Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi*

A guide for women's sociality in 11th century Japan

Carolina Negri

This study examines the possibility of interpreting *Makura no sōshi* ("The Pillow Book," 11th century) as a guide for the education of aristocratic women, equipping them to navigate the female communities of 11th century Japan, characterized by jealousy and rivalry. Through a close reading of this work, now recognized as a masterpiece of world literature, I will explore topics related to sociality in the Heian period— such as courtship, education, beauty routines, and etiquette— offering insight into the lives of middle - and high-ranking women at the imperial court. Sei Shōnagon's work also provides an opportunity to delve into the fascinating aesthetics of aristocratic society during the Heian period (794-1185), focusing on the concept of an 'oblique vision' which shaped poetic expression, architecture, and even the relationship between men and women.

Keywords: Heian Japan, women's literature, Makura no sōshi, Sei Shōnagon, sociality, oblique vision.

She could be lively only in the midst of life.
In isolation she dwindled to a shadow.
Stefan Zweig, *The Collected Stories of Stefan Zweig*

1. *Makura no sōshi* and sociality

Sei Shōnagon's (965?-1025?) *Makura no sōshi* ("The Pillow Book") belongs to a group of works written during the Heian period (794-1185) by highly educated women of the middle ranks of the aristocracy. Their active participation in literary production is linked to their experience as ladies-in-waiting and the crucial role they played in the marriage politics adopted by the Northern Branch of the Fujiwara family. For the scions of the most powerful family of the time, the ultimate goal was to marry one of their daughters to the emperor, with the hope that the future heir to the throne would be their grandchild. To achieve this, it was essential for the chosen one to be not only attractive but also

cultured, capable of fostering a genuine intellectual circle around herself. This circle would involve ladies actively promoting the reputation of the aspiring future empress in many ways often including a distinguished production of literary works. Most of these works, primarily *monogatari* (tales) and *nikki* (diaries), though dealing with different content, share the same objectives, focusing on the development, representation, and transmission of sociality (Shirane 2007: 5-6), i.e., the ability to interact profitably with others by demonstrating an understanding of what is considered polite or impolite in various contexts.

Makura no Sōshi, the only example of the *zuihitsu* genre (literally, 'following the brush') produced during the Heian period, seems to particularly emphasize the importance of sociality. It draws attention to an aesthetic conception that, rather than representing a standard of beauty to conform to, coincides with a refined sensitivity that allows one to grasp even the smallest details necessary for successful interaction with others. This work stands out from other texts written during the same period for its originality in style and content, presenting a rich collection of observations on various topics that, at least apparently, follow the free flow of the writer's thoughts. The short passages, the variety of themes treated from a personal perspective, and the alternation between colloquial and more formal language prompt inevitable reflections on the literary genre to which it might be associated. Its classification as *zuihitsu* dates to the Edo period (1603-1868), and it is still used nowadays, after centuries of uncertainty during which it was alternatively considered a court life narrative (*monogatari*), a poetry treatise (*karon*), a diary (*nikki*), an anecdotal collection (*setsuwashū*), or a manual. Although it deals with settings and themes also present in the contemporary *Genji monogatari* ("The Tale of Genji," 1008 ca.) and despite Sei Shōnagon's similarities to Murasaki Shikibu (973?-1014?) in terms of gender, family background, education, and court status, *Makura no sōshi* has long been regarded as inferior to *Genji monogatari*. Additionally, Sei Shōnagon has frequently been characterized as a negative model of a proud and presumptuous woman, contrary to the more modest and humbler Murasaki Shikibu. The classification of *Makura no sōshi* as *zuihitsu*, which means a heterogeneous text lacking internal cohesion, has further influenced its reception, making it appear less significant than other classics. Only from the end of the 1990s with the growing interest shown by Japanese[1] and foreign scholars,[2] has Sei Shōnagon's work been reassessed through intriguing interpretive lenses that also consider the political context and the representation of gender. More recently, Gergana Ivanova, in

[1] In Japan research on *Makura no sōshi* entered a new era with a new scholarly edition (*Makura no sōshi* kenkyūkai 1998) based on the *Sankan bon* manuscript's lineage followed soon after by an encyclopedic dictionary (*Makura no sōshi* kenkyūkai 2001).

[2] Outside Japan are remarkable the studies by Mark Morris (1980), Tzvetana Kristeva (1994), Naomi Fukumuri (1997), Edith Sarra (1999) and Joshua S. Mostow (2001).

