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JAPN 305: Intro to Japanese
Culture and Civilization

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Q1: Literature, like all culture mediums, is like a window one can look through to observe past and current distinctions of humanity, whether fictional or in line with historical factuality.

Japanese literature that focused on the life and times of the Kamakura and Heian periods is no different, in that it provides valuable insight into cultural norms, the prescribe attitudes, and the ethos that typified its people and their way of thinking.

At the start of the *Tale of Heike*'s 11th chapter, almost an entire paragraph is dedicated to listing the names of many warriors that participated in the battle of Yashima. One such as myself would not have expected that so much attention and detail would have been given to the listing of names, but for these representatives of the Japanese noble and warrior classes, specifically in this case name and family ties, were paramount in determining one's rank on the battlefield. To add further, when paying excessive attention to word order, one can pick up on the fact that Japanese name order, unlike its English counterpart, places one's emphasis on family name, with one's given name being subordinated. Examples include Ise no Yoshimori (Yoshimori Ise) and Taira no Kiyomune. To add further, this point is made especially clear when Moritsugi Etchū asked for the name of the opposing forces commander, to which a retainer replied, "It's Lord Yoshitsune, a descendent of Emperor Seiwa in the tenth generation and a younger brother of Yoritomo, the Kamakura Lord!" Family ties were given special emphasis in this example, considering that legitimate ties one may have had with an Emperor of Japan were superior status markers among nobility. This work may be especially attractive to readers of Japanese literature due to its historically factual portrayal of hierarchal Japanese society during the transition between the Heian and Kamakura period, and the detail it places on family status.

Another interesting Japanese literary artifact written sometime during the Kamakura period is *The Lady Who Loved Insects*, due to its attention to cultural taboos and social norms. One example from this reading that's laden with cultural nuance is the exchange between the horse captain and the lady who loved insects. The captain's attempt to attract the woman's attention through the short written poem was the kind of flattering courtship behavior expected of those with high status from this time, but what gives this story a peculiar flavor is its satirical treatment of these norms, as evidenced by her purposeful choice to use the masculine writing script Katakana, and her rather contemptuous reply to his poem, "By this you know the strangeness of my mood. Had you not called me *kawamushi*, I would not have replied." It was this kind of cunning insight into cultural norms of the time and the ability to critique their arbitrary value that has given this tale an attractive, timeless quality.

One work that deviates from the historically realistic trends of the previous two works but that encapsulates aesthetic values that typify the Heian period is the Tale of the Bamboo Cutter. One way in which this is the case is its appeal to the Japanese affinity of fleeting subjects. The fact that the central character in this story, Princess Kaguya, has only a limited time to remain on earth, is arguably one of the primary reasons why she is valued so highly as a bride-to-be by her suitors, and why she was seen as such a beauty (although this particular fact is upon reflection only apparent to the reader thus far in the story). This is evidenced by the amount of trouble that Prince Kuramochi went through to craft the counterfeit jeweled branch of Penglai (e.g. hiding out for 1000 days, promising artisans officials posts). For men with the kind of wealth and influence that both Prince Kuramochi and the Emperor had, it is quite plausible that they viewed princess Kaguya as a precious gem far more valuable than any fabled item she could have asked

for in return, as was shown in the persistent, lecherous behavior of the emperor in Studio Ghibli's animated portrayal of the same story. Another similar example of this same kind of affinity is Prince Genji's impulsive lust for Murasaki Shikibu, and the many women that came before and after her. As pointed out by Chikaomi Takahashi during his lecture on the Tale of Genji, all of the relationships that Genji created with women were, in essence, short-lived. Not only this, but as can be inferred from information provided by this same lecture, Prince Genji's lust for Murasaki Shikibu was originally inspired by his former affair with Lady Fujitsubō, one that Prince Genji presumably wished to reexperience through Murasaki Shikibu. This affinity for the fleeting is one of many distinctly Japanese esthetic values that remains attractive to contemporary readers, as evidenced by the continuation of this tradition within Japanese writing up to the present day.