance was generally known and in this case all are of Chinese origin. In view of the fact that Michinaga's diary records 'Chinese and Korean, two dances each', Murasaki may be mistaken here.

Just as the music for His Majesty reached a particularly interesting passage, the Prince gave a sweet little cry. 'Listen!' exclaimed Akimitsu, Minister of the Right, in admiration. 'The Dance of Ages harmonizes with his cries!' Major Counsellor Kintō, with some others present, recited 'For ten thousand ages and a thousand autumns'.³²

'Ah!' said His Excellency, bursting into maudlin tears. 'How could we ever have considered previous visits so marvellous? This surpasses them all!' An obvious enough remark, perhaps, but most gratifying that he recognized his own good fortune.

His Excellency went over to the west wing. His Majesty entered and asked the Minister of the Right to appear before him and write out the list of promotions. All those of Her Majesty's and His Excellency's officers who were eligible were promoted. The preliminary list had, I understand, been prepared in advance by First Chamberlain Michikata.

To give thanks for the birth of a new prince, the nobles of the main Fujiwara clan all bowed in obeisance before His Majesty. Those who were from a different branch of the Fujiwara, however, were excluded. Then Tadanobu, as Commander of the Gate Guards of the Right – the Master of Her Majesty's Household, you know – who had just been made Superintendent of the new prince's office, led the others in a formal dance of thanksgiving, together with Sanenari, who, as Assistant Master of the Prince's Household, had also been promoted that day.

The Emperor went in to see Her Majesty, but it was not long before there were shouts that it was getting late and that the palanquin was ready to leave. He returned to the Palace.

The next morning, even before the mist had cleared, a messenger came from the Palace. I slept in late and so missed seeing him. Today the Prince was to have his head shaved for the first time; it had apparently been postponed on purpose until after the imperial visit.

³² This phrase is part of a poem that can be found in the 'Celebration' section of the *Wakan rōeishū*, an anthology of well-known Chinese and Japanese verses compiled by the very person who is reciting it here – Fujiwara no Kintō, whom we have previously met (see note 25). The poem reads: *No limit to the delight at a time of celebration; For ten thousand ages and a thousand autumns the pleasure never ends.*

today was also the day when they decided who were to be appointed as steward, superintendent and ladies-in-waiting to the Prince. I was most vexed because I had been given no prior warning.³³

For these last few days the furnishings in Her Majesty's rooms had been unusually sparse, but now everything was changed and looked splendid once again. Now that the long-awaited birth had turned out well,³⁴ Her Excellency would come in as soon as dawn had broken and take care of the baby in a manner I found most affecting.

That evening there was a bright moon. The Assistant Master of the Prince's Household, Sanenari, who was perhaps intending to ask a lady-in-waiting to express his own special thanks to Her Majesty, finding that the area by the side door was wet with water from the bath with no sign of anyone being around, came over instead to Miya no Naishi's room at the eastern end of our corridor.³⁵

'Is anyone there?' he inquired.

He then moved to the middle room and pushed up the top half of the shutters that I had left unlocked.

'Anyone here?' he asked again. At first I gave no reply, but then he was joined by Tadanobu and, thinking it seemed a little churlish of me to continue ignoring them, I gave a sign of having heard. Neither of them seemed the least put out.

'You ignore me but pay great attention to the Master of the Household,' said Sanenari with a touch of sarcasm. 'Understandable, I suppose, but nevertheless to be deplored. Why the emphasis on rank here?' And with that he started singing 'the hallowed nature of today' in a rather attractive voice.³⁶

33 Why? Murasaki must have been hoping for some advancement for one of her close relatives, perhaps her ill-starred brother, and she had lost the opportunity to exert any influence she might have had.

34 From her parents' point of view, the birth certainly was 'long-awaited'. Shōshi had entered the Palace in 999, at which point she had been eleven, but Emperor Ichijō (980-1011) already nineteen: she was now twenty-one.

35 This particular room has been Murasaki's up to this point and it is not clear why she has moved. As the following passage makes clear, however, she must have moved into the middle room at some stage. See ground-plan 2 (Appendix 1).

36 This line is from a *saibara* or folk song. These were adopted at court and given a formal accompaniment in the Chinese manner. All the other songs mentioned in the diary from this point on are also *saibara*.

As it was now the dead of night, the moon seemed very bright.

'Do take away the bottom of the lattice!' they insisted. Despite the fact we were in private, I refused. I felt it would be embarrassing to have these nobles demean themselves in such a manner, and while frivolous behaviour by someone younger might be overlooked and put down to inexperience, I could hardly be so reckless, I told myself.

The fiftieth-day celebrations took place on the first of the eleventh month. Her Majesty was surrounded by her women, who all came to the Palace attired, as usual, for the occasion. I remember thinking how much it resembled an illustration of a formal competition. She was sitting to the east of the dais, which was divided off by a line of overlapping curtains that ran from the sliding screen at the back to the gallery pillar at the front, with the ceremonial meal placed in front of her, I think.³⁷ Her own food was laid somewhat to the west on the usual aloes-wood tray and a kind of stand; I could not see exactly. The server was Lady Saishō. The women who brought in the food had their hair dressed with pins and ribbons. The Prince, whose food was placed to the east, was served by Lady Dainagon. His tiny platter, bowls, chopstick holders, and the decorated centrepiece looked like toys made for a doll. The blinds by the eastern gallery were raised a little to allow those whose duty it was – Ben no Naishi, Lady Nakatsukasa, and Lady Kochūjō – to bring in the food. I did not have a very good view because I was sitting at the back.

That evening wet nurse Shō was awarded the forbidden colours. She was very composed as she carried the Prince over to the curtained dais. Her Excellency then took the child from her, and as she moved out into the centre of the room, she looked quite magnificent in the light of the torches. I was full of admiration at how carefully she had dressed in a red jacket and a plain printed train. Her Majesty wore a mantle of light purple with five cuffs under a somewhat less

37 For a clearer picture of what is going on at this point see ground-plan 7 (Appendix 1). The records translated in Appendix 2 are particularly detailed for this ceremony.

formal robe of dark red. His Excellency offered the rice cakes to the Prince.³⁸

The nobles were seated as usual in the western gallery of the east wing. The other two Ministers, Akimitsu and Kinsue, were also present. Then some of them moved on to the bridge and started carousing again. Various boxes and containers were brought over by attendants from His Excellency's quarters and lined up along the balustrade. The light from the firebrands in the garden was not sufficient, so Junior Captain Masamichi and others were ordered to stand there with torches so that everyone could clearly see. The gifts were due to be transported to the Table Room in the Palace, so they had to be rushed over this evening because the Palace was due to enter a period of abstinence from tomorrow.

The Master of Her Majesty's Household came up to the blinds.

'The nobles at your service!' he announced.

'Understood,' came the reply. So the nobles entered, led by His Excellency. They sat in order of rank from just east of the main steps right round to the front of the side door. Then the ladies-in-waiting, who were sitting in rows of two or three facing them, went to their respective blinds and rolled them up. Sat in order were Lady Dainagon, Lady Saishō, Lady Koshōshō and Miya no Naishi. The Minister of the Right, Akimitsu, moved in closer and pulled the curtains apart at the seams, nearly ripping them.³⁹

'He's far too old for such goings on!' we whispered among ourselves, but he took not the slightest notice. Instead, he picked up a fan and made a number of smutty remarks. The Master of the Household took some rice wine over to where they were sitting. They sang 'Minoyama', and the music, though impromptu, was most attractive.

Major Captain Sanesuke was leaning against a pillar two spans to

³⁸ It was the custom for the father or grandfather to offer little rice cakes to the child on such occasions, merely a ceremonial gesture.

³⁹ The men are sitting on the veranda facing inwards, while the women are sitting in the southern gallery facing outwards: see ground-plan 7 (Appendix 1). The blinds have been rolled up but the women are still hidden by curtains which were joined by seams loose enough to allow things to be passed through, or to act as peepholes. It is these that Akimitsu is now pulling apart to get a better view.

the east, checking the hems and sleeves of our robes. He was quite unlike the others.⁴⁰ Under the impression that he was befuddled with drink, we made light of him, and some of the women, certain they would never be recognized, started flirting with him a little, only to discover that far from being flamboyant, he seemed to be a paragon of propriety. He was waiting with some consternation for his turn to come round, but made do in the end with the usual congratulatory phrases.

Major Counsellor Kintō poked his head in.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'Would our little Murasaki be in attendance by any chance?'

'I cannot see the likes of Genji here, so how could she be present?' I replied.⁴¹

'Assistant Master Third Rank!' called out His Excellency. 'Take the cup!' Sanenari stood up and, seeing that his father, the Minister of the Centre, was present, made sure that he came up via the steps from the garden.⁴² Seeing this, his father burst into tears. Middle Counsellor Elect Takaie, who was leaning against a corner pillar, started pulling at Lady Hyōbu's robes and singing dreadful songs. His Excellency said nothing.

Realizing that it was bound to a terribly drunken affair this evening, Lady Saishō and I decided to retire once the formal part was over. We were just about to leave when His Excellency's two sons, together

⁴⁰ This gentleman is Fujiwara no Sanesuke, author of the *Shōyōiki*, a court diary written in Sino-Japanese that covers the years 982-1032, part of which is translated in Appendix 2. Sanesuke was a well-known critic of Michinaga's opulence and he may be looking at the women's robes with a jaundiced eye, marking up yet another instance of extravagance.

⁴¹ This is the only reference in the diary to the name Murasaki. It is, of course, a nickname associated with the fictional heroine of the *Tale of Genji* and this little vignette probably records its genesis: it would not be surprising if a name first bestowed by the eminent Kintō were quickly to gain currency.

⁴² The situation here is a little vague. The nobles are sitting on the veranda, which is quite narrow, so there would be no space to walk behind them. When asked to take the cup, Assistant Master Fujiwara no Sanenari carefully avoids walking in front of his father, goes instead down the steps at the east end of the veranda, walks along the garden and comes up the centre steps. His father, who is drunk, bursts into tears on seeing how his son can observe the correct formalities in such a situation.

lery and started to create a commotion. We hid behind the dais, but His Excellency pulled back the curtains and we were both caught.

'A poem each for the Prince!' he cried. 'Then I'll let you go!' Being in such a quandary, I recited:

How on this fiftieth day can we possibly count
The countless years of our prince's reign!

'Oh! Splendid!' he said, reciting it twice to himself; then he gave a very quick reply:

Had I as many years as the crane, then might I count
How many thousand years his eternal reign would be.

Even in his inebriated state, his mind was still on the future of the Prince. I was both moved and reassured. If His Excellency looked on the boy with such favour, then he must indeed be ensured a brilliant reign. Even I, in my own insignificant way, was filled with the thought of his future fortunes, for which a thousand years would be too brief.

'Did Her Majesty hear that?' he said proudly. 'One of my better ones! I think I make a very good papa for an empress. And she's not bad for the daughter of a man like me either! Mother must think herself very fortunate knowing what a brilliant husband she has!' Such behaviour, it would seem, could be put down to excessive drinking. But he was far from being incapable and, although I myself felt a little apprehensive, Her Majesty listened to him in good humour. Her Excellency, however, perhaps unable to endure it any longer, made as if to leave.

