

THE MISOGYNISTIC CULTURE OF HEIAN JAPAN

By

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Abstract

The Heian era of Japan is a period characterized by a court society enamored with all things beautiful and poetic. Within that society, court men and women produced many great, long-lasting works of art, not the least of which were works of poetry and literature. Some of the most famous of these literary and poetic pieces were authored by women of the court, such as *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu and *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon. Considering the great accomplishments of these women, one might be lead to believe that these women enjoyed lives of respect and opportunity, however; this could not be further from the truth. Women of the Heian era lived their lives from a position of inferiority with no chance at achievements at the level of men. In my paper, I argue that, through the writings of court men and women of the Heian era, an intrinsic misogyny within the culture is revealed.

The Heian period in Japan was a period characterized by the agonizingly elegant and tremendously dramatic lives of the elite class. In a period where belonging to court society was the expectation of the wealthy and the bane of the poor's existence, social status meant everything, and the higher one could climb within that hierarchy, the greater prestige one could bring upon his or her family. Climbing that hierarchy, however, was by no means a small task. As with most societies, there were specific barriers set up to prevent certain groups of people from ever gaining meaningful power or sway within society. Of the many barriers in place, perhaps the most egregious of those were the barriers in place for women.

The capital city during the Heian era was the period's namesake, Heian-kyō. Heian-kyō was, on the surface, ruled by various emperors over the course of almost four hundred years, however; in reality, the true seat of power was with the Fujiwara clan. In *Japan: Its History and Culture*, W. Scott Morton explains how the Fujiwara were able to maintain political control without claiming the title of emperor:

But the primary means used by the Fujiwara to maintain their political dominance was one which the Soga has used to a lesser degree before them, namely constant intermarriage with the imperial house. The Fujiwara arranged for their daughters, wherever possible, to become the wives or concubines of the successive emperors. Since a Fujiwara was thus usually the father-in-law of the reigning sovereign, he was able, whether officially or unofficially, to exert an enormous influence upon affairs. (37)

As evidenced by this quote, one aspect of Heian court women's status is clear: women were viewed as a means to achieve political control. Daughters were seen as advantageous because the father could use them to become closer to the emperor. Meanwhile, despite the fact that the consort herself was closer to the emperor than anyone, she was unable to exert any real power in politics. The imperial government was structured around the emperor, a male sovereign, and Heian era women were excluded from both the rule and the bureaucracy (Sanae and Watanabe 15-16).

During the Heian period, which lasted from approximately 794 to 1185, men were expected to know how to write using Chinese characters. It was, as put by Morton, “no longer acceptable for nobles and courtiers to hand over to scribes the task of writing; it was expected that a man of position would be able to write in calligraphy that was aesthetic and a style that was civilized and elegant” (39). That same expectation, however, did not apply to women. In fact, women were discouraged from the study of Chinese, and instead were directed to the study of *kana*. *Kana* is a type of writing system that uses “simplified symbols derived from Chinese to stand for Japanese sounds” (Morton 39). Within their confinement to the “woman’s hand,” they composed poems and, on a larger scale, fictional narratives called *tsukuri monogatari*. One of the most famous examples of these *tsukuri monogatari* is *Genji Monogatari* or *The Tale of Genji*. In the present day, it is one of the oldest, most appreciated novels in the world; however, at the time of its release, the *tsukuri monogatari* genre was being degraded by men (Tyler xii). As stated by Doris G. Bargen in her book, *A Woman’s Weapon*, “No matter how exciting contemporary Heian readers may have found these products of imagination, the Confucian notion that prose fiction was synonymous with lies demoted women’s *tsukuri monogatari* to the lower rungs of a male-constructed artistic ladder” (xv).

Court women were excluded from the rule, the bureaucracy, and the study of Chinese characters. In their confined knowledge of what was known as the “woman’s hand,” the barriers to accomplishments at the level of men were almost impossible to surmount—and this is just for court women. Women outside of court society could not read or write at all, which not only compounded their inability to achieve at the level of men, it depleted their ability to express themselves in any long-lasting way (“Shadows of Transgression 342). In this lack of writings by marginalized women and confinement to *kana* by court women, the barriers to entry for women

of the Heian era become more apparent. The writings that do exist by women of the time, however, reveal to a much greater extent the impediments to success women faced. The intrinsic, deep-seated misogyny of Heian culture is evidenced by the ways in which women were written about—by men and other women—and ultimately, the ways in which women wrote about themselves.

In the Heian era, men's writings about women are written from a position of superiority, and this notion bleeds into their discourse. Their writings involving women often give the impression of belittlement, regardless of the status of the women. In writing about *asobi*, female entertainers who provided sex as well as song and dance, Oe no Yunitoki provides a description of the women as temptresses who entice men with their sexuality:

The younger women make up their faces with rouge and powder and entice men's hearts with songs and smiles, while the older women carry the parasols and pole the boats. If their husbands censure them, it is because their lovers are too few, and their parents' only wish is that their daughters are fortunate enough to have many customers. This has become the common practice, although no human feeling is involved. Truly, using the term "vagabond" to designate the women takes reality and makes it into their name.

Ah! Although it is improper to spend the night behind emerald curtains in their crimson boudoirs, a tryst in a boat on the waves is the thrill of a lifetime. Every time one travels this road, one sees such things. We must sigh in regret! Why don't we take our hearts that are so fond of making love and embark upon the road to loving wisdom? ("Shadows of Transgression" 334)

Oe no Yunitoki is very conflicted in his depiction of the *asobi*. He both condemns the *asobi* practices as having "no human feeling involved" and praises them as "the thrill of a lifetime." He is severe in his criticism of their lifestyle and goes so far as to liken them to criminals, but he still expresses the desire to partake in what they're selling. Essentially, he finds fault in these women for luring him and other men into their "crimson boudoirs," but finds no serious fault in the men who are seduced. It is not their fault for sleeping with these women; it is the fault of the *asobi* for tempting them. It is as if the men in this situation have no agency. Oe no Yunitoki has no respect

for these women as people but will admit to the appeal of using them for his own gratification. These women are lowly and beneath him and he must make that known before revealing any hint of enticement.

