Serious Humor in Sei Shónagon's *Pillow Book*

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Topics of Japanese Thought—PHIL 285

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The aristocratic women of the Heian period in Japan are accredited with creating some of the best writing in Japanese history, producing poetry, dramas, and novels all using various forms and styles while exploring the nature of Japanese culture and society.[1] However, it was the forms in which "style was inseparable from substance" that were the only ones considered worthwhile,[2] meaning that the nature of the thought of the work should mirror the work's style of presentation. One of the most celebrated works is the diary of Murasaki Shikibu, which details the women in her court as well as proper behavior for Japanese aristocratic women. One such woman detailed in this piece is Sei Shónagon, one of Shikibu's literary rivals and one for whom she held little respect. Shónagon's most famous work, *The Pillow Book*, has been widely regarded as an insignificant, though humorous, depiction of Heian court life. It is easy to lose the writing's depth in the playfulness of Shónagon's style, but one must remember that such apposite observations of relationships and society come from a critical eye. Though Sei Shónagon's *Pillow Book* may appear to be a trifling presentation of the aristocratic women of the Heian period, closer inspection of the function of satire as a literary art form suggests that Shónagon's message is more or less the same as—if not more insightful than—Murasaki Shikibu's diary, despite their seeming disparities.

What the Eye Can See

Shikibu's diary provides specific descriptions of a court ritual, the prescribed manner in which women of the court should act, and whether or not these women met those standards. In very simplistic language, much of her writing focuses on appearance:

[1] Rui Zhu, "Topics in Japanese Thought," *Lake Forest College* (October 20, 2010).
[2] Penny Weiss, "Sei Shnagón and the Politics of Form," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (Purdue University) 16, no. 1 (2008): 26-47.

she informs the reader that there are colors only certain women were allowed to wear, she examines the fans that women carried with them, and she even includes descriptions of the physical stature of some of the women.[3] Her writing style exactly matches the content and her intended message—with descriptive language, she simply describes what she observes, no more, no less. The imagery of "folding screens," "ladies-in-waiting," women with their hair dressed in "white cords,"[4] etc, provides a rich visual setting without a divulgence into its reason for being. From this, she builds the culture of the court as one rich in appearance yet humble in manner, at least in theory.

Shikibu devotes several pages to expounding upon her opinion of the aristocratic women around her. Though she just describes what she sees, the descriptions are often her given opinion of these women, and she does not shy away from scathing judgment. For instance, she considers Lady Koshóshó "noble and charming" for her "childlike purity" and "[enviable] manners."[5] It is clear that Shikibu views the ability to maintain grace and diplomacy as a virtue. As she never restrains from singling out those who break social rules, there is no doubt that this ability was also a social expectation of women during the Heian period. One of the women who breaks this expectation is Sei Shónagon, who Shikibu viewed as "vain and reckless" and "a very proud person" who "indulge[d] too much in emotion, even when she ought to [have been] reserved."[6] Clearly, Shikibu held her contemporary with contempt, which would imply that Shikibu probably detested Sei Shónagon's writing as well.

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[3] Murasaki Shikibu, "The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu," in *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, ed. Donald Keene, trans. Annie Shepley Omori and Kóchi Doi, 145-155 (New York: Grove Press, 1955).
[4] Ibid., 147-149
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 152

The Pillow Book seems like a light-hearted rendition of the trivialities of a woman's life and her relationships in the court. Shónagon dramatically describes reactions to everyday situations. For example, she details the unnecessary urgency with which one waits for the response to a letter all day long only to receive the same note, "finger-marked and smudged" with a message that the recipient was unavailable.[7] Instead of taking a serious tone, as does Shikibu, Shónagon hyperbolically heightens the gravity of this inconsequential event, creating a comedic depiction of the situation to highlight its absurdity. Her sarcastic, witty style defines the rest of the work, even as she portrays the relationship between herself and her Empress. In one of her tales, Shónagon's Empress continues to press her to write a poem about one of her excursions, but Shónagon cannot deliver. Instead of being rebuked for her negligence, however, the Empress simply laughs. The portrayal of this relationship and that of Shikibu to her Queen are remarkably different—whereas the Queen respected Shikibu for her reverence,[8] the Empress simply finds comedy in Shónagon's inability to fulfill her given task.[9] Surely Shikibu would have scorned Shónagon's carelessness.