'Mother will scold me if I fail to see her off, you know!' he said, rushing straight out through the curtained dais. 'Terribly rude of me, my dear, but then you owe it all to your father in any case, don't you!' he mumbled, at which everyone laughed.

The time for the return to the Palace was approaching, but we were constantly rushed off our feet. Her Majesty was involved in her

book-binding, and so first thing every morning we had to go to her quarters to choose paper of various colours and to write letters of request to people, enclosing copies of the stories. We were also kept busy night and day sorting and binding work that had already been finished.

'What on earth are you doing in such cold weather?' asked His Excellency. 'You're meant to be resting!' Nevertheless, from time to time he would bring her good thin paper, brushes and ink. He even brought an inkstone. When the others found out that Her Majesty had given it to me, they all complained loudly. I had obtained it by going behind their backs, they said. Despite this, she made me another present of excellent coloured paper and some brushes.

Then, while I was in attendance, His Excellency sneaked into my room and found a copy of the Tale that I had asked someone to bring from home for safekeeping. It seems that he gave the whole thing to his second daughter. I no longer had the fair copy in my possession and was sure that the version she now had with her would hurt my reputation.⁴³

The baby was beginning to make a few sounds, so it was only natural that His Majesty was getting somewhat impatient.

Seeing the water birds on the lake increase in number day by day, I thought to myself how nice it would be if it snowed before we got back to the Palace – the garden would look so beautiful; and then, two days later, while I was away on a short visit, lo and behold, it did snow. As I watched the rather drab scene at home, I felt both depressed and confused. For some years now I had existed from day to day in listless fashion, taking note of the flowers, the birds in song, the way the skies change from season to season, the moon, the frost and snow, doing

⁴³ The stories mentioned earlier that Her Majesty was having copied may or may not have been by Murasaki, but there can be little doubt that this particular reference is to the *Tale of Genji*. The fact that copies would have taken months of hard work to produce, that they could so easily go astray like this, and that many of them may simply have been drafts rather than the finished product makes it all the more incredible that her work, in particular, has survived.

more than registering the passage of time. How would it all turn out? The thought of my continuing loneliness was unbearable, and yet I had managed to exchange sympathetic letters with those of like mind – some contacted via fairly tenuous connections – who would discuss my trifling tales and other matters with me; but I was merely amusing myself with fictions, finding solace for my idleness in foolish words. Aware of my own insignificance, I had at least managed for the time being to avoid anything that might have been considered shameful or unbecoming; yet here I was, tasting the bitterness of life to the very full.

I tried reading the Tale again, but it did not seem to be the same as before and I was disappointed. Those with whom I had discussed things of mutual interest – how vain and frivolous they must consider me now, I thought; and then, ashamed that I could even contemplate such a remark, I found it difficult to write to them. Those in whose eyes I had wished to be of some consequence undoubtedly thought of me now as no more than a common lady-in-waiting who would treat their letters with scant respect; that they were unable to fathom my true feelings was only to be expected, but nevertheless it rankled, and, although I did not break with them entirely, there were many with whom I ceased to correspond as a matter of course. There were others who no longer came to see me, assuming that I was now of no fixed abode. Indeed everything, however slight, conspired to make me feel as if I had entered a different world. Being at home only served to make matters worse, and I was most forlorn.

It struck me as a sad truth that the only people left to me were those of my constant companions at court for whom I felt a certain affection, and those with whom I could exchange a secret or two, with whom I happened to be on good terms at the present moment. In particular I missed Lady Dainagon, who would often talk to me as we lay close by Her Majesty in the evenings. Had I then indeed succumbed to life at court?

I sent her the following:

How I long for those waters on which we lay,
A longing keener than the frost on a duck's wing.

To which she replied:

Awakening to find no friend to brush away the frost,
The mandarin duck longs for her mate at night.⁴⁴

When I saw how elegantly it was written, I realized what an accomplished woman she was.

Others wrote, telling me how Her Majesty was so sorry that I could not be with her to see the snow. I also received a note from Her Excellency.

'You obviously did not mean it when you said you would only be away for a short while,' she wrote. 'I presume you are prolonging it on purpose since I tried to stop you.' She may not have been serious, but I had promised and she had given me leave to go, so I felt obliged to return.

Her Majesty returned to the Palace on the seventeenth. We had been told to be ready at eight in the evening, but the night wore on. Some thirty of us, dressed in formal attire with our hair done up but indistinguishable from each other in the darkness, took our places in the southern gallery. We were separated by the side door from the ten or more women from the Palace; they were seated in the eastern gallery to the east of the main chamber.

Her Majesty shared a palanquin with Miya no Senji. Behind them in a decorated carriage came Her Excellency and wet nurse Shō carrying the baby prince. Lady Dainagon and Lady Saishō came next in a carriage with gold fittings, and they in turn were followed by Lady Koshōshō and Miya no Naishi. I rode behind them with Muma no Chūjō, but she seemed resentful of my presence. Why should she be so high and mighty, I remember asking myself, vexed at the pettiness of court life. We were followed by Lady Jijū from the Office of Grounds and Ben no Naishi, and they in turn were followed by

44 Mandarin ducks were supposed always to go around in inseparable pairs. This common metaphor for lovers originally came from Chinese literature but had by this time become firmly part of the Japanese poetic vocabulary. These poems should be seen as forming a conventional exchange between close friends – nothing more.

Saemon no Naishi and Lady Shikibu – His Excellency's envoy. After that there was no fixed order and everyone rode with whom she pleased.

When we finally arrived, the moon was so bright that I was embarrassed to be seen and knew not where to hide. I allowed Muma no Chūjō to go on ahead of me, but when I saw how she was stumbling along, not knowing where she was going, I realized what a sorry sight I must be presenting to those behind me.

As I lay down to rest in my room, which was third from the end in one of the outer galleries,⁴⁵ Lady Koshōshō came in to commiserate with me on how tiresome the whole affair had been. We discarded our outer robes, which had gone stiff with the cold, and put on some thick padded clothes instead. I was adding some charcoal to the burner and complaining how miserable it was to feel so chilled to the marrow, when who should drop by to pay their respects but Adviser Sanenari, Tsunefusa, Adviser of the Left, and Middle Captain Kinnobu, one after the other. They were rather unwelcome. I had hoped to have been left in peace that evening, but word must have got around.

'We'll come again early tomorrow morning. It's bitterly cold tonight; we're frozen!' they said somewhat offhandedly, leaving by the back entrance on our side. As they hurried away on their respective paths, I wondered what kind of women were waiting for them at home. Not that I was thinking so much of myself as of Lady Koshōshō: she was elegant and attractive by any standards, and yet here she was brooding over the melancholies of life. Fate seems to have treated her most unfairly ever since her father retired.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ The palace to which Her Majesty returns is not the main Imperial Palace but the much smaller mansion at Ichijō nearby. The Imperial Palace itself had been burned to the ground on Kankō 2 (1003).11.15 and, although rebuilding started a year later, it was not actually reoccupied until Kankō 8 (1011).8.11. For details of the Ichijō Palace see ground-plan 8 (Appendix 1).

⁴⁶ Lady Koshōshō's father had retired from active life as early as 987 and she had been brought up by her mother. This lack of a male relative with the proper court connections would have been seen as a major impediment to making a good marriage.

The next morning Her Majesty held a close inspection of the gifts she had received the night before. The accessories in the comb boxes were so indescribably beautiful I could have gazed at them for ever. There was, in addition, another pair of boxes. In the top tray of one of them were some booklets made of white patterned paper: the *Kokinshū*, *Gosenshū* and *Shūishū*, each in five volumes, four sections to a volume,⁴⁷ copied by Middle Counsellor Yukinari and the priest Enkan. The covers were of fine silk and the ties were of similar imported material. In the bottom tray lay a number of personal poetry collections by poets old and new; poets such as Yoshinobu and Moto-suke.⁴⁸ Those in the hands of Enkan and the Middle Counsellor were, of course, for safe keeping, but these other collections were for more everyday use; I do not know who had copied them, but they were of unusually modern design.

The Gosechi dancers arrived on the twentieth.⁴⁹ Her Majesty presented Adviser Sanenari with dresses for his dancer. She also gave Kanetaka, Adviser of the Right, the cord pendants that he had requested. We took the opportunity to give them both some incense in a set of boxes with artificial plum branches attached as decoration, to spur on their rivalry. I knew full well how hard the young dancers had prepared this year in comparison to normal years when things were

⁴⁷ These books are the first three imperial anthologies of Japanese poetry: the *Kokinshū* was compiled c. 905, the *Gosenshū* c. 951, and the *Shūishū* c. 1005.

⁴⁸ Ōnakatomi no Yoshinobu (921?–991) and Kiyohara no Motosuke (908–990) both took part in the compilation of the *Gosenshū*. It is not clear here whether Murasaki thought of these men as 'old' or 'new'.

⁴⁹ The Gosechi dances were always performed over a period of four days late in the eleventh month. This year there were, as usual, four dancers, the daughters of Fujiwara no Sanenari, Fujiwara no Kanetaka, Takashina no Naritō and Fujiwara no Nakakiyo. The ceremonies began on the second day of the Ox (in this case the twentieth) when the four dancers would formally enter the Palace, each with a retinue of some ten attendants. It is this formal entrance that is being described here. In the evening they would perform the Dais Rehearsals. On the following day a banquet was held for the Imperial Rehearsals. The third day saw a presentation by the young girls (about ten years old) who were in attendance on the dancers, and the Festivals of the First Fruits were held that evening. The main Gosechi dances were performed on the fourth day.

usually come in such a hurry, so as they entered the glare of the torches that lined the standing screen opposite Her Majesty's rooms on the east side – they were more exposed than they would have been in broad daylight – all I could think of was what a dreadful ordeal it must be for them. The same misfortune had been visited on us as well, of course, but at least we had been spared the torches and the direct stares of the senior courtiers, for we had been surrounded by curtains to ward off the curious. In general, however, we must have presented a similar spectacle. I shudder to recall it.

The ladies in attendance on Naritō's dancer wore brocade jackets that stood out brilliantly even in the darkness of the night. They wore so many layers they seemed to have difficulty in moving, so the senior courtiers did what they could to help them. His Majesty came over to watch from our side of the building and His Excellency stole over as well and stood to the north of the sliding door;⁵⁰ this was rather inconvenient, since it meant we could not do exactly as we wished.

The attendants for Nakakiyo's dancer were all chosen to be exactly the same height and were pronounced to be every bit as magnificent and splendid as their rivals. Those in the Adviser of the Right's party had arranged everything perfectly; they even included two cleaning maids whose very stiffness made them seem a little provincial, bringing a smile to everyone's lips.

Last in line was the party belonging to Adviser Sanenari. Perhaps I was imagining things, but they all appeared particularly well dressed. There were ten attendants. The hems of their robes cascaded out from beneath the blinds which had been lowered in the outer gallery. The effect was not ostentatious; on the contrary, they looked extremely attractive in the glow of the lights.