It also should be noted that if this description of *asobi* is an accurate one, apart from the bias of Oe no Yukitoki, then the lives of the *asobi* were considerably taxing, both emotionally and physically. The idea that the husband of an *asobi* would push his own wife to sleep with as many men as possible, or that the parents of an *asobi* would also want that for their daughter, suggests that these women were largely valued for their profit potential. Parents and husbands typically share the closest relationships possible with a woman, and if those people are interested in making money at the possible expense of their daughter or wife, then an *asobi* in Heian era Japan truly lacked any real support system or genuine relationships. The *Wamyōshō*, a dictionary of terms compiled from 931 to 938 that contains categorizations of people and professions, classifies the *asobi* under the category of “beggars and thieves”—the lowest level under “people” (*Selling Songs and Smiles* 132). Whether the low regard for these women contributed to their remarkably low classification or vice-versa, it is clear that the *asobi* were not well-respected by many and thus, the treatment of them was poor, to say the least.

In her article, “Shadows of Transgression,” Janet R. Goodwin brings to light the fact that the voices of the *asobi* themselves are missing from any dialogue surrounding them. It is unknown “whether they felt pride or shame in their profession, or whether they lived well or suffered from venereal diseases and died from botched abortions” (328). The main source of knowledge regarding these women comes “through the voices of elite men whom the women served or troubled. Limited and biased sources produce an incomplete picture of the women’s lives” (328). This in and of itself reveals the intrinsic misogyny of Heian culture. These women

had no long lasting ability to express themselves in writing and thus the only lens with which they can be viewed is through that of the court society. The fact that Oe no Yukitoki expresses no pity for these women's situation shows the harsh reality in which these women lived, and comments like his taught others, such as women of the court, how to treat marginalized women of the time.

In *Selling Songs and Smiles*, a book about prostitution in Heian and Kamakura era Japan, Janet R. Goodwin includes a quote by Minamoto Michichika describing an encounter with *asobi* while en route to Itsukushima shrine with the party of the retired sovereign Go-Takakura:

We set up lodgings for the retired sovereign at the port of Muro. The sovereign disembarked and hot water was ordered for his bath. The *asobi* at the port gathered around us near the sovereign's lodgings, like foxes from some old grave mound that take the forms of women and seduce men as dusk is falling. Since no one was interested they went away. (129)

This description of *asobi* is particularly reproachful due to its historical context. Goodwin explains that "foxes who disguised themselves as women and seduced unsuspecting men were a standard emblem of deception and danger in late-Heian *setsuwa* literature" (129-130). The *asobi* in this passage are emblems of deception to Minamoto Michichika. It is clear that he views them as beneath him; they are deceitful and dangerous and one should pay no mind to them. These women are not even worthy of acknowledgment. Unlike Oe no Yukitoki, Minamoto Michichika is not enticed by the *asobi*, however, they both describe the women as disgraceful and imply that the rejection of their offerings is the positive course of action to take. Both Oe no Yukitoki and Minamoto Michichika see these women as depraved and undeserving of respect. Any appeal they may have to men should be ignored and their personhood need not be appreciated or recognized.

The misogynistic writings of Heian era men do not stop with marginalized women. Court women were also subject to criticism and ridicule. *Tales of Yamato* is a collection of 173 short stories from the late tenth century. It was likely written by multiple authors and essentially tells short tales regarding life in Heian court society (Frédéric 1047). Within it, there are many stories about women of the court, and the ways in which they are characterized and written about reveals the impossible idealisms and strict boundaries that Heian women were forced to live their lives adhering to.

In one of the many short stories in *Tales of Yamato*, a Major Counsellor's daughter is kidnapped and held captive in a hut in the mountains. The young woman is described only in terms of her physicality—a “very beautiful daughter” to her father and “extraordinarily attractive” to her kidnapper (108). The only trait of value this woman possesses is her beauty, but that alone is powerful enough to persuade the imperial attendant to kidnap her. When she sets foot outside of the hut for the first time since being kidnapped, she goes to a mountain spring and sees her reflection in the water; “Studying her reflection in the water, she saw that she had become extremely ugly. Because she had been without a mirror all this time, she had been unaware of how greatly altered her looks were. This sudden glimpse came as a tremendous shock to her and she felt terribly mortified” (108). Prior to her kidnapping, she would never have been without life's luxuries and was privileged enough to have the time to study her appearance and improve upon it—this was expected of her. She has fallen below the high standard of beauty society she had held herself to, and this above all else makes her “terribly mortified,” because in the next scene in the short story, she passes away. It is as if the idea of not being beautiful anymore is so horrifying, so unacceptable, that it brings her to her death.

It is clear from the way she is described to the way that she dies that this woman is beautiful and nothing else. She is reduced to below that of a person by the male author's writing in that she has no personality traits or other redeeming qualities. This is reflective of the way Heian era men saw court women. A beautiful woman is like a beautiful object, stripped of personage. Beauty is valued in women above all else and if a woman were to lose her beauty, her life would be meaningless.

Another one of the short stories in *Tales of Yamato* deals with yet another beautiful woman in a precarious situation. In this story, there is a young woman in service of and in love with the emperor. Although they are not together, she is faithful to him; "She was a very attractive woman, and many men—among whom were several courtiers—wooed her, but she refused to accept any of their proposals" (104). From this quote, it is shown that her virtues are, first of all, that she is attractive, and second of all, that she is devoted to the emperor alone. Throughout the rest of the story, no other characteristics or qualities are mentioned. The fact that these two qualities were singled out to characterize her shows that these are valued in a woman, seeing as she is portrayed as such a positive, admirable woman.