Unbinding the Pillow Book: The Many Lives of a Japanese Classic, has proposed to 'release' the work from stereotypical interpretations, demonstrating that it lends itself to multiple readings and uses varying with historical epochs (2018: 14-17). While it has been rediscovered as a text for female education since the Edo period, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that during the Heian period it may have been conceived as a manual of etiquette aimed at aristocratic women. Supporting this thesis is a study by Yamaguchi Nakami (2008), *Sura sura yomeru Makura no sōshi* ("Reading *Makura no sōshi* with Ease"), which promises an accessible reading of Sei Shōnagon's work, presenting it as a guide to good manners intended primarily for women, but indirectly also for men, offering useful models for assimilating and practicing proper behavior. It is likely that Sei Shōnagon, prompted by Empress Teishi (977-1001), intended her work to serve as a sort of manual based on personal notes written on pieces of paper. It consists of short lists interspersed with longer passages that include autobiographical memories and observations on various matters of common interest in the aristocratic environment. The 'lists,' which constitute the most original and perhaps also the most enigmatic part of the work, include both specific categories of things (*mono wa*) such as insects, flowers, and plants, focusing especially on nature, and the so-called adjectival sections (*monozukushi*) where a series of elements or situations are introduced, united by a particular characteristic. In passages containing personal memories, *Makura no sōshi* reveals several connections to other diaries written by court ladies, leading scholars to classify it as a part of the *nikki bungaku* ('diary literature') tradition. However, it fundamentally differs from these works in key aspects, such as the near-total absence of poetic compositions and the lack of a cohesive thematic unity to provide a narrative thread. The author's memories appear to the reader as independent stories where the narrative pace intentionally slows and adopts a more relaxed tone. These episodes form small pieces of a larger mosaic, collectively portraying Sei Shōnagon's life at court. They trace her gradual evolution from a young and inexperienced woman to one of full maturity, achieved through the cultivation of skills necessary to navigate a female community rife with jealousy and rivalry. Her difficult apprenticeship inspires numerous passages rich in considerations on specific themes, sometimes introduced through anecdotes heard from others (*kikigaki*) that she herself had likely found very instructive.

2. Desolate houses

If we consider sociality as central to a woman's education during the Heian period, many passages in *Makura no sōshi* becomes more comprehensible, perhaps starting with the most emblematic one, where the author describes a condition that evokes tenderness and compassion: a woman alone in a dilapidated house.

> The place where a woman lives alone appears neglected and melancholic: the rundown house is surrounded by crumbling earthen walls. The pond is overrun with weeds, and the garden, if not entirely covered with wormwood, shows green patches peeking out here and there between the gravel (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 171, 299).

These words evoke stories such as *Yamato monogatari* ("Tales of Yamato," 10th century), *Utsuho monogatari* ("The Tale of the Hollow Tree," 10th century), and *Genji monogatari* which depict similar situations of solitary young women waiting to be discovered by a charming aristocratic man (Yamaguchi 2008: 80) who could facilitate their reintegration into society as lovers, wives, and mothers. The case of Suetsumunohana in *Genji monogatari* is undoubtedly the most famous example of this romantic heroine, represented as a fallen noblewoman, lacking family support. She is forced to live away from the aristocratic society in a desolate, dilapidated, and frightening place that becomes a metaphor for her own misfortune.

> The house, already in disrepair before her father's death, had become a refuge for foxes. Among the trees—so overgrown and neglected they seemed almost mournful—the hoot of the owl echoed morning and evening. Once-mysterious creatures, held back by human presence, no longer hid from view. Now spirits of the forest and other unsettling presences appeared boldly (Abe *et al*. 1995: 327).

The condition of a woman forced to live alone in an abandoned house is described in Heian literature as a necessary premise for the beginning of a romance since "romantic love is frequently associated with the impulse to nurture someone who is weak, frail, or in distress in some way" (Childs 1999: 1060). However, this situation is also conveyed to the reader as an abnormal and fundamentally negative condition. The repugnant aspect of the house and the garden surrounding it, tangible evidence of neglect born from isolation, lends dramatic accents to the condition of the person living there: a lonely, sorrowful woman spending her days waiting for someone who might restore her access to the society from which she has, for some reason, been marginalized. Her house, located in an undefined place, represents an unreal abode from which she must try to emerge if she wants to harmoniously integrate with others. Should she fail in her socialization experience based on codified behavioral models, she risks being forced again to live on the margins of society in a repugnant dwelling, a symbolic place of atonement for her sins. This type of situation, usually concerning a more mature woman judged disappointing as a wife or mother, frequently appears in tales of mistreated stepdaughters, such as *Sumiyoshi monogatari* ("The Princess of Sumiyoshi," 10th century), to underscore, towards the end of the story, the reprehensible conduct of the stepmother and the deserved punishment involving her exclusion from society.

> Both the more sensitive and the less sensitive people detested the stepmother, who lived with the wicked woman in a place fallen into ruin—a dilapidated house surrounded by a garden overrun with weeds. This situation evoked deep compassion. The two women did nothing but weep, believing it to be the rightful punishment for having caused such great suffering to others (Kuwabara 1995: 125).

While for a young woman, the abandoned house represents a sort of embryonic stage, a prelude to her complete realization, for a mature woman, it signifies a definitive departure from the human community within which her behavior has been deemed unacceptable. It is interesting to note that both situations are described through the recurring literary *topos* of the 'desolate house' emphasizing the importance of developing and preserving appropriate social connections. This is especially significant in a context where women played a crucial role in forging new alliances between different families. In such a setting, courtship was perceived as a transformative opportunity with the power to change one's life entirely.