On the morning of the twenty-first the senior courtiers came to pay their respects. It was the same every year of course, but perhaps because they had been away from the Palace for some months now,

⁵⁰ It is not clear where this door is. If one assumes that Murasaki and the other ladies-in-waiting are sitting in the southern wing looking south, Michinaga must be standing just to their right. See ground-plan 8 (Appendix 1).

the younger women were all agog; and this despite the fact that ceremonial cloaks were not worn that day.⁵¹

That evening Naritō, as Assistant Master of the Crown Prince's Household, was summoned and presented with incense piled high in a large box. Nakakiyo, as Governor of Owari, was given a similar gift by Her Excellency. Her Majesty went over that evening to see the Imperial Rehearsals, I think it was. Because the baby prince was with her, there was much casting of rice and shouting of spells; quite different from usual.

I felt depressed and went to my room for a while to rest. I had intended to go over later if I felt better, but then Kohyōe and Kohyōbu came in and sat themselves down by the hibachi. 'It's so crowded over there, you can hardly see a thing!' they complained. His Excellency appeared.

'What do you think you're all doing, sitting around like this?' he said. 'Come along with me!'

I did not really feel up to it but went at his insistence.

I was watching the dancers, thinking how tense they looked, when suddenly the Governor of Owari's daughter took ill and had to retire; it was like watching a dream unfold. When it was all over, Her Majesty returned to her apartments.

The younger nobles could now talk of nothing but the attractiveness of the young dancers' apartments.

'Did you notice how the decoration on the edges and tops of each blind is a different design for each room? And the way they do their hair, the way they move around – they are all quite different from each other!'

The way they go on like this does annoy me.

Even in normal years the young girl attendants feel self-conscious when presenting themselves in front of His Majesty, so how much

⁵¹ Murasaki is here referring to the white cloaks dyed with indigo patterns that were connected with Shintō ritual and that were worn for the Gosechi ceremonies but only for the last two days of the event.

worse it must have been for them this year, I thought; I was both apprehensive and eager to see them.⁵² As they finally stepped forward together I was, for some reason, overcome with emotion and felt dreadfully sorry for them. Not that I was closely tied to any one of them in particular, mind you. Was it because their patrons were so convinced that their girls were the best that, look as I would, I found it difficult to distinguish between them? Someone more in the know about fashion would have been able to detect differences at once, of course. And with all those young nobles around and the girls not allowed so much as a fan to hide behind in broad daylight, I felt somehow concerned for them, convinced that, although they may have been able to deal with the situation both in terms of rank and intelligence, they must surely have found the pressures of constant rivalry daunting; silly of me, perhaps.

Naritō's little girl looked very attractive in her pale-green coat, but the way Adviser Sanenari had dressed his girl in a red coat was enviable: it made a perfect contrast with her maid's yellow-green jacket. Of the two, the former seemed the plainer.

Adviser Kanetaka's girl stood very straight and had beautiful hair, but she was rather too forward, which caused some adverse comment. All four of them were wearing deep red underjackets and mantles of various colours. Three of them had coats with five cuffs, but the Governor of Owari's girl had a coat dyed light purple throughout, which made her look most elegant and attractive by contrast; its sheen and the way it blended in with the other dresses was most impressive.

As the Chamberlain of Sixth Rank and some other men came forward to take their fans, one of the maids, a very attractive girl, took it into her head to throw hers towards them. It was not an immodest gesture but not very ladylike either. But then, if I were ever asked to present myself like that in front of everyone, no doubt I too would prove equally as gauche; I, who never imagined I would be as much in

⁵² We are now in the third day of the ceremonies and Murasaki is describing the Imperial Viewing of the Girl Attendants. The dancers themselves rested on this day, but one young girl, with an older woman in attendance, was chosen from each party to perform before the Emperor. In contrast to the two previous occasions, this presentation took place in the daytime.

the public eye as I am even now. And yet feelings can be so tickle – they shift before your very eyes. 'From now on,' I told myself, 'I know my shamelessness shall be such that I will become quite used to life at court, inured to showing myself openly to others.' My future rose up before me like a dream and I began to think unwonted thoughts; I became quite upset and found the ceremonies much less interesting than usual.

The rooms occupied by Adviser Sanenari's party were right across from Her Majesty's apartments. Looking over the top of the screen, you could see the edging on the blinds that had caused so much comment. We could also hear snatches of conversation.

'Lady Sakyō seems to be very much at home with the ladies of the First Consort,'⁵³ said Adviser Kanetaka, revealing that he knew her of old. Junior Captain Masamichi also remembered her. 'That was Lady Sakyō the other night sitting on the east side among the attendants,' he said. Somehow all this came to the ears of Her Majesty's ladies, who thought it most interesting.

'Well, we can hardly just ignore it,' they said. 'Fancy someone who used to lord it in the Palace returning in such a manner! She must be trying to remain incognito. We must disillusion her!' and with that in mind they chose from the many fans in Her Majesty's collection one with a coloured painting of Mt Hōrai; they did it deliberately, but did she realize what it was meant to signify?⁵⁴ They placed the open fan on the lid of a box, arranged a dancer's cord pendants around it, and added a curved comb tied across the ends with a strip of ceremonial white paper.⁵⁵

⁵³ The First Consort was Fujiwara no Gishi (Yoshiko), Kinsue's daughter, also known as Kokiden. Apparently Lady Sakyō used to be in her service, left for some reason, and has now returned as an attendant for Sanenari's daughter. Sanenari was Gishi's younger brother.

⁵⁴ Mt Hōrai was a symbol of longevity, used here no doubt as a specific reminder to Lady Sakyō that she was not getting any younger.

⁵⁵ The ceremonial white paper was attached to the headdress worn by the Gosechi dancers, and at the Imperial Viewing of the Girl Attendants the selection of a comb was a mark of special favour. Apparently, the younger the woman, the greater the curvature on the comb.

ones not as young as she used to be, you know!' said one of the younger nobles, bending it even more so that the ends nearly met in a dreadfully up-to-date fashion. They also prepared a roll of *kurobō* scent, cut both ends untidily, and then wrapped it in two sheets of white paper making it into a sort of folded letter. Lady Tayū was asked to write the following:

Among the many ladies at the 'Banquet of the Flushed Faces'
Your pendants were a source of shining admiration.⁵⁶

'If you are going to give her a present like that,' said Her Majesty, 'you ought to make it more attractive; add some more fans or something.' 'No,' the women replied. 'It would not do to make it too exaggerated. If it were a gift from Your Majesty, there would be none of these hidden allusions in any case. This is our own little private affair.'

They sent as a messenger a woman who would not be recognized.

'A letter from Lady Chūnagon! From the First Consort's apartments, for Lady Sakyō!' she said in a loud voice as she passed it through the blinds. We were all worried lest she be caught, but she came hurrying back. Apparently someone had asked her where she had come from but no one had doubted her reply when she had said she had come from the First Consort's quarters.

Nothing of any real interest had happened during these last few days, but even so, once the festivities were over, the Palace suddenly felt dreary; things were only enlivened by some rehearsals on the night of the twenty-fourth.⁵⁷ I can just imagine how bored the younger nobles must have felt after all the excitement.

⁵⁶ The Banquet of the Flushed Faces took place on the fourth and last day of the festivities. Somewhere in the course of the previous passage Murasaki has moved on to describe events on the twenty-third.

⁵⁷ These were the penultimate *gagaku* rehearsals for the Special Festival at the Kamo Shrines, which was held on the last day of the Cock in the eleventh month (which fell this year on the twenty-eighth).

Even the Takamatsu sons were allowed into the women's apartments after Her Majesty's return to the Palace.⁵⁸ It was extremely annoying to have them traipsing in and out all the time, although, on the pretext of being too old for it all, I made myself scarce. Obviously the Gosechi ceremonies had made very little impression on them; instead they hung around the skirts of Yasurai, Kohyōe and the others, twittering away and making a general nuisance of themselves.

The imperial messenger for the Special Festival at the Kamo Shrines was His Excellency's fifth son, Middle Captain Elect Norimichi. It was a day of abstinence at the Palace and so His Excellency came the evening before and stayed overnight. The nobles and the young men who were to perform the dances also stayed at the Palace, with the result that the area around the women's quarters was pandemonium all night.

Early the next morning retainers from Kinsue, Minister of the Centre, arrived to hand over a gift to His Excellency's men: it was a silver book box lying on the lid that we had sent the previous day.⁵⁹

Packed inside was a mirror, an aloes-wood comb and a silver comb, all apparently for the imperial messenger to dress his hair. Embossed on the top of the box in reed-like script⁶⁰ was what appeared to be a reply to our 'cord pendants' poem, but two letters had been left out and it looked a little odd. Matters seem to have taken a strange turn. I remember hearing later that the Minister had made this formal gift in the belief that the first present had come from Her Majesty. It had only been a trifling joke on our part and I was sorry to see that it had been taken so seriously.

Her Excellency also came to the Palace to watch the imperial

⁵⁸ The children of Michinaga's second wife Meishi, called Takamatsu after a mansion that had belonged to her father, Minamoto no Takaakira. They had kept their distance until now because the Tsuchimikado mansion belonged to Michinaga's first wife, Rinshi. Once Shōshi's retinue returned to the palace at Ichijō, they were again allowed free rein. As they were young men rather than boys, Yorimune (16), Akinobu (15) and Yoshinobu (14), it is not surprising that Murasaki was somewhat put out.

⁵⁹ The lid is the one that they had sent to Lady Sakyō. Kinsue, who takes it upon himself to make a return gift, was Gishi's father.

⁶⁰ A form of rebus writing whereby a poem was hidden in a sketch of reeds, rocks and water.

messenger depart, seeing him there looking very grown-up and imposing with artificial wisteria flowers in his hair, his old wet-nurse Lady Kura had no eyes for the dancers; she just gazed at him, tears running down her cheeks.

Because of the abstinence at the Palace, they all returned from the shrine at about two the following morning, so the dances performed on their return were kept to a mere formality. Kanetoki had been superb in the role of dancer in past years, but this year he seemed very uncertain in his movements.⁶¹ Despite the fact that I hardly knew him, I felt sorry for him and it gave me much on which to reflect.

I returned to the Palace on the twenty-ninth of the twelfth month.⁶² Now I come to think of it, it was on this very night that I first entered service at court. When I remember what a daze I was in then I find my present somewhat blasé attitude quite uncomfortable.

It was very late. Her Majesty was in seclusion, so I did not go to see her but lay down to rest on my own. I could hear the women talking in the next room. 'How different it is here in the Palace! At home everyone would be asleep but here it's the constant footsteps that keep one awake!' they said immodestly.

As does the year, so do my days draw to an end;

How desolate the sounds of the wind in my heart

I murmured to myself.

On the last night of the year the ceremony of casting out devils⁶³ was over very early, so I was resting in my room, blackening my teeth and

⁶¹ Owari no Kanetoki was a famous dancer of *kagura*, religious dances. This may well have been his last Kamo Shrine dance, because Michinaga's diary records that he was too ill to dance it the following year, 1009.

⁶² There is a gap of about one month at this point. A number of important ceremonies were held during this period, but either Murasaki seems not to have found them worth recording, or the record has been lost. Perhaps she returned home soon after the Go-sechi dances in the eleventh month and spent the whole month away from the Palace.

⁶³ This rite, known as *tsuina*, involved the casting of rice, beans and spells to usher out evil spirits. It was the last of the year's ceremonies.

putting on a light powder, when Ben no Naishi came in, chatted for a while and then fell asleep.