The emperor, however, does not return her affections despite her virtues as a woman. He does sleep with her, but says that "he had not been particularly attracted to her" (104). This clearly shows that he only viewed her as a means to sexual gratification and was indifferent about her as a person. The emperor likely was involved with many women and did not appreciate her despite the supposed virtue of her dedication. When the young woman discovers that the emperor does not return her affections, she proceeds to drown herself in Sarusawa Pond. Similar to the previous story in which life is not worth living if a court woman is unattractive; here it seems that life is not worth living unless a woman has the admiration of her beloved. Her life

was spent in the meaningless pursuit of romance with a person who did not care for her, to the point of which she denied other opportunities that came to her. She is not written to be a foolish character, though. In fact, her traits are exalted and her death is described as “tragic” and “untimely” (104). This shows that she truly is intended to represent the ideal woman of the time, meaning that the ideal Heian woman would be beautiful, pure-hearted, and unceasingly loyal to the point of death. There is a notable absence of intellect or personality traits in that description, indicating that those qualities are less important or simply altogether unrecognized.

While the misogyny of Heian culture is revealed in the writings of men, it becomes solidified and unmistakable in the writings of court women. Court women affirm, both explicitly and through means of implication, that women inside and outside of court society are of lesser value than their male counterparts.

In the mid to late Heian era, Murasaki Shikibu, member of the Fujiwara family, wrote *The Tale of Genji*, a novel acknowledged in the present day as “the oldest novel still widely recognized today as a masterpiece” (Tyler xii). Murasaki Shikibu (973-1014), although born into the upper class, has no recorded given name. The name “Murasaki Shikibu” is composed of the title “Shikibu,” a position held by her father, and “Murasaki,” the name of *The Tale of Genji*’s heroine (xvii). She was married around 998 but was widowed shortly thereafter, and in 1006 she was called to serve Empress Akiko due to her strong writing capabilities (xvii). *The Tale of Genji* is a fictional tale revolving around the life of the Emperor’s illegitimate son, Genji. Genji is a high-ranking government official and a remarkably charming person, particularly in his love life. In fact, Royall Tyler, the translator, mentions in the introduction how *The Tale of Genji* can be seen as a novel that is less about the hero Genji and more about the women within the story (xiii). Indeed, there are many major female characters throughout *The Tale of Genji*, and Murasaki

Shikibu's own views on the various types of women of the Heian era are reflected in the ways in which she writes about them.

In "The Pilgrimage to Sumiyoshi" chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu depicts a scene in which Genji encounters a group of *asobi*:

Singing girls crowded to his procession, and all the young gallants with him, even senior nobles, seemed to look favorably on them; but not Genji, for he thought, Come now, all delight, all true feeling spring from the quality of one's partner, and a little frivolity, even playfully meant, is quite enough to put one off. Their airs and graces served only to turn him away. (292)

In alternate translations of the story, the "singing girls" referenced above are translated as "*asobi*." Throughout the story of *The Tale of Genji*, Genji has numerous affairs and is characterized as a man who could hardly turn down a beautiful woman, but here in this passage, Genji is doing just that. The fact that Genji is such a flirtatious and amorous person, yet his interest is not piqued by these women who sell just the qualities and volitions he looks for in other women, shows that he, and, likewise, Murasaki Shikibu, view the *asobi* as beneath a man like him. Murasaki Shikibu wrote Genji as this valiant, exciting, and attractive man whom all people love; he is the undeniable hero of the story and an idealized male. For Genji—this great man—to be unaroused by the offerings of the *asobi* reveals that this was considered to be the response of a great man, in other words, the ideal response. Genji is an amorous man, but *asobi* are below him and the proper response to their charms is to ignore them. This opinion, as expressed by Murasaki Shikibu, a woman, through Genji, is an opinion echoed by Minamoto Michichika in his writings about the *asobi*. It is acceptable for and, perhaps, even, expected of Genji to sleep with many women of various rankings in court society, but it would not be appropriate for someone of his class to sleep with an *asobi*. It is clear that the social rules and morals in this instance are being set by men, such as Minamoto Michichika, and these rules and morals are ingrained in the minds

of women—in this case, Murasaki Shikibu. The rules and morals appropriated by men inform Lady Murasaki to put down women such as the *asobi*, but raise up men like Genji, despite the fact that he, too, sleeps with many different people like the *asobi* do.

In the “Heart-to-Heart” chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, Genji sees his wife, Aoi, fall very ill and become possessed by his lover, Rokujō Haven:

“No, no, you do not understand,” a gentle voice answered. “I only wished you to have them release me a little because I am in such pain. I did not want to come at all, but you see, it really is true that the soul of someone in anguish may wander away. This spirit of mine that, sighing and suffering, wanders the heavens, oh, stop it now, tie a knot where in front the two hems meet.”

The voice, the manner, were not hers but those of someone else. After a moment of shock he understood that he was in the presence of Rokujō Haven. Alas, what he had dismissed so far as malicious rumor put about by the ignorant now proved to be patently true, and he saw with revulsion that such things really did happen. (174)

At this point in the story, Genji has made Lady Rokujō very jealous by avoiding her due to his wife, Aoi’s, illness. The culmination of her strong feelings of jealousy results in her spirit possession of Aoi. Jealousy is considered to be a character fault in women of the Heian era, but it is also seen as dangerous to make a woman too jealous, due to the potentiality of an event such as this (Bargen 52-53). In the passage above, Genji expresses “revulsion” at the fact that Lady Rokujō has come to possess his wife. He is disgusted by the fact that Lady Rokujō has done this—that her intense jealousy has come to this—but he acknowledges no responsibility in it. It is him who carried on romantic relationships with both Aoi and Lady Rokujō and treated them in ways that caused them to be upset, but he does not recognize this. He is shocked at the intensity and power of Lady Rokujō’s jealousy, but if he had felt any real remorse for the way he had been treating her, if he had noticed the pain he put her through, it should not have been such a terrible surprise.