3. The importance of courtship

In the Heian period courtship among aristocracy took a variety of forms, representing the ambiguous time before the beginning of a formal relationship or its eventual end. It was often oriented towards sexual intimacy and procreation. As a result, courtship became closely linked with kinship that formalized in family lineages marked by a polygynous marital system. One's position among kin and one's alliances with other families played a significant role in shaping one's political future, often with the goal of attaining the highest position possible at the imperial court (Bargen 2015: 1). Marriage in the upper echelons of Heian society were often polygynous, meaning that while high-ranking noblemen could have relationship simultaneously with several women, a noblewoman was only allowed one husband at a time. In the inner palace and in the mansions of the elite a woman's standing was typically determined by a combination of her fertility and the sociopolitical influence of her family. Her position among her husband's several wives was established as a matter of custom rather than law and it could easily be compromised by the presence of a younger rival of higher social rank or simply more fertile (Sarra 2020: 27).

Within the aristocracy, the first marriage was typically arranged at a young age, often between cousins or members of the same extended family, and usually without the consent of those involved. The individuals passively accepted decisions that had already been made for them, leaving little to no room for romantic considerations. On the other hand, extramarital and occasional relationships, which could sometimes evolve into secondary marriages, included, at least as described in literary works, a

long and complicated courtship (Bargen 2015: 48-53). It represented a stage of gradual acquaintance between individuals of different sexes who would normally not have had the opportunity to meet. Typically, a man would become intrigued by a woman simply based on praise he had heard about her beauty and refined cultural sensibilities. In some cases, he might also have the chance to observe her from a distance, through a physical barrier such as a fence, wall, shutter, curtain screen, fan, or kimono sleeve—an encounter that could be sufficient to fall in love with her. In literary works the *kaimami* (lit. 'looking through a gap in the fence') often marks the beginning of a romance. A quick glimpse at a 'hidden woman' not only satisfies a man's curiosity but also inspires him to express love and desire through refined poetry. The woman, in turn, could choose to either accept or reject his advances, often with the assistance of her family and servants.

Courtship was considered the most important and concrete expression of sociality, often portrayed as a difficult test to overcome during which people were evaluated based on very strict behavioral norms. It was necessary to arrive well-prepared because courtship could lead to more stable relationships that in some cases could radically change people's lives. It also represented a sort of societal debut allowing individuals to gain and maintain a positive reputation in the eyes of others.

Sei Shōnagon, reflecting on the apprenticeship of aristocratic women and the need to interact profitably within their environment, primarily recommends seizing the opportunity to work at court as a lady-in-waiting to a high-ranking individual. She considers it as an essential opportunity to understand the world. In her words, ladies-in-waiting are portrayed as more privileged than married women who remain confined at home, content with a boring life and false happiness.

> Women who live without prospects, believing that what is merely an illusion of happiness is true happiness, are, in my opinion, both depressing and contemptible. I wish that the daughters of people of considerable social rank could mingle with others and come to know the world by serving at court as ladies-in-waiting or in other similar positions for a time (Matsuo and Nagai: 1997, dan 22, 56).

To know the world meant, first and foremost, understanding the importance of courtship, and knowing how to interact effectively with the opposite sex. On this topic Sei Shōnagon returns repeatedly, focusing her attention particularly on the behavior of men. It almost seems as though she intends to provide women with an indispensable guide to identifying the ideal partner. Memorable is the passage explaining what a man should or should not do after spending a night with a woman.

> The behavior of a man who separates from a woman at dawn should be impeccable. He lies down, showing no desire to get up. And when the woman tries to urge him to leave saying: "It's already

> past dawn! It's a shame!", he sighs subtly implying that if he doesn't stay with her just a little longer, it will be difficult to say goodbye (Matsuo and Nagai: 1997, dan 61, 116).

Regarding the man's behavior, it is also interesting to see how a great seducer is portrayed with vivid realism, not without a touch of irony, as he strives to demonstrate in various ways that he continues to think nostalgically about the woman with whom he spent the night even when he has returned home.

> A great seducer who has relations with many different women, when he returns from who knows where at dawn, even if sleepy, stays awake. It is delightful to see how at ease he is when he takes the inkstone, carefully grinds it, and without dashing off whatever comes to mind he write the next-morning letter with all his heart (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 182, 319-320).

As evidenced by this passage, although it was permissible to have relationships with multiple women simultaneously, it was essential for the man to leave a good impression on each one, maintaining a positive reputation as a lover over time. The woman, for her part, always anxiously awaited the morning letter after a night spent together (*kinuginu no fumi*) as concrete confirmation of the man's appreciation, which hinted at the possibility of further encounters. Thus, the excitement felt when the longed-for letter arrived was understandable, with the letter being carefully examined for how it was sent, the choice of paper, the calligraphy, and the individual words used.