Takumi, the maid, was sitting just outside in the corridor, intent on teaching Ateki how to pinch the hems of a dress she had just made, when suddenly there was uproar from the direction of Her Majesty's quarters. I shook Ben no Naishi but she took time to wake up. The crying and wailing was terrible to hear, and I was beside myself. I thought at first it was a fire, but no, it was something else.

'Come on!' I said, urging Takumi to take the lead. 'Whatever it is, Her Majesty is in her room tonight. We must go and see if she is all right.' Finally I managed to shake Ben no Naishi out of her slumbers and the three of us went over, trembling in fear and apprehension. What should we find but two women sitting there with no clothes on, Yugei and Kohyōbu! When I realized what had happened, I felt even more upset.

The menials had all retired and both Her Majesty's servants and the guards had left as soon as the ceremony was over. We clapped our hands and shouted, but to no avail. A serving girl was called out from the Kitchens. 'Quick! Fetch the Chamberlain at the Ministry of War. He should be in the main chamber!'⁶⁴ I said, forgetting proprieties and speaking directly to her. She went to find him but he too had left. I was mortified. Then who should arrive but Sukenari, Chamberlain at the Ministry of Ceremonial, who went round on his own to fill the oil lamps.

Some of the women just sat there gazing at each other in a state of shock. A messenger came from His Majesty. What a dreadful experience it was, I remember. Robes were brought from the imperial storehouse and given to the two women who needed them. Their formal dresses for the New Year's Day celebrations had not been stolen so they put on a brave face, but I shall never forget the sight of them without their clothes. It was frightening but it also had an amusing side to it, although I should never dream of saying so.⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ Murasaki is here calling for her younger brother Nobunori, who was always such a disappointment to her. The fact that he fails to turn up is made doubly mortifying when Sukenari, his erstwhile rival for promotion, comes to the rescue.

⁶⁵ This incident is not mentioned in any other record, although the entries for the latter part of the twelfth month are missing from both Michinaga's diary and the *Shiōyōki*. It is

the next day was New Year's Day. We could hardly refrain from discussing last night, although to do so was obviously unlucky. It was also an inauspicious day according to the almanac, so the rice-cake ceremony⁶⁶ for the Prince was cancelled. It was in fact the third day of the month before the Prince was taken to see His Majesty.

This year it was Lady Dainagon who was in charge of serving Her Majesty. On the first day she wore a crimson gown with a light purple mantle, a red jacket, and a train of printed silk. For the second day she had a mantle of purple and crimson figured silk, a dark crimson gown of glossy silk, a yellow-green jacket, and a train of variegated colours. For the third day she wore a white mantle of Chinese damask with a red lining, and a dark red jacket of figured silk. As was usually the case, when the gown was dark the lining was a shade paler, and vice versa. Her lined robes were of various colours, pale green, white with a dark-red lining, light yellow, dark yellow, crimson with purple lining, and pale purple lined in white; the effect of these six quite common combinations worn all at one time together with the mantle was perfect.

On the third day Lady Saishō acted as sword bearer, following behind His Excellency, who carried the Prince over to His Majesty's quarters in his arms. She wore one lined crimson robe with seven cuffs which were sewn to the unlined dress beneath, and over that were four more robes of a similar colour with alternating cuffs of three and five layers. Her crimson gown was of thick figured silk with five cuffs. Her mantle was pale purple with a lightly embroidered pattern of oak leaves. Even the stitching was beautifully done. She was also wearing a train with three cuffs, and a red jacket that was embroidered with a

possible that burglaries were so commonplace as to be considered unworthy of special notice. Security certainly seems to have been lax. It is also possible that Murasaki had misunderstood the situation. In view of the fact that the best robes were not stolen, we may be dealing with a prank played by some drunken young nobles. Murasaki uses the word *hadakasugata* here, which may mean 'nude' or may simply mean that the women have lost their outer robes; the matter is unclear.

⁶⁶ This ceremony was carried out for imperial princes and princesses three times during the New Year until they were about four or five years old. Specially made rice cakes were placed on the child's head and spells were cast.

water-chestnut pattern that gave her a rather Chinese look." Her hair was done up especially for the occasion and she looked and acted quite perfectly. She is just the right height too, with a full figure, fine features and a beautiful complexion.

Lady Dainagon is petite, one might almost say small; pale and lovely, a little plump perhaps, but always very well dressed. Her hair falls about three inches past her heels and is so luxuriant and kept so beautifully trimmed there is hardly anyone to match her for elegance. She has intelligent features and acts in a most charming, graceful manner.

Lady Senji is also on the small side, but she is very slim. Her hair falls to about a foot beyond the hem of her robes and not a strand is ever out of place. She is so infinitely distinguished it quite puts me to shame, and she has only to put in an appearance to make one feel on one's guard. Her character and her speech are just what you would expect of the epitome of a noble lady.

Now if I go on describing people for you in this manner, I am sure I will get a reputation for being a gossip, especially if it concerns those close to me.⁶⁸ It is too difficult to discuss people I meet every day and I should avoid commenting on anyone about whom I have second thoughts.

Lady Saishō – the daughter of Kitano of Third Rank, you know – has a plump but compact figure and looks very shrewd; she improves greatly upon further acquaintance. She has a refined air about her and a most attractive smile plays around the corners of her mouth. The initial impression she gives is one of correctness and show, but inside she is in fact lovable and gentle, while in some matters she can still be positively daunting.

⁶⁷ This pattern consisted of flat diamond shapes in groups of four, and it was this geometric effect that struck Murasaki as being rather Chinese.

⁶⁸ It is at this point that most scholars place the beginning of the so-called 'letter section', in which Murasaki describes her contemporaries and indulges in some self-analysis, although the transition from description of event to description of character has already started a few paragraphs before.

one of a weeping willow in spring. She has a lovely figure and a charming manner, but is by nature far too retiring, diffident to the point of being incapable of making up her mind about anything, so naïve that it makes one want to weep. Whenever someone unscrupulous tries to take advantage of her or spreads rumours, she immediately takes it all to heart. She is so vulnerable and so easily dismayed that you would think she were on the point of expiring. I do worry about her.

Miya no Naishi is also very attractive. She is just the right height so that when seated she has a most imposing, stylish air about her. Although not the kind of woman whose attractiveness can be ascribed to any one feature, there is a freshness in her countenance and an air of distinction in her face; the contrast between her pale skin and her black hair sets her apart from the rest. Everything, the shape of her head, her hair, her forehead, surprises with its beauty and yet gives an impression of openness and candour. She acts quite naturally, is kind to others, and never gives the slightest cause for any misgivings. So perfect in whatever she does, she could be a model for all, entirely free from any airs and graces.

Lady Shikibu, her younger sister, is chubby – fat even. She is a pale woman but has delicate, well-formed features. Her hair has a magnificent sheen, but it cannot be that long, for she comes to court with an additional hairpiece attached. I remember her plump little figure as being really most charming. She has pretty eyes and a clear forehead, and is very winsome when she laughs.

Of the younger women, Kodayū and Genshikibu have a reputation of being attractive. Kodayū is petite and very stylish. Her hair is beautiful; it used to be even thicker than it is now and over a foot longer than she was, but recently it has thinned somewhat. Her features show great character and leave a powerful impression. Her looks are impossible to fault. Genshikibu is slim and elegant, the ideal height. She has very fine features and impresses one the more one sees her. Her charm and freshness are just what they should be in 'a girl of good family'.

Kohyōe and Shōni are also very attractive women.

All these ladies-in-waiting must have been approached by senior

courtiers at one time or another. If anyone is careless there is no hiding the fact, but somehow, by taking precautions even in private, they do seem to have managed to keep their affairs secret.

Miyagi no Jijū had a delicate kind of beauty. She was very slightly built, the kind of person you wished would always remain a little girl, but she let herself age, became a nun, and we heard no more of her. Her hair used to fall just beyond the hem of her robes, but she cut it boldly on the occasion of her farewell visit to the Palace, I remember. She had beautiful features.

There is one woman called Gosechi no Ben, who, they tell me, was brought up as an adopted daughter by the Middle Counsellor Taira no Korenaka. She has the kind of face you see in paintings, with a very broad forehead and narrow eyes, rather nondescript in fact. She has a pale complexion and beautifully shaped hands and arms, but her hair, which used to be over a foot longer than she was and seemed almost too thick the spring I first saw her, is now extraordinarily thin in places, almost as though someone had cut it deliberately. Even so, it still falls well and reaches to the ground and a little further.

The woman known as Koma had very long hair too. In the past she used to be a marvellous young lady-in-waiting, but now she has become an old stick-in-the-mud and has immured herself at home.

So much for their looks; but their characters – that is a much more difficult matter. We all have our quirks and no one is ever all bad. Then again, it is not possible for everyone to be all things all of the time: attractive, restrained, intelligent, tasteful and trustworthy. We are all different and it is often difficult to know on which aspect to dwell. But I must stop rambling on.

I heard there was a Lady Chūjō serving in the household of the High Priestess of the Kamo Shrines.⁶⁹ By chance someone happened to show me in secret a letter which this Lady Chūjō had written. It was dreadfully affected. She seemed to think there was no one in the world as intelligent or discerning as her; everyone else was judged to

69 For a discussion of this household see the Introduction, pp. xxi–xxii.

written, I could hardly contain myself and felt very angry, quite 'worked up' as the saying goes. I know it was a personal letter but she had actually written: 'When it comes to judging poetry, is there anyone who can rival our Princess? She is the only one who could recognize a promising talent nowadays!' There may be some point in what she says, but while she makes such claims for her circle of friends, in fact there are not many poems that her group produces that are of any real merit. Admittedly, it seems to be a very elegant and sophisticated kind of place, but were you to make a comparison, I doubt they would necessarily prove any better than the women I see around me.

They keep themselves very much to themselves. Whenever I have visited them, for it is famous for beautiful moonlit nights, marvellous dawn skies, cherries, and the song of the cuckoo, the High Priestess has always seemed most sensitive. The place has an aura of seclusion and mystery about it, and they have very little to distract them. Rarely are they ever in the rush that we are in whenever Her Majesty visits the Emperor, or when His Excellency decides to come and stay the night. Indeed, the place naturally lends itself to such pleasures, so how could one possibly produce an exchange that offended good taste in the midst of such a striving for the best effects?

If a retiring old fossil like myself were to take service with the High Priestess, I am sure that I would also be able to relax my guard, secure in the knowledge that if I exchanged poems with a man I had not met before I would not automatically be branded a loose woman. I am sure I would absorb the elegance of the place. How much more so if one of our younger women, who have absolutely no drawbacks when it comes to beauty or age, were to put her mind to act seductively and converse by means of poetry; I am convinced that she would compare most favourably.

But here in the Palace there are no other imperial consorts or empresses to keep Her Majesty on her mettle, and there are no ladies-in-waiting in any of the other households who can really challenge us; the result is that all of us, men and women alike, are lacking in any sense of rivalry and simply rest on our laurels. Her Majesty frowns on the slightest hint of seductive behaviour as being the height of

frivolity, so anyone who wants to be thought well of takes care never to seem too forward. Of course that is not to say we do not have women among us of quite a different persuasion, women who care nothing for being thought flirtatious and light-hearted and getting a bad name for themselves. The men strike up relationships with this kind of woman because they are such easy game. So they must consider Her Majesty's women either dull or feckless. And as for the upper- and middle-ranking women, they are far too self-satisfied and far too full of themselves. They do nothing to enhance Her Majesty's reputation; in fact they are a disgrace.