The reason that Genji's responsibility in the situation remains unrecognized by him is because, for the Heian era, Genji was not doing anything remarkably wrong. As mentioned before, jealousy was seen as a character flaw in women. Men were socially permitted to sleep with many women, and it was an expectation that these women to remain calm and unaffected by the matter. Their jealousy was something to be suppressed, but with Lady Rokujō in this passage, quite the opposite is happening. Her jealousy is unbridled and that is shockingly repulsive behavior from her in the eyes of Genji, and presumably in the eyes of Murasaki Shikibu. It was a social norm for men in Genji's position to have numerous affairs, and Lady Rokujō is unaccepting of or unwilling to abide by this norm to the point that she caused hurt to another, namely Genji's wife, Aoi. It is clear that these two actions, hurting someone and going against what is socially acceptable, are negative actions and, therefore, negative qualities present in Rokujō Haven.

Murasaki Shikibu expresses these social expectations in no uncertain terms in "The Broom Tree" chapter through the character of Chief Equerry. He, the Secretary Captain (Aoi's father), and Genji are having a discussion, and Chief Equerry says:

Besides, it is silly for a wife to quarrel with a husband who is inclined to look elsewhere. Even if he is, she can always trust him to remain her husband as long as his first feeling for her still means anything to him, whereas an outburst like that may alienate him for good. She should always be tactful, hinting when she has cause to be angry with him that, yes, she knows, and bringing the issue up gently when she might well quarrel with him instead, because that will only make him like her better. Most of the time it is the wife's attitude that helps her husband's fancies to pass. It might seem endearingly sweet of her to be wholly permissive and to let him get away with everything, but that will only make her seem not to deserve his respect. (26)

In this passage, Chief Equerry is articulating the expectation that women should allow their husbands to have romantic affairs with other women. Among the traits he implies are proper in a woman are docility and tact, however, he also proclaims that a woman cannot be "wholly

permissive” because then she will become unworthy of his respect. In other words, women have to toe a fine line between reprimanding their husbands and not mentioning the affairs at all. The expectations of women are specific and narrow to the point that it seems failure to comply is almost inevitable.

Some may argue that these expressions and implications are not that of Murasaki Shikibu herself, but only of her characters in the story; however, through her portrayal of Genji, this statement is proved false. Genji is the hero of *The Tale of Genji* and is an almost universally positive character. Royall Tyler describes him in the introduction to *The Tale of Genji* as “devastatingly handsome, charming, and eloquent, and he seems to enjoy throughout his life absolutely unlimited material means” (xiv). Murasaki Shikibu portrays Genji as an overall good person, so when she writes about his actions and reactions, she writes them as actions a good person would take from her own point of view. In this way, her personal views are present in the novel. Therefore, when she writes about his rejection of the *asobi* or the revulsion at Lady Rokujō’s manifestation of jealousy, these are actions that she likely believed a good person would take. These actions also line up with the social rules and morals of the time as purported by men, revealing that these male-oriented norms are ingrained in the minds of women like Murasaki Shikibu. It is impossible to know the exact intent of Murasaki Shikibu when writing *The Tale of Genji*, but it would appear that if she did not agree with these societal expectations, she at least acknowledged that they were widely accepted to be true.

In terms of women writing about other women in the Heian era, none are quite as critical as Sei Shōnagon. The blatant honesty and lack of restraint in her writing is very revealing of the realities of court life and the attitudes of the people within it. Sei Shōnagon, born in 966, was a court woman and one of the ladies in waiting to the Empress Sadako. She wrote her book, *The*

Pillow Book, while she was serving in court and it consists of opinions, musings, and recollections of her time there. Sei Shōnagon was not one to withhold her judgment, and therefore, her merciless remarks about other women can be seen as a very real and honest conveyance of how a court woman regarded other women of the time (“Sei Shōnagon”).

Sei Shōnagon was quick to comment on women of a lower social status than her own, and the group she was particularly critical of was commoner or lower class women. Her first mention of these women appears on page four of *The Pillow Book*, in which she says, “But when I actually saw them at such close quarters at the palace, the attendants’ faces were all dark and blotchy where their white powder hadn’t covered the skin properly, precisely like black patches of earth showing through where snow has half melted – a truly horrible sight.” This passage is, in fact, ironic because, Sei Shōnagon herself was not considered to be very good looking (“Sei Shōnagon”). In this case, it appears to be a situation in which women were convinced that putting other women down would strengthen their own social status. Sei Shōnagon calls the women whose makeup was not properly applied a “truly horrible sight” without any sense of empathy for the difference in situation these women were faced with. In calling to attention their aesthetic shortcomings, Sei Shōnagon raises herself up by comparison, seeing as she was a well to do court woman whose makeup was likely more expensive and skillfully applied. The culture of criticizing other women in order to manufacture the appearance of higher esteem for oneself is detrimental to all women and the product of a culture of misogyny, in which women are taught to loathe other women and their achievements. This creates an environment in which women’s successes go uncelebrated and help is not given to the women who need it.

Sei Shōnagon goes on to further criticize the situation of lower class women, only this time, she finds fault in their lifestyle; “Women without prospect, who lead dull earnest lives and

rejoice in their petty little pseudo-pleasures, I find quite depressing and despicable. People of any standing ought to give their daughters a taste of society” (Shōnagon 22). As evidenced here, Sei Shōnagon had no understanding, no empathy, and no sense of social responsibility for the financial situation of these women. She clearly views these women as beneath her station in life, stating that their sources of joy were only “petty little pseudo-pleasures” and that their lives were “dull,” as if to say her own life was exciting and dignified by comparison. She makes judgment calls on their lives without any idea of the struggles they face that a person of her status would never have to. This is evidenced by her suggestion that lower class parents should spend lavishly on their daughters and send them out into the world—as if that were an option for them—but Sei Shōnagon does not understand this. It is possible that she believes that part of the reason why common people do not provide their daughters with an education or make large purchases for them is because they are unintelligent, stating later in the book that she thinks country people ask “stupid, boorish questions” (23). She also criticizes the language of common people, saying, “Commoners always use too many words when they speak” (Shōnagon 7). Sei Shōnagon sees these women as uneducated, undignified, and altogether beneath her in nearly every way possible.