> [...] you feel a surge of happiness as a slender man, dressed like an escort guard and holding an umbrella, steps through the side wall door. He hands you a letter, written on white Michinoku paper or perhaps a beautifully decorated one. The brushstroke that seals the paper where it has been tied, has dried, leaving delicate smudges at the edges. As you untie and open the letter to read it, it reveals itself to be tightly rolled and knotted, with subtle creases marking its folds. The ink fades from deep black to softer shades. The lines are dense, and the handwriting sprawls across both sides of the paper. (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 275, 430)

Several passages confirm that delays or non-delivery of the letter caused concern and embarrassment, so much so that Sei Shōnagon includes this type of situation among those that provoke the greatest anxiety, eliciting deep compassion from those who know the waiting woman.

> The heart is a creature amazingly prone to being moved. And it is even moved for another woman when the next-morning letter from the man she spent her first night is delayed in arriving (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 144, 270)

Although relationships were quite free and not bound by an indissoluble commitment, according to Sei Shōnagon both men and women were expected to understand the rules of courtship and constantly

verify rumors among others to maintain a good reputation. They also needed to be able to pick up on subtle cues to anticipate how a relationship might develop. Indeed, a passionate next-morning letter received promptly could serve as a powerful catalyst for a woman, elevating her confidence within a competitive context where she often faced rivalry and social pressure.

4. Education for sociality

In a society where people were primarily evaluated based on the sensitivity and refinement they demonstrated in every situation, receiving a proper education was crucial. In this regard, Sei Shōnagon recounts a very significant anecdote told by Empress Teishi, which discusses the advice given by the Minister of the Left, Fujiwara no Morotada (920-969), to his daughter Hōshi (??-967), who was destined to become the consort of Emperor Murakami (926-967).

> When she was still a young girl, her father gave her the following advice: "First of all, you must practice calligraphy. Then you should strive to become the best at playing the seven-string *koto*. Finally, you must study to memorize all the poems from the twenty books of the *Kokinshū*" (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 21, 54).

It was believed that aristocratic women needed to receive an education that included the study of poetry, music, and calligraphy, along with other refined arts like incense blending. Knowing poetry and being able to compose it on demand was considered an essential requirement for social communication. For this reason, girls began practicing calligraphy regularly around the age of ten, copying poems written by eminent calligraphers. This exercise, known as *tenarai* (calligraphy practice), aimed to memorize numerous poems and master beautiful handwriting, using the *Kokinwakashū* ("Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems," 905) as the main textbook. This anthology was considered an indispensable reference for describing human emotions in relation to the changing seasons, fostering an appropriate empathy with others (Kawamura 2005: 59-62). One of the main activities of ladies-in-waiting to an imperial consort or a shrine priestess was reading and producing poetry, which was considered a privileged means of communication for romantic relationships or simply for building and maintaining good relations with acquaintances. An aristocratic woman destined to become empress had among her main duties the management of a literary circle, attended by highly cultured ladies who were constantly invited to cultivate their poetic talent through the memorization of works from important anthologies (Moroi 2018: 177), which served as essential reference material for producing new, valuable verses. In the same passage where Sei Shōnagon recalls Fujiwara no Morotada's advice to his daughter, she shares an intriguing anecdote about Empress Teishi. The

Empress, demonstrating her wit and literary knowledge, recites the opening lines of selected poems from the *Kokinwakashū*. She then asks her understandably nervous and embarrassed ladies-in-waiting to complete the verses, testing whether they had memorized them correctly.

> There was another occasion when Her Majesty placed a bound book of the *Kokinshū* before her and began reciting the opening lines of various poems, inviting us to complete them. Why did we hesitate to reply, even for poems we had studied so diligently from morning to evening? Only Saishō managed to recall about ten. Others recognized merely five or six, and you might think they could have simply admitted that they couldn't remember any at all. (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 21, 53)

This type of exercise, reminiscent of *uta garuta* (poetry cards), a social game still practiced in Japan where participants compete in their knowledge of famous poems, confirms the importance of poetic culture in a world characterized by the physical separation of men and women. The letters including verses exchanged by persons who could not see each other were seen as revealing important clues about the writer's ability to express emotions. Even in a normal conversation among cultured and refined individuals it was important to refer to a well-known poetic composition, perhaps quoting some lines, as communication risked becoming difficult, if not impossible, without a solid poetic education. Especially at court, it was common to be asked to compose impromptu verses during many social occasions to confirm one's sensitivity and literary preparation. Those who did not have a good knowledge of poetry had little chance of integrating with others and would especially face inevitable failure if they ever attempted to win someone over.

As Fujiwara no Morotada points out, music study was also an essential part of women's education. During the Heian period, musical concerts, typically held in the evening, were a favorite pastime among aristocrats, offering them an opportunity to appreciate the musical talent of performers. Various string instruments were used on these occasions, including the *kin*, a type of floor harp with seven strings. The *kin* was considered particularly challenging to play, and its mastery was often regarded an effective tool for seduction (Toriimoto 2023: 51). Just like calligraphy and poetry, playing string instruments well, were necessary for socialising and establishing a good reputation thus, acquiring this skill was a highly anticipated and understandably anxious expectation for young women.