Now it may seem that I pretend to know all there is to know about these women, but each one has her own personality and no one is particularly better or worse than anyone else. If they are good in one aspect, they are bad in another, it seems. Mind you, it would, of course, be most improper for the older women to act foolishly at a time when the younger ones themselves are apparently trying to appear serious and dignified; it is just that as a general rule I do wish that they were not quite so stiff.

Her Majesty, although she is so refined, so graceful in all she does, is by nature a little too diffident and will not take the matter up with them. Even were she to do so, she is convinced that there are very few people in this world who can be relied upon with complete confidence. She is right, of course; to do something foolish on an important occasion is worse than just doing things half-heartedly. Once, when she was much younger, Her Majesty heard a lady-in-waiting, who tended to be careless and who thought rather too much of herself on occasions, blurt out some ridiculous things at an important event; it was so dreadfully out of place that she felt deeply shocked. So now she seems to think that the safest policy is to get by in life without a major scandal. I am sure that it is precisely because her women, naïve creatures that they are, have all fitted in so well with her designs that things have turned out as they are.

Her Majesty has gradually matured of late and now understands the ways of the world: that people have their good points and their bad, that they sometimes go to excess and sometimes make mistakes. She is also well aware of the fact that the senior courtiers seem to

have become bored with her household, pronouncing it lacking in sparkle.

And yet such reticence is not taken to extremes by all; some women can let themselves go and come out with quite risqué verses. But, although Her Majesty wants the stiff and formal ones to be more lively, and indeed tells them so, their habits are too ingrained. What is more, the young nobles these days are too compliant and act very seriously as long as they are with us. But when they are somewhere like the High Priestess's household they naturally seek to compose all sorts of elegant phrases in praise of the moon or the blossoms, and they say what they think. Here in the Palace, where people traipse in and out day and night and there is little mystery, women who can make the most ordinary conversation sound intriguing or who can compose a passable reply to an interesting poem have become very scarce indeed, or so the men seem to be saying. I have never heard them say this in so many words, however, so I do not know the truth of the matter.

It is ridiculous to respond to someone's overtures with something that causes offence because it has simply been tossed off without due thought. One should take care to give an appropriate response. This is what is meant by the saying 'sensitivity is a precious gift'. Why should self-satisfied smugness be seen as a sign of wisdom? And there again, why should one continually interfere with other people's lives? To be able to adapt to a situation to the correct degree and then to act accordingly seems to be extremely difficult for most people.

For example, whenever the Master of Her Majesty's Household arrives with a message for Her Majesty, the senior women are so helpless and childish that they hardly ever come out to greet him; and when they do, what happens? They seem unable to say anything in the least bit appropriate. It is not that they are at a loss for words, and it is not that they are lacking in intelligence; it is just that they feel so self-conscious and embarrassed that they are afraid of saying something silly, so they refuse to say anything at all and try to make themselves as invisible as possible. Women in other households cannot possibly act in such a manner! Once one has entered this kind of service, even the highest born of ladies learns how to adapt; but our women still act as

though they were little girls who had never left home. And as the Master of the Household has made it plain that he objects to being greeted by a woman of a lower rank, there are times when he leaves without seeing anyone; either because the right woman has gone home or because those women who are in their rooms refuse to come out. Other nobles, the kind who often visit Her Majesty with messages, seem to have secret understandings with particular women of their choice and when that woman is absent they simply retire in disappointment. It is hardly surprising that they take every opportunity to complain the place is moribund.

It must be because of all this that the women in the High Priestess's household look down on us. But even so, it makes little sense to ridicule everyone else and claim: 'We are the only ones of note. Everyone else is as good as blind and deaf when it comes to matters of taste.' It is very easy to criticize others but far more difficult to put one's own principles into practice, and it is when one forgets this truth, lauds oneself to the skies, treats everyone else as worthless and generally despises others that one's own character is clearly revealed.

It was a letter I would have loved you to have seen for yourself, but the woman who secretly stole it from its hiding place to show me took it back, I remember – such a pity!

Now someone who did carry on a fascinating correspondence was Izumi Shikibu.⁷⁰ She does have a rather unsavoury side to her character but has a talent for tossing off letters with ease and seems to make the most banal statement sound special. Her poems are most interesting. Although her knowledge of the canon and her judgements of other people's poetry leaves something to be desired, she can produce poems at will and always manages to include some clever phrase that catches the attention. Yet when it comes to criticizing or judging the work of others, well, she never really comes up to scratch – the sort of

⁷⁰ Murasaki may have been led on to the subject of Izumi Shikibu because she was Lady Chūjō's aunt, but the main link here is the subject of interesting letters and their authors. Izumi Shikibu entered the service of Shōshi in the late spring of Kankō 6 (1009) and so must have been a companion of Murasaki's for some time, although this passage is written in retrospect.

PERSON WHO relies on a talent for extemporization, one feels. I cannot think of her as a poet of the highest rank.

The wife of the Governor of Tanba is known to everyone in the service of Her Majesty and His Excellency as Masahira Emon.⁷¹ She may not be a genius but she has great poise and does not feel that she has to compose a poem on everything she sees, merely because she is a poet. From what I have seen, her work is most accomplished, even her occasional verse. People who think so much of themselves that they will, at the drop of a hat, compose lame verses that only just hang together, or produce the most pretentious compositions imaginable, are quite odious and rather pathetic.

Sei Shōnagon, for instance, was dreadfully conceited.⁷² She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them?

Thus do I criticize others from various angles – but here is one who has survived this far without having achieved anything of note. I have nothing in particular to look forward to in the future that might afford me the slightest consolation, but I am not the kind of person to abandon herself completely to despair. And yet, by the same token, I cannot entirely rid myself of such feelings. On autumn evenings,

⁷¹ Otherwise known as Akazome Emon, this is the wife of Oe no Masahira, who became Governor of Tanba in Kankō 7 (1010):3,30. She had served with Michinaga's wife Rinshi even before her marriage and was the mother of Takachika, who, it will be remembered, read out the passage from the classics at Prince Atsuhira's first bath. She is also reputed to be the author of the *Eiga monogatari*.

⁷² Sei Shōnagon is the well-known author of the *Pillow Book*, who served Empress Teishi until her mistress died in childbirth in 1000. If she were still alive at this time, and there is no way of telling, she would have been about forty-five.

which positively encourage nostalgia, when I go out to sit on the veranda and gaze, I seem to be always conjuring up visions of the past – 'and did they praise the beauty of this moon of yore?' Knowing full well that I am inviting the kind of misfortune one should avoid, I become uneasy and move inside a little, while still, of course, continuing to recall the past.⁷³

And when I play my *koto* rather badly to myself in the cool breeze of the evening, I worry lest someone might hear me and recognize how I am just 'adding to the sadness of it all';⁷⁴ how vain and sad of me. So now both my instruments, the one with thirteen strings and the one with six, stand in a miserable, sooty little closet still ready-strung. Through neglect – I forgot, for example, to ask that the bridges be removed on rainy days – they have accumulated dust and lean against a cupboard. Two *biwa* stand on either side, their necks jammed between the cupboard and a pillar.

There is also a pair of larger cupboards crammed to bursting point. One is full of old poems and tales that have become the home for countless insects which scatter in such an unpleasant manner that no one cares to look at them any more; the other is full of Chinese books that have lain unattended ever since he who carefully collected them passed away. Whenever my loneliness threatens to overwhelm me, I take out one or two of them to look at; but my women gather together behind my back. 'It's because she goes on like this that she is so miserable. What kind of lady is it who reads Chinese books?' they whisper. 'In the past it was not even the done thing to read *sūtras*!' 'Yes,' I feel like replying, 'but I've never met anyone who lived longer just because they believed in superstitions!' But that would be thoughtless of me. There is some truth in what they say.

⁷³ The rhythm here suggests a direct quote from a poem, but no satisfactory source has been identified. Misfortune will come from looking too long and too often at the moon and hence identifying with it; this was said to promote nostalgia, grief and premature ageing.

⁷⁴ A reference to Poem 985 in the *Kokinshū* by Yoshimine no Munesada (Bishop Henjō): 'While on his way to Nara he heard a woman playing a *koto* in a dilapidated house. He wrote this poem and sent it in: It seemed to be a dwelling where you might expect someone dejected to be living; and now I hear the sound of a *koto* that adds to the sadness of it all.'

Each one of us is quite different. Some are confident, open and forthcoming. Others are born pessimists, amused by nothing, the kind who search through old letters, carry out penances, intone sūtras without end, and clack their beads, all of which makes one feel uncomfortable. So I hesitate to do even those things I should be able to do quite freely, only too aware of my own servants' prying eyes. How much more so at court, where I have many things I would like to say but always think the better of it, because there would be no point in explaining to people who would never understand. I cannot be bothered to discuss matters in front of those women who continually carp and are so full of themselves: it would only cause trouble. It is so rare to find someone of true understanding; for the most part they judge purely by their own standards and ignore everyone else.

So all they see of me is a façade. There are times when I am forced to sit with them and on such occasions I simply ignore their petty criticisms, not because I am particularly shy but because I consider it pointless. As a result, they now look upon me as a dullard.

'Well, we never expected this!' they all say. 'No one liked her. They all said she was pretentious, awkward, difficult to approach, prickly, too fond of her tales, haughty, prone to versifying, disdainful, cantankerous and scornful; but when you meet her, she is strangely meek, a completely different person altogether!'

How embarrassing! Do they really look upon me as such a dull thing, I wonder? But I am what I am. Her Majesty has also remarked more than once that she had thought I was not the kind of person with whom she could ever relax, but that I have now become closer to her than any of the others. I am so perverse and standoffish. If only I can avoid putting off those for whom I have a genuine regard.

To be pleasant, gentle, calm and self-possessed: this is the basis of good taste and charm in a woman. No matter how amorous or passionate you may be, as long as you are straightforward and refrain from causing others embarrassment, no one will mind. But women who are too vain and act pretentiously, to the extent that they make others feel uncomfortable, will themselves become the object of attention; and

once that happens, people will always find fault with whatever they say or do: whether it be how they enter a room, how they sit down, how they stand up or how they take their leave. Those who end up contradicting themselves and those who disparage their companions are also carefully watched and listened to all the more. As long as you are free from such faults, people will surely refrain from listening to tittle-tattle and will want to show you sympathy, if only for the sake of politeness.

I am of the opinion that when you intentionally cause hurt to another, or indeed if you do ill through mere thoughtless behaviour, you fully deserve to be censured in public. Some people are so good-natured that they can still care for those who despise them, but I myself find it very difficult. Did the Buddha himself in all his compassion ever preach that one should simply ignore those who slander the Three Treasures?⁷⁵ How in this sullied world of ours can those who are hard done by be expected not to reciprocate in kind? And yet people react in very different ways. Some glare at each other face to face and fling abuse in an attempt to gain the upper hand; others hide their true intent and appear quite friendly on the surface – thus are true natures revealed.

