



## The Chrysanthemum Spirit

*The Chrysanthemum Spirit* (*Kiku no sei monogatari*), also known as *Lady Kazashi* or, literally, *The Girl with the Flower in Her Hair* (*Kazashi no himegimi*), recounts the love affair of a young lady whose intense longing for the quintessential autumn flower conjures up its manifestation in the form of a dashing courtier. Although the romance between the two ends tragically, the tale turns felicitous when a daughter born to the couple becomes an imperial consort and gives birth to descendants worthy of the Chrysanthemum Throne. The text, which was probably written in the middle to late Muromachi period (1337–1573), belongs to a long tradition of flower-spirit stories in East Asia, including ones of impregnation, but offers a new twist in its sustained treatment of a flower manifestation that is gendered male.<sup>1</sup> In the process, it provides a condensed lesson on life, love, and the poetic tradition.

A rich history of chrysanthemum symbolism structures the story and derives from ancient courtly associations established well before the flower became the official emblem of the imperial house in the nineteenth century. Legends that the chrysanthemum could bestow longevity on those who drink tea and wine made with its infusions, or water mingled with dew from its petals, originated on the continent and inspired the annual Chrysanthemum Festival on the ninth day of the ninth month in China and Japan. This led to associations of the chrysanthemum with the

The translation and illustrations are from the *Kiku no sei monogatari* picture scroll (late Muromachi period) in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums, typeset and annotated in Ichiko Teiji et al., eds., *Muromachi monogatari shū jō*, Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai 54 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989), 291–309.

1. Stories in the poetic commentaries *Kokin wakashū sanjō shō* (*Third Avenue Notes on Kokin wakashū*) and *Rōichū* (*Commentary on Wakan rōishū*) include those of women who become pregnant after encounters with orchids, and in “The Cherry Tree Lover,” a tale in *Ima monogatari* (*Tales of the Present*, ca. 1240), a lady famously uncovers her lover’s floral identity when she stitches a thread to his sleeve, only to find that it has been sewn to a cherry in her garden. See Tokuda Kazuo, *Kazashi no himegimi*, in *Otogizōshi jiten* (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 2002), 198–99.

longevity of the imperial line, as witnessed in the seventeen poems on the chrysanthemum in honor of Empress Shōshi (988–1074) and her imperial offspring in *Eiga monogatari* (*Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, eleventh century). Japanese court poetry also celebrated the white blossom’s transformation to purple upon the first frost, and likened its fading to the vicissitudes of love. *The Chrysanthemum Spirit* artfully employs many of these tropes, along with puns on dewdrops; a description of the man’s purple robe in autumn, as if alluding to the flower’s famous shifting of color; and his “wilted” appearance on the eve of being plucked. Even the young woman’s name, Lady Kazashi, refers to flowers placed in the hair for adornment or in the headdresses of court dancers as a part of courtly spectacle and ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

The small scroll in which this version of the story is recorded engages the reader with nineteen colorful paintings and vibrant calligraphic texts while functioning as something of a botanical primer in visual form.<sup>3</sup> The first painting in the scroll depicts eleven varieties of autumnal flowers, including lantern plants with their papery orange seed covers, bush clover, pampas grass, pinks, thoroughworts, and several varieties of mums. The plants’ charmingly anthropomorphized scale echoes the story’s theme, yet recalls flower-arranging manuals newly popular in the Muromachi period. As both flower and pollinator, the personified chrysanthemum works didactically as well. It provokes questions about the “birds and the bees,” as when the flower-man informs the lady that he has sown “a seedling in her womb,” or in a conspicuous birthing scene included among the paintings in the scroll. *The Chrysanthemum Spirit* thus addresses readers on multiple levels, but first and foremost transforms a classical poetic trope on longevity into a spirited narrative tinged with the poignancy of life’s fleeting nature.



Long ago, in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue, there lived a man of great refinement known as the Minamoto Middle Counselor. His wife was the daughter of the Lord

2. When Genji dances “Waves of the Blue Sea” before the emperor in the “Beneath the Autumn Leaves” chapter of *The Tale of Genji* (early eleventh century), for example, a courtier places chrysanthemums in his headdress to match his radiant face, creating an alignment among Genji, the chrysanthemum, and sovereignty that echoes the themes of *The Chrysanthemum Spirit*. *Kazashi no himegimi* is an alternative title for this story in its other versions, but the title of the Harvard text seems to be the oldest, taken from the original label affixed to the mounting of the scroll.