Another group of women Sei Shōnagon mentions several times in *The Pillow Book* are nuns. At one point in her musings, she recalls a certain beggar nun coming to visit the palace, and she describes the encounter in no uncertain terms: “Wondering who this person was, I went over to have a look, and discovered the voice belonged to a nun well past her prime, dressed in horribly grimy clothes and looking like a little monkey” (76). It is evident from this description that Sei Shōnagon was repulsed by the nun, going so far as to compare her to an animal. The comparison to a monkey is very revealing of Sei Shōnagon’s view of such people. Not only is

she repulsed by the nun, she ceases to see her as a peer as a human being. To her, the nun has reached such a level of filth that she bears less of a likeness to a woman and more of a likeness to an animal—a monkey. This shows a complete lack of respect and a clear belittlement of this woman, and this is not an isolated incident.

A few pages later in the book, she describes an encounter with a different nun: “A little later, a much more refined beggar nun turned up at the palace. We called her over and questioned her in the same way, and were touched by how shamefaced and piteous she was” (77-78). Although she initially describes the nun as refined, her later remarks do not exemplify the level of respect a “refined” woman should receive. Comparatively, Sei Shōnagon values the second nun higher than the first nun because she is “shamefaced and piteous.” This reveals an expectation among the wealthy that the poor should naturally be ashamed of their station in life—that shame is an admirable trait in the poor. “Piteous” gives the impression that this woman is the lowest, most pitiful a person can be, and Sei Shōnagon remarks that she was “touched” by this—as if that were revealing of her more delicate side. Her position that this woman was so low and pathetic is much more revealing of her arrogance and mercilessness than anything else. Sei Shōnagon’s reactions towards these nuns as expressed through her writings shows a sense of superiority. She devalues these women because they are unclean and poor—revealing that much of a woman’s value in Heian society came from appearance and wealth. Sei Shōnagon considers herself to be above these women because she comes from money; she is wealthy and therefore able to afford the lavish clothing, makeup, adornments, and the personal hygiene habits expected of a Heian era court woman. Much of Sei Shōnagon’s own value and the value of other women come from their appearance and wealth, revealing a very shallow, narrow view of women as a whole.

Although Sei Shōnagon clearly valued rank and wealth, her respect did not extend to women who had it, and her harsh criticism was also applied to women of the court. On page 174 of *The Pillow Book*, Sei Shōnagon discusses rank in court society at length:

Nothing is more splendid than rank. How different a man is when he's called Commissioner or Adviser and can be snubbed with impunity, from the same man once he's become Counsellor, Grand Counsellor or Minister, when he's held in awe and can throw his weight around! [...] Women, on the other hand, are much less impressive. Certainly an imperial nurse who attains third rank or the title High Gentlewoman is of considerable importance, but she's already past her best, and what's so good about it after all? And most women never even get so far. [...] However, it's a most impressive thing to watch a young man's rise. (174-175)

In this passage, Sei Shōnagon provides an unambiguous example of the institutionalized misogyny of Heian culture. While the ranks of men are impressive and worthy of awe, a woman's rise is of no major importance and is significantly less distinguished. Considering the fact that it was a woman who wrote this, it is evidence of two items. First, that the ranks and titles for women are designed to be less meaningful or important than that of men's, and second; that a man's ascension to power is more serious, encouraged, and substantial. Power in Heian court society was a critical component to a man's success, to the point at which a man would exchange his daughters for it (Morton 37). In that sense, women were the pawns of men. They lived in a society controlled by men. This power of men extended to the titles of ranks of women, where society is set up so that the highest rank a woman could achieve does not possess the power or impact of the male equivalent, hence Sei Shōnagon's lack of awe with the rise in ranks of women. Indeed, Sei Shōnagon is not only critical of lower class women—she is critical of women in general. If her beliefs on the ranks of women in this passage are truthful, then she must believe that she herself cannot attain a meaningful level of distinguishment. In belittling the power of court women, she belittles herself. This is the position in which Heian era women were

forced to live; an unending cycle of pitting themselves against one another and never gaining any real power from it.

The author of *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*, Lady Sarashina, also makes comments regarding other women—in particular, *asobi*—that reinforces some of the values expressed by Sei Shōnagon in her book. Lady Sarashina was born into what is referred to as the middle class of the Heian period, meaning her family ranked below that of the High Court Nobles and above that of the commoners. Her real name is unknown and she is commonly referred to as Takasue's Daughter, however, the translator of *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*, Ivan Morris, refers to her as Lady Sarashina, after the Japanese language title of her book—*Sarashina nikki* (Sarashina 11-12). Lady Sarashina continued to live, unmarried, at home until the age of thirty-one. This was long past the typical age of marriage for a woman in the Heian era. At thirty-one, she left home to be a lady-in-waiting for an Imperial Princess, and at thirty-six she was married for the first time. This was practically old age for a woman of her time, so it is clear that Lady Sarashina was very different from most of the women of her time and she was ridiculed for it (Sarashina 16).

At the beginning of *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*, Lady Sarashina embarks on a journey to the Capital, Heian-kyō. On her way to Heian-kyō, her party stops at Mount Ashigara, and there she encounters three *asobi*. Upon seeing them, Lady Sarashina wrote; “Their hair, which was extremely long, hung beautifully over their foreheads; they all had fair complexions and looked attractive enough to serve as waiting-women” (Sarashina 47). At first glance, this appears to be a compliment, but it actually reflects the shallow nature of the culture of the ladies-in-waiting and the boundaries in place for women without wealth. Lady Sarashina says that these women are so attractive that they could be waiting-women, indicating that, in order to be a lady-in-waiting, you must be attractive. What is left unsaid in this statement is the fact that, even

though these women are beautiful, it does not matter because they could not be ladies-in-waiting due to their social status. It is possible that this was not the intention of Lady Sarashina, but it reads as though she is belittling these women. They supposedly could be ladies-in-waiting if they had money, but they do not, so Lady Sarashina's sentiments are for naught. This, just as Sei Shōnagon's comments did, brings up the importance of physical beauty in Heian court society and the acknowledgement a woman can receive if she has it.