There is a woman called Saemon no Naishi who, for some strange reason, took a dislike to me. I heard all sorts of malicious, unfounded rumours about myself. His Majesty was listening to someone reading the *Tale of Genji* aloud. 'She must have read the *Chronicles of Japan!*' he said. 'She seems very learned.' Saemon no Naishi suddenly jumped to conclusions and spread it abroad among the senior courtiers that I was flaunting my learning. She gave me the nickname Lady Chronicle. How very comical! Would I, who hesitate to show my learning even in front of my own servants at home, ever dream of doing so at court?

When my brother, Secretary at the Ministry of Ceremonial,⁷⁶ was a

⁷⁵ The Three Treasures without which the teachings would not survive were the Buddha himself, the Buddhist Law, and the community of monks who preserved that law. Slander of these three treasures was one of the gravest of offences.

⁷⁶ Murasaki's brother was given the title Secretary at the Ministry of War earlier in the diary. When he changed is not known. It is possible that 'Ministry of Ceremonial' (Shikibu) is a simple mistake, which may have arisen because Murasaki's father, who is mentioned later in this same passage, did at one stage hold this post.

young boy learning the Chinese classics, I was in the habit of listening with him and I became unusually proficient at understanding those passages that he found too difficult to grasp and memorize. Father, a most learned man, was always regretting the fact: 'Just my luck!' he would say. 'What a pity she was not born a man!' But then I gradually realized that people were saying 'It's bad enough when a man flaunts his Chinese learning; she will come to no good,' and since then I have avoided writing the simplest character. My handwriting is appalling. And as for those 'classics' or whatever they are that I used to read, I gave them up entirely. Yet still I kept on hearing these remarks; so in the end, worried what people would think if they heard such rumours, I pretended to be incapable of reading even the inscriptions on the screens. Then Her Majesty asked me to read with her here and there from the *Collected Works of Po Chü-i*,⁷⁷ and, because she evinced a desire to know more about such things, to keep it secret we carefully chose times when the other women would not be present, and, from the summer before last, I started giving her informal lessons on the two volumes of 'New Ballads'. I hid this fact from others, as did Her Majesty, but somehow both His Excellency and His Majesty got wind of it and they had some beautiful copies made of various Chinese books, which His Excellency then presented to her. That gossip Saemon no Naishi could never have found out that Her Majesty had actually asked me to study with her, for had she done so, I would never have heard the last of it. Ah, what a prattling, tiresome world it is!

Why should I hesitate to say what I want to? Whatever others might say, I intend to immerse myself in reading sūtras for Amida Buddha. Since I have lost what little attachment I ever had for the pains that life has to offer, you might expect me to become a nun without delay. But even supposing I were to commit myself and turn my back on the world, I am certain there would be moments of irresolution before

⁷⁷ Po Chü-i (772-846) was a T'ang dynasty Chinese poet who had the distinction of being well-known and read in Japan during his own lifetime. In Murasaki's time his work still formed the foundation of a courtier's knowledge of Chinese poetry.

Amida came for me riding on his clouds. And thus I hesitate. I know the time is opportune. If I get much older my eyesight will surely weaken, I shall be unable to read sūtras, and my spirits will fail. It may seem that I am merely going through the motions of being a true believer, but I assure you that now I think of little else. But then someone with as much to atone for as myself may not qualify for salvation; there are so many things that serve to remind one of the transgressions of a former existence.⁷⁸ Everything conspires to make me unhappy.

I want to reveal all to you, the good and the bad, worldly matters and private sorrows, things that I cannot really go on discussing in this letter. But, even though one may be thinking about and describing someone objectionable, should one really go on like this, I wonder? But you must find life irksome at times. I know I do, as you can see. Write to me with your own thoughts – no matter if you have less to say than all my useless prattle, I would love to hear from you. Mind you, if this letter ever got into the wrong hands it would be a disaster – there are ears everywhere.

I have recently torn up and burned most of my old letters and papers. I used the rest to make dolls' houses this last spring and since then no one has written. I feel I should not use new paper, so I am afraid this will look very shabby. It is not through lack of care; quite the opposite.

Please return this as soon as you have read it. There may be parts that are difficult to read and places where I have left out a word or two, but just disregard them and read it through. So you see – I still fret over what others think of me, and, if I had to sum up my position, I would have to admit that I still retain a deep sense of attachment to this world. But what can I do about it?

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⁷⁸ Murasaki may be thinking of the fact that she was born a woman and so might well have to go through at least one further rebirth as a man. In Early Buddhism the female state was a major handicap to enlightenment, although by Murasaki's time in Japan textual 'proof' was available, particularly in the *Lotus Sūtra*, that enlightenment was more or less attainable by women.

Her Majesty went over to the Dedication Hall just before dawn on the eleventh.⁷⁹ Her Excellency was with her in the carriage and the ladies-in-waiting crossed by boat. I went over much later in the evening. They were in the process of distributing lotus petals and intoning the Great Confession exactly as it is performed at Hieizan and the Miidera. The nobles had been amusing themselves painting small white pagodas on as many petals as they could, but now most of them had left and only a few remained.

In the early morning each of the preachers – there were twenty – gave a little congratulatory sermon in honour of Her Majesty; a number of them caused some amusement because they kept on interrupting each other and getting tongue-tied.

When it was all over, the senior courtiers took the boats and rowed out together on to the lake to play music. On the eastern veranda of the Hall in front of the open side door sat Tadanobu, the Master of Her Majesty's Household. He was leaning against the railings of the steps that ran down to the water's edge. When His Excellency went inside to talk to Her Majesty for a moment, Tadanobu took the opportunity to exchange a few words with Lady Saishō; what with him outside the screens and her inside trying not to appear too intimate in front of Her Majesty, it was quite a performance.

A hazy moon emerged. It was refreshing and pleasant to hear His Excellency's sons all in the one boat singing songs in the modern style, but it was amusing to see Masamitsu, Minister of the Treasury, who had got in with them in all seriousness, now sitting there meekly with his back to us, not unnaturally loath to take part. The women behind the screens laughed softly. 'And in the boat he seems to feel his age,' I said.

The Master of the Household must have heard me.

'Hsu Fu and Wen Ch'eng were empty braggarts,' he murmured. I was most impressed.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Here there is a definite break. One theory has it that this passage actually predates the beginning of the present diary. See the Introduction (p. xlv) for further discussion.

⁸⁰ Murasaki has just quoted a line from one of Po Chü-i's New Ballads entitled 'The Ocean Wide', which is concerned with the search for a magic elixir from the fabled mountainous isle of Peng-lai (p.: Hōrai), which was mentioned earlier with reference to a pattern. Tadanobu immediately caps it with the next line from the poem.

'And the duckweed upon the lake, calling the voice of the water, there was also a flute accompanying them which somehow intensified the coolness of the dawn breeze. The most insignificant thing can have its season.'

His Excellency happened to see that Her Majesty had the *Tale of Genji* with her. Out came the usual comments, and then on a piece of paper that held some plums he wrote:

She is known for her tartness
So I am sure that no one seeing her
Could pass without a taste

and he handed it to me.

She is a fruit that no one has yet tasted –
Who then can smack his lips and talk of tartness?⁸¹

'I am shocked,' I replied.

One night as I lay asleep in a room in the corridor, there came the sound of someone tapping at the door. I was so frightened that I kept quiet for the rest of the night. Early next morning I received:

Crying crying all night long
More constant than the water rail
In vain did I tap at your door.

To which I replied:

The water rail was indeed insistent;
But had I opened up, come dawn,
I may well have had bitter regrets.⁸²

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⁸¹ Both of these poems revolve round a pun on the word *suki*, which can mean either 'tart', in reference to the fruit, or 'amorous', in reference to a man or woman.

⁸² The cry of the water rail was thought to sound like tapping on wood, hence the conventional association of this bird with the visit of a lover.

each year, each day for the first three days of the New Year, the senior ladies-in-waiting all accompanied the imperial princes to the Palace for the ceremony of the rice cakes.⁸³ Yorimichi, Commander of the Gate Guards of the Left, carried the boys in his arms, and His Excellency himself passed on the rice cakes, presenting them to His Majesty, who in turn stood facing the eastern doors of the Two-Bay Room and placed the cakes on their heads. The processions there and back were marvellous spectacles. Her Majesty did not attend.

On New Year's Day this year Lady Saishō was in charge of serving the meal. As usual she was most tastefully dressed and looked very attractive. Two maids, Takumi and Hyōgo, were also present; but with her hair done up Lady Saishō really stood out, poor thing.

The woman in charge of the spiced wine, Lady Fuya, was officious and overbearing. The distribution of the ointment was carried out as usual.

On the second day, Her Majesty's formal banquet was cancelled, so the guests for the informal gathering were accommodated as usual by opening up the eastern gallery. The nobles sat facing each other in two rows. Present were Mentor and Major Counsellor Michitsuna, Major Captain of the Right Sanesuke, Master of Her Majesty's Household Tadanobu, Shijō Major Counsellor Kintō, Middle Counsellor Elect Takaie, Gentleman-in-waiting and Middle Counsellor Yukinari, Commander of the Gate Guards of the Left Yorimichi, Adviser Ari-kuni, Minister of the Treasury Masamitsu, Commander of the Military Guards of the Left Sanenari and Adviser Minamoto no Yorisada, Middle Counsellor Minamoto no Toshikata, Commander of the Gate

⁸³ At this point all extant manuscripts carry the following annotation, thought to be by the scholar and poet Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241): 'In Kankō 6 (1099).10.4 the Ichijō Palace burned down. On the 19th the Emperor moved to the Biwa mansion belonging to Minister of the Left Michinaga. On the 25th of the eleventh month the third prince was born, the Empress returning to the Palace on the 26th of the twelfth month.' This means that the word 'Palace' here and in what follows is in fact Michinaga's Biwa mansion. The court did not finally return to the palace at Ichijō until Kankō 7 (1010).11.28. We are now at the beginning of 1010. There are now two princes: Atsuhira and his younger brother Atsunaga, born Kankō 6 (1099).11.25. The annotation says 'third prince' because it is also counting the son born to the Emperor's first consort, Teishi.

Guards of the Right Yasuhira, and Advisers of the Left 'Isunetusa and of the Right Kanetaka sat on the veranda outside at the head of the senior courtiers.

His Excellency picked up the elder prince in his arms and brought him out, making him greet the guests with a word and generally fussing over him. Then, turning to Her Excellency, he said 'Let me take the younger one now.' At this the elder boy grew very jealous and wailed in protest, so that His Excellency had to fuss over him again to placate him. Major Captain Sanesuke and a few others found this very amusing.

Then they all went to pay their respects to His Majesty, who came out to meet them in the Senior Courtier's Hall. There was music and His Excellency started drinking as usual. Foreseeing trouble, I made myself inconspicuous, but to no avail.

'Why!' he cried in a vexed tone. 'Why, when I asked him to attend the concert, did your papa scuttle off like that? Sulking is he?'

Then he pressed me further.

'Give me a poem good enough to compensate!' he said. 'For your father. It's the first day of the Rat. Come on, come on!'

But it would have been out of place for me to have done so.

He did not seem to be very drunk; in fact he looked rather handsome and attractive, standing there in the light of the torches.