3. The scroll in the Harvard Art Museums measures 17.2 centimeters (6¾ in.) in height and 748.7 centimeters (294¾ in.) in length, small enough to fit comfortably in one’s hands and short enough to be read in one sitting. See Melissa McCormick, *Tosa Mitsunobu and the Small Scroll in Medieval Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).





Minister. They had one daughter, whose name was Lady Kazashi. She was a sight to behold with her lovely cascade of hair, beautiful brow, and shapely lips. In the spring, she spent her waking hours beneath the blossoming branches, and in the autumn, she spent her nights beneath the moon. She was forever composing poems and reciting verses on all sorts of flowers and grasses.

Above all, she adored the chrysanthemum. And during the ninth month, the “month of long nights,” she found it nearly impossible to part from her garden. Indeed, this is how she spent the passing years.

Toward the end of autumn in her fourteenth year, the young lady felt an overwhelming sadness over the fading of the chrysanthemum flowers. In this melancholy state, she dozed off and beheld the dim outline of a man, no more than twenty years old, in a formal cap. He wore a pale-lavender hunting cloak and had a lightly powdered face, blackened teeth, and thickly drawn brows. The radiant bloom of



Lady Kazashi, accompanied by her attendant, visits her beloved chrysanthemums. (From *Kiku no sei monogatari*, courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums)

elegance about him was enough to make her think, “So this is what the famous Lord Narihira and the Shining Genji must have been like!”<sup>4</sup> He moved in close to embrace her. Was this dream or reality? The young lady no longer knew. As she got up with a start, the man held fast to her sleeve, saying, “Have you not one dewdrop of feeling for me?” He spoke tearfully, pouring out his heart, so that even the young lady could not remain unmoved.

Now deep in the night with their sashes undone, the man was elated. They talked until dawn about the events of the past and their future yet to come. When it became time to untangle their layered robes, he faced the young lady and tearfully pledged, “I will return another night”:

4. Ariwara no Narihira (825–880) was a poet and the purported protagonist of *The Tales of Ise* (ca. tenth century). Like Genji of *The Tale of Genji*, he came to be recalled as a quintessential romantic hero.





A handsome stranger visits Lady Kazashi in the night. (From *Kiku no sei monogatari*, courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums)

<i>uki koto wo</i>	Enduring the pain of parting
<i>shinobu ga moto no</i>	beneath the grasses of remembrance,
<i>asatsuyu no</i>	the morning dew
<i>okiwakarenan</i>	forming and then leaving
<i>koto zo kanashiki</i>	is sorrowful indeed.

To which the young lady promptly replied:

<i>sue made to</i>	“Until the end of time”—
<i>chigiri oku koso</i>	to promise such love
<i>hakanakere</i>	seems fleeting indeed,
<i>shinobu ga moto no</i>	when I hear of the dew on chrysanthemums
<i>tsuyu to kiku yori</i>	beneath the grasses of remembrance. <sup>5</sup>

Having exchanged verses, the mysterious visitor left. He seemed to approach the chrysanthemums at the brushwood fence, whereupon he vanished without a trace.

The young lady felt increasingly unsettled, but there was no one reliable in whom she could confide. Despite her best efforts to overcome it, their bond formed on that first encounter proved far from shallow, and they continued to meet in secret. Night

5. In her response, the young lady posits that it is the man's vow as much as the dew that is unreliable. There is a pun on the word *kiku*, which means both “to hear” and “chrysanthemum.”



The handsome stranger vanishes beside a bed of chrysanthemums. (From *Kiku no sei monogatari*, courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums)

after night they spent, until one day, the young lady ventured, “What is it that you conceal from me even now? Come, let me know your name.” Seemingly flustered, the man replied, “In these parts, I am known as the Lesser Captain. In time, you will come to understand.” Then he departed.

Around that time, it was announced that there would be a flower display at the palace. Various courtiers were summoned, and the young lady's father, the Middle Counselor, attended as well. Calling the Middle Counselor before him, the emperor said, “Bring me chrysanthemum flowers the likes of which are rarely seen in this world.” The Middle Counselor, powerless to refuse an imperial command, replied that he would bring the chrysanthemums and returned home.