> Even when you learn to play stringed or woodwind instruments, just as with calligraphy, if you haven't made much progress, you will surely wonder when you will ever become as good as others (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 152, 279).

Music typically followed different scales depending on the seasons, and like poetry and clothing, required a trained sensitivity to perceive and internalize natural phenomena, always showing an appropriate awareness. The opening lines of the *Makura no Sōshi* represent a fundamental prelude to drawing attention to this important aspect of Heian aesthetics, as an explicit invitation to admire nature, for example, the extraordinary beauty of a spring dawn.

> In spring, the dawn is beautiful. As the light gradually illuminates the mountains, coloring their rims with red, and layers of violet clouds float in the sky (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 1, 25).

When we carefully read the entire passage that details the charm of each season, we cannot help but notice the frequent repetition of the adjective *okashi.* This term is challenging to translate with a single word, as it encompasses a range of meanings including 'interesting,' 'beautiful,' 'lovely,' 'refined,' 'curious' and 'strange' (Kristeva 1994: 21). For Sei Shōnagon, each season is defined by elements that can be described as *okashi.* Their distinctiveness inspires contemplation of the surrounding nature, fostering the development of a refined aesthetic sensitivity. In the *Makura no Sōshi,* numerous references to the natural environment can be found, particularly within the so-called 'lists,' where Sei Shōnagon presents concise catalogues of flowers, birds, and mountains. The evident purpose of these lists is to offer reference material for poetic production, drawing on conventional themes of 'secondary nature.'[3]

> Mounts are Mount Ogura. Mount Kase. Mount Mikasa. Mount Konokure. Mount Iritachi. Mount Wasurezu. [...] (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 11, 45)

The mountains mentioned here are rich in literary associations and are not only real objects. They represent *utamakura*, or poetic places that function as sounds useful for creating wordplay commonly used in poetry (Morris 1980: 14). With these lists, Sei Shōnagon seems to be testing her readers' erudition, suggesting that a composition can be understood and appreciated only if it employs a codified language shared by members of a particular social and cultural context.

Not only native poetic production but also Chinese poetry was to be part of a court lady's education. Throughout the *Makura no sōshi,* there are clear references to Chinese literature, indicating that familiarity with it was a valuable skill for engaging effectively with court gentlemen interested in continental culture. It could also be considered as a great contribution to the education of the future emperor's mother, who was believed to be able to pass on her knowledge even during pregnancy

[3] On the concept of 'secondary nature' (*nijiteki shizen*) see Shirane (2014: 1-18).

(Mostow 2001: 131). Passages referring to knowledge of Chinese language and culture can be divided into three main categories:

1. passages, mainly the 'lists,' where Sei Shōnagon flaunts her knowledge of Chinese culture to readers while discussing a particular topic;
2. passages where she culturally challenges the men of the court she interacts with;
3. passages where she interacts with Empress Teishi (Mostow 2001: 129-131).

The latter category represents situations that provide satisfaction to the writer, as they allow her to assert a certain cultural superiority and justify the privileged position she enjoyed at court. A famous passage describes how on a cold winter morning, Empress Teishi, to test her ladies' knowledge of Chinese poetry, instead of directly asking them to open the shutters to admire the fallen snow, makes a vague reference to a poem by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772-846), who was highly regarded in Japan at the time. In the poem, it is said that on a winter morning, upon waking, one cannot help but look out to contemplate the snow accumulated on Mount Kōro.

> One morning when a lot of snow had fallen, for once Her Majesty's shutters were left down. We ladies all gathered in her presence around a brazier were chatting about this and that when Her Majesty asked me: "Shōnagon, what might the snow be like on Kōro Peak?" Thereupon I immediately ordered that the shutters be lifted, and the bamboo blinds rolled up. She smiled with satisfaction, and the other ladies commented: "Even though we knew those lines that we also quote in poems, they didn't come to mind at all! Indeed, Shōnagon is perfect for serving Her Majesty!" (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 280, 433-434).

This is one of the most famous passages from the *Makura no sōshi* featured in Japanese school textbooks, demonstrating the author's extraordinary cultural knowledge.

5. Beauty tips

> Washing one's hair, applying makeup, putting on clothes well-scented with incense. On such occasions, even when no one special will see you, you feel an overwhelming sense of pleasure inside (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 27, 69-70).