Shónagon also disdainfully comments on relationships with men, depicting several inconsequential scenes of men possessing less-than-desirable manners. Take the two following excerpts as an example: She explains how "one is always irritated" when someone of interest repeatedly refers to an old lover[10] and also postulates, "the success of a lover depends greatly on his method of departure."[11] She clearly focuses on minor

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[7] Sei Shónagon, "The Pillow Book of Sei Shónagon," in *Anthropology of Japanese Literature*, ed. Donald Keene, trans. Arthur Waley, 137-144 (New York: Grove Press, 1955).
[8] Shikibu, "Diary," 154.
[9] Shónagon, "Pillow Book," 143-144.
[10] Ibid., 138.
[11] Ibid.

events with such intensity that it is unavoidably laughable. But this comedy is not just as simple as providing a good laugh. Rather, she intentionally highlights situations that she finds trivial and emphasizes overreactions in an attempt to mock her own society. This literary device is known as satire.

The Function of Satire

Satire can be defined as "a literary work characterized by irony, wit, and sometimes sarcasm intended to highlight human vices often in an implicit effort to initiate change or reform. Like comedy, satire generates laughter; unlike comedy, it is not meant purely to entertain, but to provoke a moral response."[12] Because of the comedic nature of satires, their critical response to society, politics, and culture is often overlooked. To understand satire, one must also have knowledge of the culture from whence the work originated. Once this knowledge is attained, one can see the areas in which the satirical author wishes to examine and bring into question. Sei Shónagon's satire is subtler than that of other works defined similarly. In order to garner a better understanding of the function of satire, let us turn to one of the clearest examples of literary satire: Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock,* which was written in and about the time of the early 18th century.

Satire in *The Rape of the Lock*

The Rape of the Lock provides an account of Belinda, a young woman of high status, and the unfortunate event that ruins her prized semblance. In Canto 2, Pope details

[12] Lake Forest College English Department, "Handbook for English Majors." s.v. "satire."

how the heroine, Belinda, prepares for the day, sarcastically describing her actions with utmost importance. For instance, Pope likens Belinda's efforts of putting on make-up and dressing her hair to that of a warrior preparing for battle. When Belinda opens her vanity cabinet, "unnumbered treasures ope *(sic)* at once, and here / The various offerings of the world appear; / From each she nicely culls with curious toil"[13] until she gathers every necessary piece for her armory. This melodramatic presentation is meant to engender laughter, but it also prepares the reader for a discussion of the society's roles for women.

In Canto 3, after Belinda has made herself up and entered into a card tournament with a few men, one male guest dares to cut off a piece of her hair in jest. The action is not received with humor and incites a debate over the gravity of the matter, becoming the incidence known as the rape of the lock. In Canto 5, one woman, Clarissa, speaks to the fleeting nature of beauty, regarding it as the only thing over which women have control when they are young.[14] Belinda would have had very little control over her life in the early 18th century—her success as a woman would have depended solely on the success of her husband, and as she was a bachelorette, her only success would then be in attracting a husband. In this sense, she must rely on her beauty to avoid growing into an old maid, thus giving beauty as much bearing in the world as skill in battle.[15] Suddenly, Pope's sarcastic portrayal of Belinda at her toilet becomes justified. Clarissa relays this message with clear logic, but from her audience, "no applause ensued."[16] Through this reaction, Pope stresses the human vice that his satire ridicules—its members are

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[13] Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock," Vol. 1, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Julia Reidhead, Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, 2513-2531 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 2517-2518.
[14] Ibid., 2524-2532.
[15] Richard Mallette, "English Literature II: 17th-18th Centuries," *Lake Forest College* (April 2009).
[16] Pope, "The Rape of the Lock," 2529.

incapable of understanding reason and fail to see its flaws. Though he does not directly state "No one in my society listens to reason," the sentiment is clearly implied. Sei Shónagon uses a similar tactic in her *Pillow Book.*

Satire in *The Pillow Book*

There is no audience in Sei Shónagon's *Pillow Book*, so even though her implications may be less apparent, the satire is still just as immanent. Shónagon has an unbelievable talent to make readers aware of their own aggrandized responses while simultaneously encouraging them to laugh about their absurdities. Reconsider the passage wherein Shónagon demonstrates the disappointment one feels when a letter is returned as undeliverable. It is humorous because it is relatable and because it parodies the situation. As in *The Rape of the Lock*, the emotions are dramatized, ascribing diction such as "dismally depressing" and a sense of urgency to a rather mundane affair.[17] In this instance, Shónagon draws attention to the courteous social rule that asks for people to respond to letters but which is also regrettably not obliged. Also, if we look again at Shónagon's account of her relationship with men, we can see that underneath the humor lies an apt observation of how women were unfavorably treated. If a man does constantly refer to an old lover and repeatedly leaves every morning in haste,[18] he shows little respect to the woman who is currently with him. It is as if her presence as a person is not as important as her role as a lover. In addition, Shónagon highlights the ineffectiveness of women who have power in the court. Reconsider the relationship between Shónagon and her empress. The Empress is just as concerned with trivial matters as she, as throughout