Although Lady Sarashina enjoyed the performances of the *asobi* at Mount Ashigara and found them to be attractive women, she “was surprised that their faces were not coarse or dirty” (*Selling Songs and Smiles* 129). This reveals a very low expectation of the *asobi* by Lady Sarashina and the class difference between them. Just as Sei Shōnagon saw the commoners and nuns as unclean and repulsive to her, Lady Sarashina views the *asobi* in the same way. She expects that they will be unclean, while she herself is not, suggesting that she views *asobi* as beneath her. Lady Sarashina's low expectations of the *asobi* she encounters on Mount Ashigara in terms of attractiveness and cleanliness further displays the Heian culture principal of lowering the status of other women in order to better one's own status by comparison.

In the writings of women regarding other women, the level of misogyny in Heian culture becomes increasingly apparent. The amount of belittlement that occurred not only between court women and lower class women, but between women of the same rank, is astonishing and contributes to a culture in which women cannot succeed because none of their peers want them to. The revulsion towards the *asobi* borders on the nonsensical when faced with the double standard that men, like Genji, can sleep with as many women as they want to but women in the position of an *asobi* are viewed as temptresses that should be ignored for doing so. The idea that a woman's jealousy is something to be suppressed is convenient for men and oppressive to

women, yet women themselves purported the expectation as well. A woman of the Heian era must suppress her jealousy and enhance her beauty, for beauty is one of the most important traits a woman can have and if she does not have it, she will be largely ignored by men and mocked by the likes of Sei Shōnagon and other women in her position. Even if a woman manages to meet both the expectations of her emotions and beauty and climbs the ranks to achieve an exalted status, it pales in comparison to the achievements of men at a similar rank. Heian society was set up in such a way that women could not truly succeed no matter how great their efforts were, and the misogyny of the culture was so deeply intrinsic to it that women not only looked down upon other women, they looked down upon themselves. The most telling evidence of misogyny in the Heian era unfolds in the way women wrote about themselves, with the most notable case being that of Izumi Shikibu.

The Izumi Shikibu Diary is the tale of Izumi Shikibu's affair with Prince Atsumishi, as told by Izumi Shikibu herself. It is not, however, a diary in the sense of day to day journal entries detailing Izumi's life. *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* has many attributes that make it less of a diary and more of a story, such as third person narration and a point of view that extends beyond what Izumi could have known at the time, e.g. events not involving Izumi and the thoughts and feelings of others (I. Shikibu 26). This has called into question the authorship of the diary; however, there is substantial evidence that suggests that Izumi Shikibu is, indeed, the true author. In *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, there is a passage in which Murasaki Shikibu discusses Izumi's poetic abilities. These comments are likely based on her reading of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, since she would have been much more likely to have read her *nikki* than her letters; similarly, it is assumed that Murasaki's remarks on Sei Shōnagon are based her book, *The Pillow Book* (I. Shikibu 47-48). *Nikki*, literally translated, means "day-record," although this is not the case with

most famous *nikki*. As Ivan Morris puts it in the introduction to *Sarashina nikki*, a *nikki* is “a book in which the material has been deliberately selected and shaped to reveal certain significant aspects of a woman’s life” (23). It is alleged that *The Tale of Genji* took influence from *Izumi Shikibu nikki*, being that there is an “obvious resemblance” to *Izumi Shikibu nikki* in three places—the “Yūgao,” “Kochō,” and “Uji” chapters (I. Shikibu 48). Given this evidence, it is safe to assume that the *nikki* was, in fact, authored by Izumi Shikibu.

The story of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* begins with the first interaction between Izumi and Prince Atsumishi, referred to solely as “the Prince.” Izumi characterizes the Prince as “old fashioned” and unaccustomed to scandal, although his actions throughout the novel are often contradictory to that description. It is he who first takes an interest in her, having his page bring her a sprig of orange blossom. Despite this, it is she who takes responsibility for the situation; “She felt rather uncomfortable about writing him a letter; but then, as yet he had no name for scandalous behavior. Should she risk a trifling verse” (131)? At this point in time, Izumi was considered to be a very scandalous woman. She had an affair with Prince Tametaka, Prince Atsumishi’s brother, and as a result was divorced by her first husband and disowned by her parents (I. Shikibu 8-11). The quotation above shows that Izumi recognizes her status as a disgraced woman, and worries that Prince Atsumishi’s reputation may suffer as a result of being involved with her. It is him, however, who pursues her. He reaches out to her as a married man with other mistresses knowing Izumi’s reputation, so it appears that he is not as innocent as he is characterized. His actions are at the very least questionable in this situation, yet Izumi considers him to be a good man and her to be problematic. From Izumi’s point of view, the only blameworthy party in this situation is herself.

Despite her initial hesitation, an affair does begin, but then it is the Prince who starts to have doubts. He does not want the affair to become serious for fear of it disrupting his relationship with his official consort, the Princess. He muses:

And further, he reflected, it was because of his infatuation with this woman that his brother the late Prince had been made the subject of vicious gossip until the day of his death. Such were the cautious considerations that crossed the Prince's mind. Perhaps his dedication to the lady was not quite complete. (136)

Once again, Izumi, the woman, is to blame. It is Izumi's fault that the late Prince, Prince Tametaka, was gossiped about, and because of this, Prince Atsumishi is questioning his feelings for her. There is no sense of accountability on behalf of the male in these circumstances. It is the woman who brings about the scandal and ruins the reputations of good men. It must be taken into consideration that this is Izumi imagining the thoughts and feelings of the Prince, but in a sense, that makes the situation all the more grave. Izumi expects her lover to think this of her and provides this explanation as to why he is hesitant to continue seeing her. This suggests that Izumi may have felt ashamed of her past. It is likely that Izumi drew this conclusion from the Prince's letters to her during the time that the affair was going on.

