

Mount Hiei and the *Tale of Genji*

The *Tale of Genji* is the world's oldest extant novel, written in the eleventh century. It concentrates on the romantic life of Genji, the son of an emperor, and describes the customs of aristocratic life at that time. Murasaki Shikibu (973? –1014?), author of the *Tale of Genji*, was a contemporary of the Mount Hiei monk Genshin (942–1017), and themes from the Lotus Sutra, Mount Hiei, and its monks appear frequently in the novel. Genshin's fame was widespread among the court and aristocracy of the time, and the fifty-third chapter of the *Tale of Genji*, "Writing Practice," gives a central role to a Yokawa monk who may well have been modeled after Genshin.

Ukibune, the main character of the final Uji chapters, torn between her love for two men, Kaoru and Niou-miya, attempts to commit suicide by throwing herself into the Uji River. Drifting and unconscious, her body comes to rest in the gnarled roots of a great tree on the riverbank. The Yokawa monk discovers her and saves her by reciting magical prayers. Later, at her own request, Ukibune takes the tonsure under his guidance.

At the beginning of the 54th and final chapter of the *Tale of Genji*, "The Floating Bridge of Dreams," Kaoru, the son of Genji, has constantly been making offerings of Buddhist sutras and Buddha images during frequent visits to the Konpon Chudo (Central Hall) of Enryakuji. In this chapter he again visits the Konpon Chudo.

On the next day, unable to forget Ukibune, he goes to see the Yokawa monk and laments:

I traveled along this path
thinking it would take me
to the teacher of the Law,
but instead I found myself lost
on a path of love.

Other sections of the *Tale of Genji* also mention Mount Hiei. In Chapter 10, "The Green Branch," Fujitsubo, Genji's paramour, accompanies monks of Mount Hiei attending the "Eight Lectures of the Lotus Sutra" to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the death of Genji's father, Emperor Kiritsubo. On that occasion, Fujitsubo, along with many others, takes the tonsure and is ordained by the Tendai Abbot. Her uncle, a Yokawa monk, cuts off her hair in the tonsure ceremony.