'I was worried to see Her Majesty alone without any children for so long,' he said. 'But now they seem to be everywhere! How marvelous!' And with that he went over to take a peek at the princes, who were by now both asleep.

'If there were no small pines in the fields,'⁸⁴ he murmured to himself. Such a fitting reference, I felt; far better than any new poem of mine could have ever been. I was most impressed.

Next day, sometime late in the afternoon, the sky suddenly became very misty, but the eaves were built so close together that all I could see of it was a patch just above the roof of the corridor opposite. I

⁸⁴ An apposite quote from a poem attributed to Mibu no Tadamine: 'If there were no small pines in the fields on the day of the Rat, then what could we pick as a sign of future fortunes?' (Shiishū, Poem 23). It was the custom to go out into the fields and pick young shoots and pine seedlings on the first day of the Rat every year.

appeared to be with Lady Nakatsukasa and I told her how moved I had been by His Excellency's impromptu reference of the previous evening. What a sensitive, intelligent creature she is!

I went home for a short while but then returned for the fiftieth-day celebrations for the Second Prince, which took place on the fifteenth of the first month. I arrived at the Palace just before dawn, but Lady Koshōshō came much later when it was fully light, which was rather embarrassing for her. As usual we shared. We had made our two adjacent rooms into one, using it even when one of us was away at home. When we were both serving at court hanging curtains were all that separated us. His Excellency was amused.

'What happens when you entertain someone the other one does not know?' he said. A tasteless remark. In any case, we are both very close to each other, so there would be no problem.

About midday, we went to attend to Her Majesty. Lady Koshōshō wore a red jacket over robes of white figured silk lined with red, with the usual printed train. I wore a jacket with cuffs of white lined with pale green over robes of crimson lined with purple, and pale green lined with a slightly darker green, together with a printed train; it was all a bit extravagant and so youthful looking that I should have exchanged my dress for hers. Seventeen women from the Palace were also in attendance on Her Majesty. Lady Tachibana was in charge of serving the Second Prince's meal. The women whose job it was to pass in the food were Kodayū and Genshikibu, who sat outside by the veranda, and Lady Koshōshō, who sat inside.

The Emperor and Her Majesty were in their respective curtained daises. They were as resplendent as the morning sun, dazzling in their brilliance. The Emperor wore ordinary court dress with wide trousers drawn in at the ankles. Her Majesty wore her usual unlined crimson dress, robes of crimson lined with purple, pale green lined with darker green, white lined with pale green, and yellow lined with darker yellow. Her mantle was of light purple figured silk, over which she wore an informal outer robe that was white lined with pale green. The pattern and colours were most unusual and up-to-date. Since it was

too exposed out there in front, I made myself inconspicuous in the back. Lady Nakatsukasa, carrying the little prince in her arms, came out from between the two daises and brought him into the southern part of the hall. In no way formal or imposing, she has, however, composure and dignity, and looks intelligent; a born teacher. She wore light purple robes of figured silk, a mantle of plain green, and a jacket with cuffs of white lined with dark red.

That day all the women had done their utmost to dress well, but, as luck would have it, two of them showed a want of taste when it came to the colour combinations at their sleeves, and as they served the food they came into full view of the nobles and senior courtiers. Later, it seemed that Lady Saishō and the others had been mortified; but it was not such a terrible mistake – it was just that the combinations were rather uninspiring. Kodayū had worn an unlined crimson dress with robes of five layers in differing shades of crimson with purple linings. Her jacket was white lined with deep red. It seems that Genshikibu had worn robes of deep crimson lined with purple and a damask mantle of crimson lined again with purple. Was it because her jacket was not of figured silk? But that would be ridiculous.⁸⁵ The slightest mistake in a formal setting should indeed be the subject of censure, but there is no sense in criticizing the material itself.

After the ceremony of touching the rice cake to the children's lips was over and the trays were removed, the gallery blinds were rolled up. Then the women from the Palace moved over to sit in close ranks to the west of the dais, where His Majesty usually sat. Lady Tachibana was there together with a number of assistant handmaids.

As for Her Majesty's women, the younger ones sat out on the veranda and the senior ones sat in the eastern gallery, where the screens on the south side had been replaced by blinds. I went to where Lady Dainagon and Lady Koshōshō were sitting in the narrow space between Her Majesty's dais and the eastern gallery and watched the proceedings from there.

⁸⁵ Murasaki apparently thought that Kodayū's colour sense was at fault but she is unsure as to why Genshikibu was being criticized. Genshikibu was not of a high enough rank to wear the 'forbidden colours' and so could not have worn a mantle in figured silk even if she had wished to.

APPENDIX I GROUND-PLANS AND MAP

so beautifully arranged I cannot find words to describe it. Out on the southern veranda facing north and ranked from west to east sat the nobles. The three Great Ministers of the Left, Right and Centre were there, as were Michitsuna, the Crown Prince's Mentor, Tadanobu, Master of Her Majesty's Household, and Kintō, Shijō Major Counsellor. From where I was sitting I could not see the others below them.

There was music. The senior courtiers sat in the corridor at the south-eastern corner of the wing and those of lower rank sat where they usually did on these occasions, in the garden – men like Kagemasa, Korekaze, Yuki Yoshi and Tōmasa.

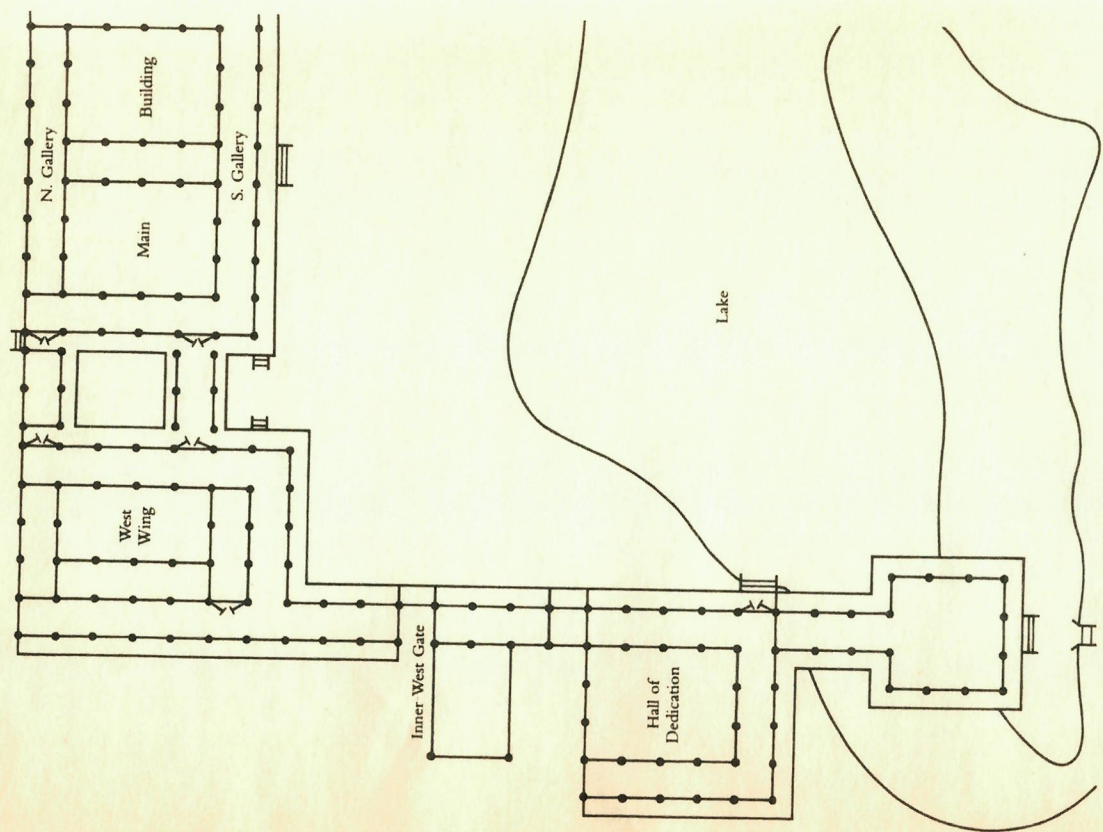
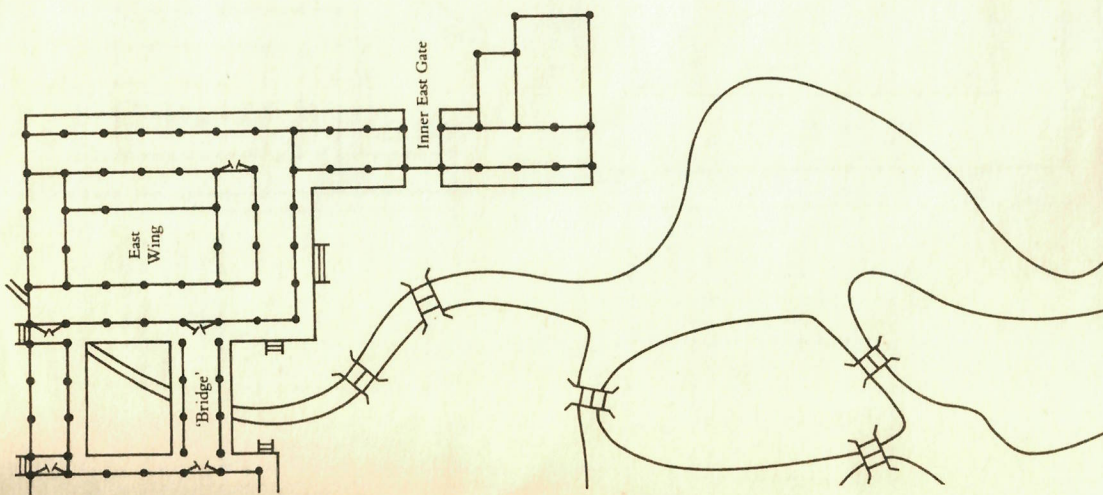
Up in the gallery Kintō marked time with the clappers. Chamberlain Michikata played the *biwa*, ****⁸⁶ the *koto*, and Adviser Tsunefusa the hand pipes. They sang 'Ah how sacred!' 'Mushiroda' and 'These Halls', all to the *sōjō* mode.⁸⁷ For music they chose the last two movements of the 'Dance of the Kalavinka Bird'. Down in the garden flutes were playing in accompaniment. The one who made a mistake in marking time for the songs and who was scolded for it was the Governor of Ise. The Minister of the Right, Akimitsu, became somewhat over-enthusiastic about the *koto* playing and started to play pranks which ended up with his making a dreadful fool of himself.⁸⁸ We all shuddered to watch. I saw His Excellency present the Emperor with a box containing the famous flute Hafutatsu.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ There is a lacuna at this point in the text and one can only guess at who is meant.