The description of the pleasure experienced when taking care of oneself recurs, is often noted, in a passage announcing a detailed list of 'exciting things' (*kokoro tokimeki suru mono*). Given the lack of running water in the aristocratic residences of the Heian period, it is easy to imagine that the beauty routine was a very demanding activity. Some essential aspects of personal hygiene, such as washing one's hair, could not be performed frequently. Hair care, a symbol of female beauty and an infallible

gauge of a woman's age and health, required a lot of time and involved the cooperation of several people. Typically, a comb with a bit of rinse water obtained from the washing of rice (*yusuru*) was used to refresh the hair, and rarely, after considerable reflection and complicated calculations to determine auspicious months and days, did the much-desired washing take place. This process used the same liquid obtained from rice, which served both as a treatment and a detergent, contained in a bowl placed on a beautiful, lacquered tray (*yusurutsuki*). After washing, the hair was dried while lying down, with the help of several ladies who used the heat from a brazier to complete this laborious task (Toriimoto 2023: 37-38). Among the essential steps in body care, especially for ladies, was perfect and long-lasting makeup, necessary for public appearances. To achieve it impeccably, one had to first create a very thick white base on the face to highlight it in dimly lit environments. The product used for this purpose was a sort of fluid cream made from powder derived from rice, chestnuts, wheat, or kudzu mixed with water. Lead-based makeup, imported from China even before the Heian period, was easier to apply, but unfortunately, it later proved to be harmful to health. Once this whitish base was created, the makeup for the lips was applied, making them appear much smaller than their natural size and colored with a red powder made from safflower. Eyebrows were not left in their natural shape but were shaved and deliberately drawn thicker and higher than their normal placement (Toriimoto 2023: 39-40). This operation, known as *hikimayu*, was typical when reaching adulthood (around ten years old) and, along with the blackening of the teeth (*haguro*), was one of the distinguishing features of a girl who had become a woman and was ready for a new social role.

The completion of personal care also involved the careful selection of clothing, always chosen based on age, social position, and the current season. Court ladies-in-waiting, who had to wear formal attire in the presence of aristocratic individuals to show respect, typically wore layered clothing (*kasaneuchiki*) and paired it with a short jacket (*karaginu*) with a long train (*mo*) (Kawamura 2005: 37-39). As confirmed by detailed descriptions found in many Heian-period works, such as the *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* ("Diary of Murasaki Shikibu," 11th century) and the *Genji monogatar*i, makeup and clothing were considered fundamental elements of a woman's appearance that spoke volumes about her taste and refinement. Inaccurate or poorly done makeup could become the subject of annoying gossip, as could inappropriate clothing: not only the fabric and tailoring but also the color combinations, always suitable for the rank and in harmony with the season, were carefully evaluated before a public appearance. In this regard, the passage from the *Makura no sōshi* where Sei Shōnagon reflects on the color combinations of Empress Teishi's attire in preparation to receive her sister Genshi (980?-1002), who had become consort to the future Emperor Sanjō (976-1017), is illuminating.

> Her Majesty was draped in two plum-pink cloaks, one crafted from rich brocade and the other adorned with embossed patterns on three scarlet robes of glossed silk. "Plum-pink is more beautiful when paired with deep purple, she remarked. "It is a pity I cannot wear it. At this time of the year, it is probably better not to wear plum-pink, but I have never been fond of color like spring-shoot green. Do you think this color pairs well with the scarlet?" (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 100, 200).

The reference to plum-pink (*kōbairo*) in this passage does not seem accidental, given that it was a very popular color among aristocratic women of the time who loved the flower that came from China. The rule was that it could be worn from the middle of the eleventh month until the second month, so it was no longer considered appropriate for an event organized after the middle of the second month (Toriimoto 2023: 66).

Colors, fabrics, dyeing, and perfumes were the standard measures used in the Heian period to judge the quality of clothing and, by extension, the person wearing it (Pandey 2017: 46). However, a necessary precondition for appearing attractive to others was primarily youth, which marked a woman as sexually desirable. This was especially important in a society where her main function was to bear enough children to ensure the continuation of the family and forge new alliances. Sei Shōnagon notes that no matter how meticulously a woman might appear, the inevitable physical decline risked making her seem inadequate not only as a mother but also as a wife. In the passage listing what is 'out of place' (*nigenaki mono*), one can discern a genuine warning to all women of a certain age.

> A mature woman pregnant, walking around. It is unbearable when she has a young husband and even worse if she gets hungry because he is seeing another woman. (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 43, 101)

In Sei Shōnagon's world, a mature woman is inevitably seen as unattractive and thus unacceptable even as the protagonist of a romantic idyll.

> It would have been more impressive if the lady-in-waiting behind the screen, responding to the gentleman on the other side, had been a young girl with beautiful hair flowing all around her, just as described in the tales. But unfortunately, I was a mature woman well beyond my youth. My hair, perhaps because it was no longer really mine, seemed sparse and unruly here and there [...] (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 79, 142-143).

In this scene, the male protagonist, Fujiwara no Tadanobu (933-994), is described as the typical charming hero of romantic tales, while Sei Shōnagon is portrayed as a sort of anti-heroine, being a mature woman, whose faded beauty is incontrovertibly evidenced by her hair. She is clearly a woman who no longer fits the ideal model of a young, attractive lady-in-waiting who was supposed to entertain the gentlemen of the court and win their favors.

Sei Shōnagon offers many insights and advice on beauty, particularly for woman at court, but she also highlights the strict social codes and expectations that governed court life. While she describes the value placed on youthful beauty and elegance, she acknowledges that the opportunities for woman to stand out are more limited as they age. In the highly hierarchical and appearance-focused world of Heian court, a woman's worth was often tied to her beauty, and as time passed, older women were seen as less prominent and influential. Sei Shōnagon, however often presents this reality with a certain pragmatism, while also emphasizing the importance of charm, wit, and the ability to navigate the complex social dynamics of the court.