[17] Shónagon, "Pillow Book," 137.
[18] Ibid., 138.

the story, the empress never encounters any issue of consequence—all that is depicted is a tale of an impromptu journey and a request for a poem about it. In *The Rape of the Lock*, the reader is shown society's imperfections through Clarissa's logic, but in *The Pillow Book*, one must find this logic on one's own.

However, we must remember that Shónagon is Japanese and not English, like Pope, and therefore, she adheres to a different aesthetic style. Daisetz T. Suzuki defines one of the characteristics of Japanese aesthetics as "an appreciation of transcendental aloofness in the midst of multiplicity—which is known as *wabi*."[19] Satire in itself is rather robust for an appreciation of art that calls for simplicity so that the audience may fill in the blanks themselves. In this sense, then, perhaps Shónagon avoids a discussion in reflection of this aesthetic value. On the other hand, the Japanese also attempted to avoid philosophy altogether, rather wishing to accept things as they are without investigating the complexity of its existence. Shónagon stays clear from philosophy, as she does not include a discussion, but I would not go as far to say that she wanted to accept things just as they were—the above analysis in the frame of satire proves this idea, and her behavior in public furthers this idea.

Luckily, given Shikibu's diary, we have an idea of Shónagon's character and can thus bolster the evidenced satire in *The Pillow Book* through Shónagon's own conduct in society. If Shikibu is correct in assessing Shónagon as crass,[20] then Shónagon had actively defied the accepted role of women's behavior. Because Shónagon's description of court life is so obviously hyperbolized, this act of defiance was likely intentional—if no one would take her writing seriously, perhaps her actions would have drawn attention

[19] Daisetz To. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 11th Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 22.
[20] Shikibu, "Diary," 152.

to her message. Had she included such a strong-minded message in her writing, however, the consequences for the rejection of social norms may have been ruinous in a society that admonishes all who step out of place.[21] In truth, Shónagon had few options.

As a woman of the court, she did not have much else than the trivial interactions that she depicts in her *Pillow Book*. Women who were not in a position of power held very little power at all. She lived to serve her Empress and answer her every bidding.[22] As this was her job, she could pursue no other business endeavor, as did some women of lesser nobility (the *toji*) during the Heian period.[23] Also, during the Heian period, men viewed women's thoughts as inferior. This sentiment was expanded to include even the type of writing that women were allowed to use—*hiragana*, which is the original Japanese alphabet. No man would ever deign to use *hiragana*. Instead, men wrote using Chinese script, which was considered more sophisticated. Because women did not write with Chinese characters, they were automatically disregarded as philosophical thinkers.[24] So even Shónagon's writing, her greatest skill, could never have societal impact or even the possibility of being praised outside of the court. In essence, her greatest strength was essentially inconsequential. With this in mind, it is possible that Shónagon disliked her circumstance and wrote about her disposition in protest, though we can only guess.

What Shónagon's motivation truly was is impossible to know for certain, but her message is still clear. We can deduce by her topics that she recognized the superficiality of the court and wrote about it with such ridicule in hopes that people would see their own shallowness and possibly change. However, as Shónagon was probably aware, the

[21] Zhu, "Japanese Thought," (2010).
[22] Yoshie and Goodwin, "Gender in Early Classical Japan," 470.
[23] Ibid., 471.
[24] Weiss, "Politics of Form," 32.

likelihood of this event, especially triggered by a woman's observations, was doubtful. And yet, regardless of the reaction she hoped to incite, her message was to relay the hypocrisy and superficiality of the people of her court. In an odd sense, Shikibu's message was the same, though she was more than likely unaware of this connection.