Toward the evening of the same day, the Lesser Captain, looking unusually withered, came to the west wing of the young lady's residence. He spoke on and on about the ephemeral things of this world and then burst into tears. Because he appeared so inexplicably anguished, the young lady was moved to ask, “What is tormenting you so? Open your heart and tell me everything.” She implored him throughout the night, until he responded, “Why bother keeping anything from you now? Even my visits will end today. How sad to realize that what I thought should have endured for many lives to come has turned to naught!” Silently he wept. “How can this be?” exclaimed the young lady. “I have relied on you so completely; what will





The Middle Counselor presents his chrysanthemums at the palace. (From *Kiku no sei monogatari*, courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums)

become of me now? How can you say such things? You must take me with you, whether to the end of the fields or deep into the mountains!" There was an unrestrained sadness in her voice. "It is not as I would have wanted . . .," said the Lesser Captain, who had run out of words.

A while later, the Lesser Captain choked back his tears and said, "I shall swiftly take my leave. Do not forget. Do not forget. As for me, how could I ever let the memory of your affections disappear?" Having said this, he cut off a side lock, pressed it into a delicate paper embellished with background designs, and wrapped it up. "Whenever you think of me, look upon this," he said, presenting it to the young lady. "And in the womb, I have left behind a seedling that you should raise ever so carefully. May the child remind you of me." With these words he departed, weeping as he went. The young lady moved quietly to the edge of the blinds to see him off, thinking that he might pause at the garden's brushwood fence. But she could see nothing.

And so night turned into dawn. The Middle Counselor presented the chrysanthemums to the emperor, who could not take his eyes off them.

The young lady waited until evening, but the Lesser Captain never reappeared, not even in her dreams. Oh, how woeful! Although the moon shone through the treetops against the clear midnight sky, tears clouded her heart. She spent night after

long sleepless night, until one day she took out the keepsake the man had instructed her to use as a memento. Overwhelmed with emotion, she opened it and discovered a single poem:

<i>nioi wo ba</i>	The fragrance
<i>kimi ga tamoto ni</i>	on your sleeves
<i>nokoshiokite</i>	I left behind—
<i>ada ni utsurou</i>	how it withers in vain,
<i>kiku no hana kana</i>	the chrysanthemum flower!

What she had taken to be a lock of his black hair had all along been a wilted chrysanthemum flower. She felt more unsettled than ever, and thought to herself, "Then even the leaves of verse left behind were composed by none other than the spirit of the chrysanthemum."

Making her way into a garden of white chrysanthemums, she cried, "The poet wrote that 'the blossoms may scatter, but the roots will never die,'<sup>6</sup> and thus your fate is known. Even if you are a chrysanthemum spirit, I beseech you to exchange with me your leaves of verse just once more." She appeared at her wits end, and the reason was all too clear. "If there had been no flower-gathering at the palace, then I would have no such despair. Whatever the case may be, I am not long for this world." To even contemplate such thoughts was excruciating.

"Hurry, hurry, come to me, Lesser Captain! In whose care will you leave me? Oh, where could you be? The sadness of our mortal lives! Although you said again and again that this was the end, I assumed you were just talking about the ordinary fleetingness of the world. How can this be? Oh, how wretched! Am I dreaming or awake?" She went on and on, bewildered, sinking to the ground in despair. He had left her with only instructions never to forget. Now it was clear that those had indeed been his final parting words. Distraught, she continued, "Alas, I will give my

6. This is a slightly garbled reference to poem 268 in *Kokin wakashū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*, ca. 905), attributed to Ariwara no Narihira. The headnote reads, "A poem sent attached to chrysanthemums for a person's garden":

<i>ueshi ueba</i>	If firmly planted,
<i>aki naki toki ya</i>	only without autumn
<i>sakazaran</i>	will it fail to bloom;
<i>hana koso chirame</i>	the blossoms may scatter,
<i>ne sae kareme ya</i>	but the roots will never die.

The poem is the first of thirteen on the chrysanthemum in the Autumn section of *Kokin wakashū*. It also appears in section 163 of *Yamato monogatari* (*The Tales of Yamato*, tenth century) and in section 51 of *Ise monogatari* (*The Tales of Ise*, ca. tenth century).





The spirit medium divines. (From *Kiku no sei monogatari*, courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums)

life for that fragile vow! Let us see each other once more!" She was in a certain maternal condition and grieved ceaselessly the entire time. How sad her nurse must have been to see the young lady so distressed.

After the nurse told the young lady's mother the state of things, she and the Middle Counselor were beside themselves. They tried to help in whatever way they could, but to no avail.

The nurse sought the help of a spirit medium, saying, "My young lady, just fifteen years of age, has been ill ever since the evening of the last day of the ninth month. Just what should we do? Please perform a divination."