6. Social etiquette

Not only does the aesthetic aspect distinguish refined people, but also their impeccable manners. Attention to behavior and respect for others is a topic on which Sei Shōnagon places great emphasis, recalling, for example, the importance of using appropriate language in various life situations (Matsuo and Nagai, 1997, dan 186, 324), or highlighting the necessity of maintaining decorum when receiving men at court (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 187, 325-326). To illustrate the importance attributed to social etiquette, a specific passage provides readers with a reminder of *nikuki mono*, or 'disappointing things' that unexpectedly level people, animals, or things on the same plane.

> Disappointing things. A guest who arrives and lingers to talk precisely when you have something urgent to attend to. If it is someone you can treat without much formality, you can try to send them away by saying, "We'll talk about it another time", however, if it is a person that you must treat with respect, it is a disappointing situation. A hair that falls on the inkstone, and you accidentally mix it in while grinding with the inkstick. There is also the harsh scraping sound when a small piece of stone gets caught in the ink. An exorcist you cannot find in his usual place just when someone suddenly falls ill. You wait a long time while they search for him. Finally, they succeed in finding him, and you feel a sense of relief as he begins the exorcism rites. However, it seems that exhaustion from dealing with other possessing spirits earlier has taken its toll. No sooner does he sit and begin chanting than his voice quickly grows drowsy. This is thoroughly disappointing (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 26, 64-65).

In this lengthy passage, various disappointing things are discussed in succession: an unexpected guest arriving when we are busiest, an exorcist who cannot be found exactly when needed, people making inappropriate or vulgar gestures in daily life, as well as an annoying hair stuck to the inkstone, the buzzing of a mosquito, and the creaking of a carriage's wheels. The deliberate lack of distinction between very different situations emphasizes that a person who disregards the rules of good manners is as unbearable as a hair accidentally fallen on the inkstone, a bothersome mosquito, or a noisy

carriage. Sei Shōnagon emphasizes that the good manners of an elegant and refined person must reveal, in every circumstance, consideration and deep respect for others—what today the Japanese would sum up with the term *omoiyari*. This is a particular sensitivity which implicates to guess others' feelings and pay careful attention to their feelings, accepting what happened (or will happen to others) as what has happened (or will happen) to oneself (Amanuma 2004).

During the Heian period, a well-educated and refined individual was expected to leave a lasting impression of their elegance in every situation. For this reason, it was essential to captivate those with a keen sense of hearing and smell even in environments where sliding doors, blinds, screens, and fans limited direct interaction. In such settings, a person's presence could still be distinctly perceived through subtle cues. Not surprisingly, Sei Shōnagon extensively discusses *kokoronikuki mono* ('fascinating things'), an expression difficult to translate, given that the adjective *kokoronikushi* refers to something which intrigues us because it seems charming and refined even if it is not clearly visible. This might be an imperceptible sound or a light fragrance that attracts someone's attention, instantly stimulating the imagination and a pleasant memory associated with certain sensations. Sei Shōnagon provides a series of examples to clarify this challenging concept.

> Fascinating things. It is delightful to hear, through something which separate us, the sound of someone, who does not seem like a lady-in-waiting, softly and elegantly clapping her hands to call someone. Then you can hear a youthful voice respond and the swish of silk robes as someone arrives. Behind something like sliding paper doors we can guess that someone on the other side is having a meal. How lovely is the sound of chopsticks, spoons, and other things mixing together! We startle at the metallic clink of a pouring-pot handle suddenly falling sideways and knocking against the pot. Hair swept back gently over a robe that shines with a smooth luster, subtly suggesting the hair full length (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 190, 329).

A slight clap of hands to call the servants, the prompt response of a fresh and gentle voice, the rustling of silk robes, the noise of utensils at mealtime, and the hair falling delicately on a glossy silk robe. These are examples united by the preference for an oblique mode of visuality[4] which involves perceiving with hearing or smell what is not visible, drawing on our personal experience. This perception, characteristic of the refined sensitivity of the Heian period, recurs in various poetic compositions of the *Kokinwakashū*, where something invisible is imagined based on previous experience. Awareness of the cyclical nature of the seasons allows the poet to see even what is not before his eyes, perceiving, as expressed in a famous poem by Ki no Tsurayuki (872-945), the arrival of spring even in darkness through the fragrance of plum blossoms filling the air (Lamarre 2000: 171-173).

[4] On this topic see also Konishi (1978: 71) and Lalonde (2019: 22-25).

Ume no hana	When spring comes,
niou harube wa	the scent of plum's flowers
Kurabuyama	though I cross Mount Kurabu
yami ni koyuredo	in the darkness
shiruku zo arikeru	clearly reveals its presence

(Ozawa and Matsuda 1994: I, n. 39, 43).