There are several instances throughout the story where the Prince refuses to visit Izumi due to the rumors and gossip surrounding her life. It is apparent that many men other than the Prince visit Izumi's residence in attempts to win her affections. When the Prince sees or hears about these other men visiting her, he assumes she is involved with them and becomes upset, saying, "What a fool I was to go on trusting you in spite of everything!" and "I don't know what to make of you" (175). He is clearly upset that Izumi might be romantically involved with other men, but he himself is married and involved with women other than Izumi outside of his marriage. At one point in the story, the Prince asks Izumi to compose a poem for another woman he is seeing, and she complies (160-161). Both of their actions—assuming Izumi accounted for

these events in a way similar to which they occurred—evidence that a man having an affair is acceptable and that a woman should not feel jealous if her lover is less than faithful; in fact, Izumi is expected to aid Prince Atsumishi in another affair he is having. This same standard is not applied to men. In the above quote, when the Prince believes that Izumi is seeing other men, he is openly jealous and outraged. Due to his reaction, it is apparent that the Prince was under the expectation that Izumi was faithful only to him, and any indication otherwise is unacceptable. He considers it to be Izumi's fault if his visits to her dwindle;

At long last he went to her. 'Please do not attribute it to negligence on my part,' he said earnestly, 'that due to no intention of mine our relations should have become so exasperatingly uncertain. I think the fault lies with you. When I heard how many gentlemen there were who found my visits to you inconvenient, I was pained; and while I hesitated out of general principle, time simply went by.' (143)

In this passage, the Prince is essentially telling Izumi that he was attempting to punish her by withholding his affections while the rumors spread. His actions born out of jealousy are not construed as wrong or inappropriate, and Izumi does not punish, scold, or act out towards him for his behavior. The most she does is express sadness at the infrequency of his visits through her poetry to him. She feels heartache and unhappiness, as expressed through her narration, at the fact that the Prince does not come for her, but she withholds herself from expressing the full extent of her emotions to her lover. This behavior further suggests that a man's jealousy is acceptable in relationships, but a woman's jealousy and general unhappiness should be suppressed.

Ultimately, the Prince does feel some remorse for lashing out at Izumi over the rumors and attempts to reconcile with her, telling her, "If you would avoid being talked of in this way, then come to me" (177). It appears that he believes there is some element of control on the part of Izumi with regards to these rumors. Instead of apologizing for not trusting her, he tells her to,

essentially, make the rumors stop by changing her behavior. This is yet another example of the tremendous responsibility placed on the shoulders of women in relationships. The Prince is not expected to trust Izumi, to remain faithful to her (or his wife), or for the scandal that arises as a result of their affair. These responsibilities are considered to be Izumi's—dispelling rumors, remaining faithful, and somehow preventing a scandal. Izumi accepts these responsibilities and therefore facilitates the misogyny of the society as much as the Prince does.

The reaction of Izumi to these rumors and accusations is critical to understanding the depth of misogyny in Heian era culture. In response to the rumors circulating about her, Izumi says, “Despite the fact that she no longer paid the slightest heed to the many gallants who pressed their attentions upon her, it seems she had become the subject of much scandalous gossip. But she resigned herself to the thought that this was the inevitable consequence of her continued existence in society” (140). In terms of how this affected her relationship with the Prince, she thinks, “If only she could somehow correct the quite grotesque impressions of her he had picked up from current gossip” (149). It is once again suggested that the blame in an affair lies with the woman, and again, Izumi is taking responsibility for the situation. From the point of view of Izumi, it is her responsibility to dispel the rumors for the Prince. There appears to be no expectation on behalf of the Prince to simply not believe these rumors. Furthermore, there is no outrage from Izumi regarding these accusations; no burning desire to set the record straight. She just passively accepts the situation. This reaction suggests that women of the Heian court were forced to accept defamation of character as an inevitable consequence of doing anything outside of society's rigid guidelines for their behavior. Her reaction also suggests that she may feel ashamed of herself. She may feel that she is unable to combat the gossip because she has done

something that, in society's collective mindset, is wrong. As a result of this, she may feel like she deserves the treatment she is receiving.

At the end of the story, the Prince invites Izumi to move into his home with the Princess, and after some contemplation, she agrees. It comes as no surprise that this greatly upsets the Princess. When the Princess and her staff begin to speak poorly of Izumi, the Prince hears what they are saying and is offended by it, claiming, "After all, there was no necessity for his consort to think or speak so meanly of someone else" (189). This shows that the Prince has absolutely no empathy or sensitivity towards his wife's feelings. He has chosen to move his mistress into their home and now, when she is clearly angered by this, he is offended and acts as if he and Izumi have done nothing to deserve her censure. Once again, a woman's jealousy is considered to be an inappropriate and unacceptable reaction to a man's behavior, but a man's jealousy is justified.

Another interpretation of that quote lies in what Izumi was trying to convey in writing it. It is possible that she was simply recording her lover's reaction to his wife's behavior, but it is also possible that she was trying to make a remark on the treatment she was receiving. It is possible that she herself felt that there was no need for the Princess to be so unkind to her, thus exemplifying the intrinsic misogyny of Heian culture by showing that a woman has no patience or compassion for other women's emotions, even when they experience those same emotions themselves. *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* depicts a relationship in which all of the blame and unhappiness is the fault of the woman, while the man is simply acting out of love. This is likely a distortion of reality, but a distortion brought about by the woman herself, Izumi Shikibu. She wrote the story and painted the Prince in a more favorable light than herself, suggesting that she does, indeed, feel responsible for the events that took place—much of which was out of her control. Izumi Shikibu's feelings of responsibility and willingness to portray herself in this way

suggests a low view of oneself, brought about by constant reinforcement of that view by the society in which she lived.