The spirit master spoke: "The divination you ask for is difficult to read. Could she perhaps be in a certain condition? However viewed, the signs suggest peril."<sup>7</sup> The nurse rushed back home with an eerie feeling and relayed all of this to the young lady's mother. The lady responded, "I, too, suspected that she might be in that way, but naturally I hesitated to speak up, assuming that you would know of such a thing. What if they meet again? Go question her thoroughly."

7. The diviner employs bundles of bamboo sticks laid out for the *bokuzei* method of divination based on the *Yijing*. The painting in the scroll clearly shows six bundles of three sticks arranged in a pattern on the ground.

Heeding her words, the nurse headed for the adjacent quarters and went straight to the young lady's side. "By the looks of you," she said, "you do not seem at all like your usual self. There must be something you are concealing from me." Continuing in a delicate whisper, she said, "Please, open up your heart." The young lady knew that it should remain a secret, but she longed to talk about it. Although deeply embarrassed, she recounted the affair from beginning to end, sparing no detail. The nurse was astonished.

The nurse and the young lady's mother approached the Middle Counselor to inform him of the situation. "This is an unthinkable disgrace!" he responded. "And just when I had been consumed with arranging her entry into court service! I have no desire to abandon that now," he said, and dropped the matter.

The days and months slowly passed, and the young lady grew ever weaker and more helpless. Then, with her own nurse and numerous ladies attending to the delivery, she bore a beautiful baby girl. The Middle Counselor and his wife felt boundless affection for the child. And yet the young lady seemed to be nearing the end.

The Middle Counselor and his wife were beside themselves with grief. The young lady had her mother and father brought near, and she tearfully addressed them, saying, "Take that truism to heart, that all living things must one day vanish, and do not lament my passing. What matters most is the little girl whom I leave behind in this world. Although I myself will have passed away, please do not forget her. I am overcome with regret that I must precede my mother and father on this journey. How wretched you must think me. It is excruciating indeed to leave behind so many people, but most of all my mother and father." Uttering these final words, she faded with the morning dew. The Middle Counselor and his wife were at a complete loss. The nurse, immersed in grief, swiftly took the tonsure. Such a profoundly moving thing is difficult to put into words.

Since they could not simply leave her as she was, they tearfully sent her remains to the moor, where the smoke from her pyre evoked the evanescence of this world. When they had completed her funerary rites, they turned their attention to the granddaughter and lavished her with care. With each passing year, she became more and more the living image of her mother. Cherishing her, they appointed a wealth of young women to her service. The days and months passed, and at the age of seven she donned her first trousers.<sup>8</sup>

8. She performed the *hakama gi* (donning of the trousers), a rite that marked the passage from toddler to young girl in which a child was first dressed in split, pleated trousers.





Lady Kazashi bears a child. (From *Kiku no sei monogatari*, courtesy of the Harvard Art Museums)

The years went by, and before they knew it, the girl turned thirteen. Her looks were exquisite. "Surely she would surpass the likes of Yang Guifei of Tang, Lady Li of Han, or, in our land, Princess Sotoori and Ono no Komachi!" the people all exclaimed.<sup>9</sup> Before long, word of her beauty had reached the ears of the emperor. By his order, she was made a consort. The Middle Counselor and his wife were overjoyed.

9. Yang Guifei (719–756), Lady Li (Li Furen; second century B.C.E.), Sotoorihime (Princess Sotoori; fifth century), and Ono no Komachi (ca. 825–ca. 900) were famous beauties of China and Japan. In particular, Sotoorihime is described in *Nihon shoki* (*The Chronicles of Japan*, 720) as having been so brilliant that her beauty shone through her clothes like light.

Rumor had it that the emperor loved her above all others. His feelings for her grew only deeper, and before long a prince and a princess were born in quick succession. Everyone remarked how truly fortunate this was.

Because this story is so unusual, I have recorded it for posterity.

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION BY MELISSA MCCORMICK



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COVER IMAGE: Having transformed into a demon, a *tanuki* runs away from a dog that has seen through its disguise. Detail from *Jūnirui kassen* (*The War of the Twelve Animals*), seventeenth century. (Photo courtesy of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, and the HUMI Project, Keiō University. © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, and the HUMI Project, Keiō University. All rights reserved)

COVER DESIGN: Milenda Nan Ok Lee

For Tokuda Kazuo, a friend and an inspiration to us all

一樹の蔭一河の流れも他生の縁

*ichiju no kage ichiga no nagare mo tashō no en*