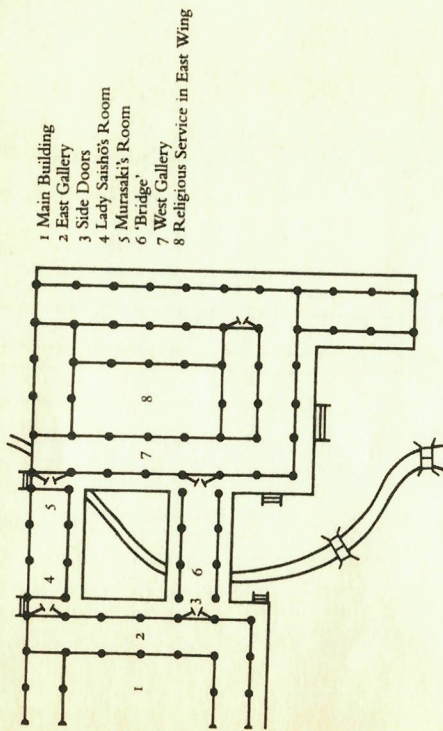
⁸⁷ The *sōjō* mode, with a scale of g a b d e, was the third of the six basic *gagaku* modes. The three songs are *saihana*, old folk songs incorporated into court music.

⁸⁸ Michinaga's diary for this day reads: 'Showers. In the evening the sky cleared and the moon was bright. While the music was being played the guards provided torches, but the flares in the garden were extinguished so that we could see the moon. When it was all over we went inside. Minister of the Right Akimitsu caught sight of the Emperor's meal and tried to pick up a bowl and some food which was piled in between the ornamental cranes. He tipped the whole tray over. Everyone was most shocked. The cranes should not have been touched! What a blunderer! How stupid of him!'

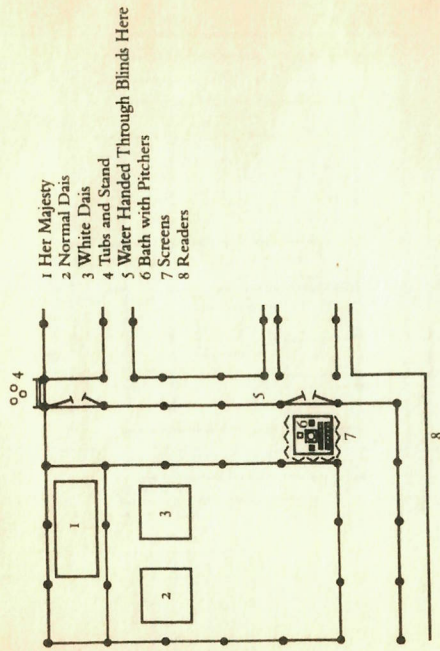
⁸⁹ This was the name of a famous flute that Michinaga had been given just a few days previously by Retired Emperor Kazan. The significance of the name ('two teeth?') is not known, but prized instruments and utensils were often given nicknames that reflected some aspect of their origin.



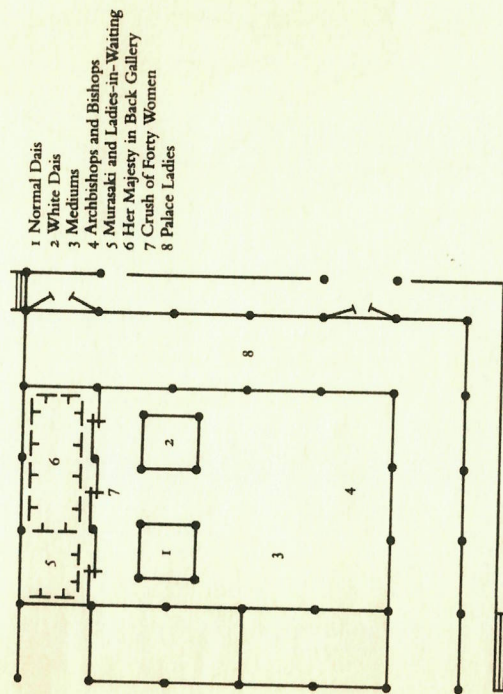
GROUNDPLAN 2
Tsuchimikado Mansion - Detail



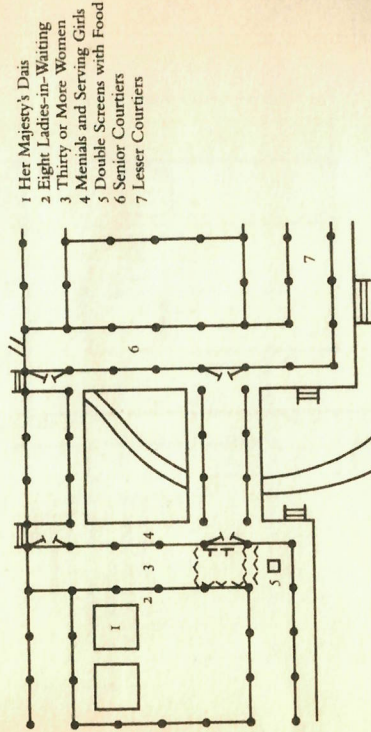
GROUNDPLAN 4
The First Bath



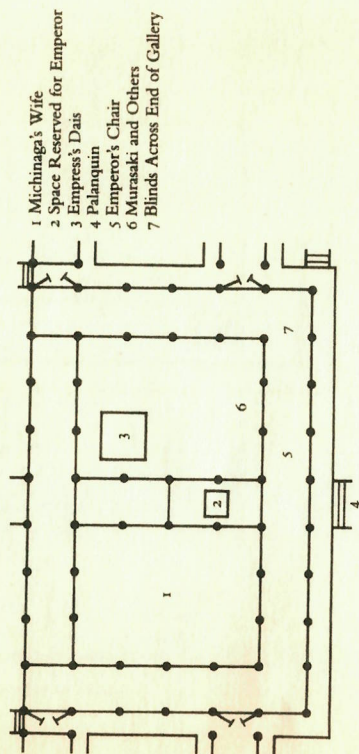
GROUNDPLAN 3
Birth of Atsuhira



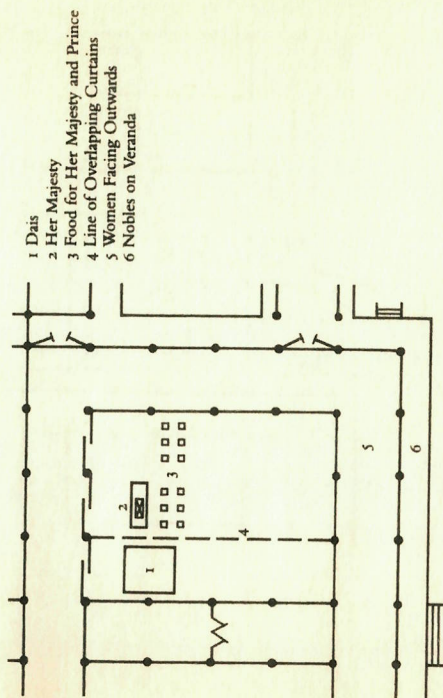
GROUNDPLAN 5
Fifth-Day Celebrations



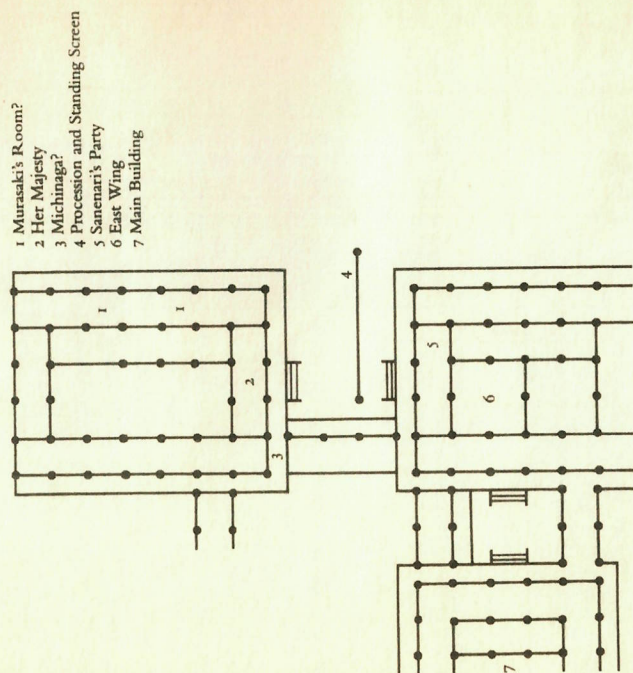
GROUNDPLAN 6
The Imperial Visit



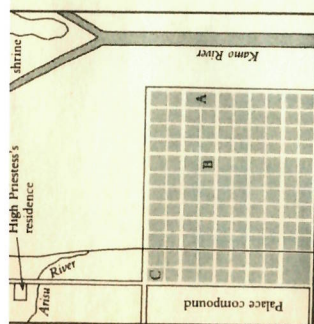
GROUNDPLAN 7
Fiftieth-Day Celebrations



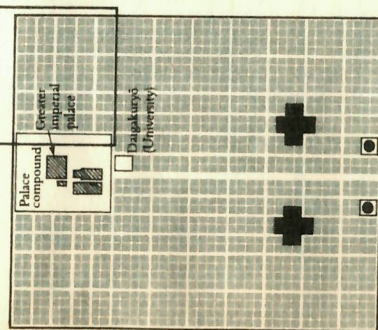
GROUNDPLAN 8
Ichijō Palace



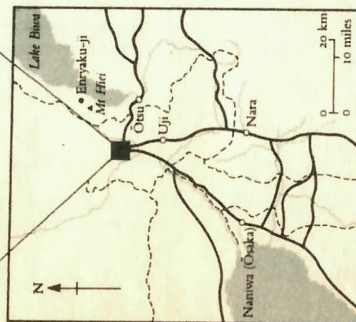
12. Biwa mansion
C. Ichijō mansion



Temples
Markets
Palace and government buildings



Heian-kyō
Roads



The capital city in Heian Japan

APPENDIX 2 ADDITIONAL SOURCES

In part because the birth of Prince Atsuhira was such an important event for Michinaga and his branch of the Fujiwara family, there are a number of extant records in Sino-Japanese that cover similar ground to Murasaki's diary. Not only do they provide a background of factual details which often help us to understand her diary correctly, but they also reveal the different perspective that men writing in Sino-Japanese and women writing in pure Japanese brought to their description of events at court. Translated here are a few relevant sections from two of the three anonymous descriptions, *Fuchiki A* and *B*, taken from a manuscript in the Imperial Library entitled *Gosanki bunri* ('Classified Records of Imperial Births'), and from Fujiwara no Sanesuke's diary the *Shōyūki*. Except for *Fuchiki B* these extracts cover the main events during the ninth month of 1008.

(a) Fuchiki A

(Probably of much later provenance and influenced by Murasaki's diary)

Kankō 5 (1008).8.11. The furnishings for Her Majesty's lying-in were brought over from the Palace. One dais made of white wood with damask curtains and five supports each painted white; three pairs of five-foot screens and three pairs of four-foot screens made of white damask backed with black, and black and white design on the borders, and the usual gold fittings; three pairs of four-foot curtain frames and two pairs of three-foot frames with damask curtains; thirteen thick mats with borders of white damask; everything else had damask edging too; one extra cover edged with figured silk. Everything packed in black lacquer boxes and containers.

9.11. Fair. Her Majesty gave birth to a son in the Tsuchimikado mansion about midday. Yorisada arrived outside the Palace gates and had a Chamberlain announce the good news to the Emperor. Then he was ordered to present the sword to Her Majesty. He returned to the mansion, stood outside the