In *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*, Lady Sarashina reflects on her life at court and comes to some unhappy conclusions. She lived nearly all of her years as a young woman with her parents, due in no small part to her father's hesitations, and when she is invited to attend court, her father's first reaction is to refuse to allow her to go. He is persuaded to give his consent, however, and Lady Sarashina attends her first period of service. Her first period of service lasted only a night, and she claims;

During my cloistered years I had often imagined that life in the Palace would offer all sorts of pleasures which I never encountered in my monotonous routine at home. As it turned out, my first experience at Court suggested that I would feel extremely awkward and unhappy in these new surroundings. Yet what could I do about it? (84)

Lady Sarashina's first night at the Palace is not what she anticipated it would be like, but as she says, "what could I do about it?" It was up to her father whether or not she could go in the first place, that choice was not her own, and in addition to that she is placed at a disadvantage due to the social situation her father has kept her in. She knows that she has spent much longer at home than most women and because of that, she feels she is "awkward" and that her life thus far has been "cloistered." Societal pressure on women to marry and go out into the world at a very young age has convinced her that she is different because she has taken a different route, and perhaps this is true. The issue is that her father has prevented her from making those choices in her life. She doesn't have control and she is made to feel awkward and uncomfortable. She is placed in a precarious situation.

She returns to court shortly thereafter, but the discomfort she felt on her first night is still with her, and she remarks;

Now that I was back in Court service—not through any wish of my own but because of my nieces—I could hardly be treated as a newcomer. On the other hand, I certainly did not qualify as one of those senior ladies-in-waiting who, from long experience at Court, go about with knowing looks on their faces and allow nothing to ruffle them. In consequence I was regarded rather scornfully as a sort of guest who came to Court for occasional visits. It was an awkward position. (88)

Once again, Lady Sarashina lacks control in the situation she finds herself in. She believes she cannot be treated as a newcomer, despite the fact that, in reality; she is still new to the court. She recognizes the fact that she does not have the experience necessary to be a senior lady-in-waiting like the women closer in age to her, but she cannot acknowledge the fact that she is still a novice due to her being around thirty-one years of age at this time. She facilitates the misogyny of Heian society by accepting the expectations of her—marrying young, attending court young—and openly acknowledging that she has failed to meet them. She does not fight against them; she merely acts defeated. Ivan Morris, the translator, even acknowledges in his introduction to *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams* that she was “clearly a failure in society” during the time in which she lived, but Heian court culture provides such a specific, narrow path to success that it is bound to produce failures. Heian court culture is not set up to allow women to succeed. Even if she were to have followed all the expectations of her as a woman at the age Heian society deemed appropriate, her accomplishments would be minimal at best in comparison to the achievements of men.

The *asobi* women of the Heian era were unable to write and, therefore, there are no writings available from them that express their thoughts and feelings from their own unique perspective, however; there are songs. The lyrics to many of these songs were collected in the twelfth century anthology, *Ryōjin hishō* (“Shadows of Transgression” 342). One of the songs addresses a man who has abandoned a woman;

A strolling player came down from the capital,

Built herself a house to live in at Shimaie.
 But “he” abandoned her without a second thought.
 No matter how she prays—Hyaku Dayū—
 Without your miracle,
 She’s headed back for the capital of flowers. (“Shadows of Transgression 342)

The *asobi* performing this song sing of a man who has abandoned them, but they do not scorn him. Instead, they pray to their deity for a miracle, without which they will be left with no choice but to return to the “capital of flowers.” It is possible that what the *asobi* mean when they refer to returning to the capital is that they will be forced to continue living the life of a prostitute and enticing men near the capital. Without some kind of divine intervention, they will be forced to continue to live the lives that they do, and perhaps this song suggests that they do not want to. Like Lady Sarashina, however, the *asobi* women are defeated and do not fight against the situation they are condemned to. The *asobi* cannot let on enough detail in their songs to be sure of their true feelings. As Goodwin states in “Shadows of Transgression,” “If a woman felt exploited—and we cannot be sure that they did—it would hardly have been good business to complain at banquets where they were paid to entertain” (342). This is the only glimpse historians can get of the possible problems in an *asobi*’s life from her perspective.

The writings of Heian era women about themselves reflect the tremendous burden of responsibility placed on a woman’s shoulders. Throughout the entirety of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, any flaws in the relationship, any mistakes made, were the fault of Izumi Shikibu and not the men in her life. It was her fault rumors were circulating about her and it was her fault if the Prince became involved in a scandal. She characterizes the Prince as innocent and herself as disgraced. There is no sense of accountability on the part of any man she is involved with, and while the jealousy of her partner is appropriate and the censure she receives justified; her own jealousies are something to be suppressed. Both Izumi Shikibu and Lady Sarashina act defeated

in the face of rigid social expectations and narrow ideas of what a woman can be. They cannot fight it because the structural integrity of the Heian court depends on the learned misogyny of its people—it depends on their knowing the underlying truth they are less and that, try as they may, they cannot succeed.

From the Heian era to the present day, there has been a significant change in gender equality in Japan. The barriers to entry that women of the Heian era faced, in writing and in the bureaucracy, are no longer and women are educated in Chinese characters and allowed to participate in government. The most obvious and egregious forms of misogyny in the Heian era are not apparent in modern day Japan, however; sexism still lingers. In a study done by the World Economic Forum in 2014, out of 142 countries assessed, Japan ranks 104th in terms of gender equality. This places Japan below countries like Tajikistan, Indonesia, and South Korea. The World Economic Forum notes that, “the percentage of female lawmakers remains one of the worst of any nation” (Kyodo, Jiji, and Bloomberg). Only fifteen percent of candidates in the last major Japanese election were female and only 6.2 percent of the country’s managerial positions are occupied by women (Mizuho; Kyodo). In the thousand years that have passed since the Heian era, gender inequality has not disappeared. Although major strides have been made to allow women to lead lives of the same quality as men, the barriers to achievements at the level of men still exist, even if they are not so explicitly stated or purposefully constructed. The struggles of women during the Heian era in Japan are relevant to Japan today as they contribute to a history and subsequent culture of misogyny that will continue to desperately need dismantlement for years to come.

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