What is not visible has the power to stimulate the imagination and fascinates much more than what appears distinctly before our eyes. This concept applies equally to both things and people around us. According to Sei Shōnagon, people should not focus solely on appearing elegant during official occasions or in direct interaction with others. They should pay close attention, especially to how their voice, movements, fragrance, or even the rustling of their robes can be perceived from afar. These are small but revealing hints that can make us imagine even the appearance of a person still unknown who speaks and moves beyond a thin wall.

Even fragrance plays a crucial role in communicating someone's sought-after elegance from a distance, whether it is a man or a woman, as evidenced by the intoxicating and lingering scent left by a charming gentleman after his visit.

> The fragrance of incense is the most fascinating thing. I still remember the wonderful scent that wafted from Captain Tadanobu as he sat by the little door of Her Majesty's apartments, leaning against the blinds one day during the long rains of the fifth month. The blend was so refined that its ingredients were impossible to distinguish. Naturally, the moisture of the rainy day enhanced the scent, but how could one not take notice of it? It was no wonder that the following day, the younger ladies were so deeply impressed at the way the scent seemed to linger on the blinds he had rested against (Matsuo and Nagai 1997: dan 190, 332).

Incense played an important role in aristocratic society because people rarely saw each other and one of the few means of forming an opinion of a men or a woman was precisely the scent emanating from his or her quarters. It is interesting to note that "in the *The Tale of Genji*, that register of taste, the social utility of incense extends into the realms of literary technique: for here the author develops and defines her characters through the device of incense" (Gatten 1977: 39).

The production of incense achieved from the skillful blending of fragrant woods, plants, and animal substances used to scent garments was considered a highly sought-after art comparable to poetry and music and, like them, reflected the cyclical passage of the seasons through the skillful use of different ingredients (Toriimoto 2023: 144-146). The fragrance announced a hidden presence, allowing a person to imagine what could not be seen with the eyes, making it immediately more important and desirable. This strategy of emphasizing a presence through its obscuring is reminiscent

of the concept of the 'hidden Buddha' (*hibitsu*), where a Buddha's icon is concealed inside a temple to diminish its profane nature and materiality, thereby enhancing its sacrality (Rambelli 2002: 295).

In the Heian period, the custom of not making a woman's physical appearance visible led men to focus on details that could be intercepted even without visual contact. The *kaimami* which represents the moment in literary works when a woman is 'discovered' for the first time by a man, demonstrates the involvement of sight along with other senses that collect preliminary information about the female presence: the fragrance, voices, and music from her apartments are valuable clues gathered by the visitor before even seeing the woman (Lalonde 2019: 50-52). Even the construction of aristocratic residences (*shindenzukuri*), which replicates the concentric structure of a temple within which a sacred object is hidden, adheres to the ideal of an 'oblique vision.' It urges the potential visitor to move from the most polluted outer area to the purest interior, where the body of the woman, associated with fertility and fragility, is protected. The mechanism of various protective layers characterizing the environment in which she lives serves to ensure her safety, allowing her to decide whether and how to reveal herself according to the circumstances. Contrary to what one might imagine, women in the Heian period were not always passive victims of strong and authoritarian men but had the opportunity to present a fragmented view of themselves through an intriguing game of gradual revelation. For these reasons the *kaimami* should not be interpreted as a violation of a defenseless female body but rather as a precise external alert signal that the woman can perceive and use to her advantage. In the *Makura no sōshi* 'erotic desire between men and women becomes a game for skilled players on both sides, with the woman playing as active a role as her man counterpart' (Sarra 1999: 257). Sei Shōnagon's perspective underscores the idea that women should not merely conform to societal expectations of grace and decorum but should actively harness the power of how they present themselves. By carefully managing their appearance, movements, voice, and even the way their presence is perceived from a distance, women could wield influence without necessarily asserting it directly. This form of 'controlled visibility' allowed women to navigate complex social dynamics, enabling them to maintain autonomy while still conforming to the cultural norms of the time. Sei Shōnagon's work seems to be written with the intention of making woman aware that social interaction is a dual act of observing and being observed, requiring them to carefully monitor all the information they wish to convey to others.

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Carolina Negri is Associate Professor of Japanese Language and Literature at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her scholarly interests lie at the intersection of literature and gender studies. She examines the political and cultural roles of ladies-in-waiting in Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) Japan, delving into how their writings reflect their experiences and the societal structures that shaped their lives. Her research sheds light on the complexities of female identity in a male-dominated society, exploring themes of power, agency, and creativity. Currently, she is interested in the representation of sociality in women's literature produced in the Heian and Kamakura period. Her contributions as editor-in-chief of a new history of pre-modern Japanese literature further emphasize her dedication to expanding the field and making it accessible to a broader audience. Her publications include: *Tra corte, casa e monastero. La vita di una donna nel Giappone del Medioevo* (Venezia, 2021), *Diario di Murasaki Shikibu* (Venezia, 2015), *Diario di Izumi Shikibu* (Venezia, 2008) and *Le memorie della dama di Sarashina* (Venezia, 2005).
Carolina can be contacted at: carolina.negri@unive.it