Similar Messages, Different Intent

Both Shónagon and Shikibu detail the superficiality of the courts, they just do so under different guises. Whereas Shónagon despises this aspect of the courts, Shikibu relishes in it, unaware of her vanity. As we have seen, Shónagon highlights the trivial actions that cause overreactions and superficial qualities of people and objects. Let us use another example. When the Empress wanted to venture to Kamo Shrine to hear the cuckoos, she could only take a few of her ladies. The others were "very much disappointed," but the Empress and her group "drove off rather hardheartedly without attempting to console them or indeed worrying about them at all."[25] Though the Empress in no way admonished the other ladies, they took offense to her exclusion. Moreover, none of the ladies or the Empress even cared that their actions caused such distress. Throughout the rest of the retelling, Shónagon satirically makes superficial judgments, saying such things as "no one seemed much interested in its contents" and "not a soul did we meet, save one or two wretched priests or other such uninteresting people."[26] Both remarks are judgments based on superficial observation. Shónagon's assessments, through the use of satire, imply that superficiality is an ugly attribute of court women.

[25] Shónagon, "Pillow Book," 140.
[26] Ibid., 141.

Shikibu, on the other hand, makes superficial observations and attributes her subsequent opinions to depth of analysis. She spends most of her time in her diary observing the appearance of things. A few examples are when she notes how and when the "folding screens" were placed, the dress of women, and the size of their stature.[27] When she begins to analyze specific women in the court, she mostly relates their semblance and demeanor. At one point, she remarks, "If I go on describing ladies' manners"—(though she mainly describes their appearance)—"I shall be called an old gossip, so I must refrain from talking about those around me,"[28] and yet she continues her scrutiny. Later, she pines over "freeing [herself] from the reproach of shallowness,"[29] but she is shallow herself. Her message of superficiality was largely present, though it may not have been her intent.

The Plot Thickens

In a rather humorous way, both authors exhibited the frivolous nature of the court women, but it is the *Pillow Book* that provides a stronger message because of Shónagon's insight. Not only does she relay the shallow nature of those around her, but she is aware of this nature as well. However, she conceals these observations using satire. As exhibited earlier, critical analysis reveals Shónagon's actual interpretation of the behavior she depicts.

However, the end of Shónagon's story concerning her Empress takes an interesting twist—she begins to ridicule herself and her status. The Empress teases

[27] Ibid., 147-150.
[28] Ibid., 149-150.
[29] Ibid., 151.

Shónagon for her unreliability, and Shónagon haughtily defends her actions: "I don't see anything to be ashamed of. I have made up my mind only to make poems when I feel inclined to. […] As it is, not having the slightest degree of special talent in that direction, I object strongly to being perpetually thrust forward and made to behave as though I thought myself a genius."[30] Firstly, Shónagon shows that though her place may require her to respect the Empress' every behest, she chooses to follow her own bidding, stepping out of her social place. Secondly, she defends her position by belittling herself, assuring others that she is not brilliant. The tone in this explanation is serious, contrasting highly with the rest of the piece's aloof-sounding qualities. Yet, in the context of the scene, the others are laughing at Shónagon for the seriousness she attributes to poetry much in the same way Shónagon mocks the overreactions they have to seemingly trivial events. She finally dares to define something of consequence, though, as discussed earlier, women's writing was not thought of as profound in the Heian period, and so this observation is null.[31] Here, Shónagon seems to satirize the importance she ascribes to writing.

What, exactly, is Shónagon expressing with this sudden flip in the object of ridicule? Perhaps she is trying to portray that because trivial situations are approached with unwarranted significance, matters of true importance never receive the proper amount of attention. Suddenly, when pressed with a true issue, no one has the awareness to recognize the gravity of the situation. And let us not forget that it is society that deems women's writing frivolous—thus the others, who are blind followers of social rules, mock Shónagon with sincerity. Or perhaps Shónagon is expressing how everyone—including herself—falls victim to taking trivial matters too seriously. Her character, who

[30] Shónagon, *Pillow Book*, 144.
[31] Weiss, "Politics of Form," 32.

throughout the book maintains a satiric tone, suddenly becomes overworked at a slight made about her writing ability. Even the matter of writing the poem seems trivial in itself, as seen in the Empress' insouciant attitude towards her request for Shónagon to write a poem. Though she asks for a poem several times, she only laughs about the matter in the end when she does not receive one.[32] It seems as though Shónagon may have been mocking herself. We may not know Shónagon's exact intentions for her *Pillow Book*, but we can safely assume that it is a satiric commentary of the court life that she knew.

Though *The Pillow Book* may seem inconsequential at first glance, careful inspection shows how the nature of satire provides insight to Japanese aristocratic society and its hypocrisies, which, when compared, illuminates the false virtue in the highly celebrated diary of Murasaki Shikibu. However, because of social norms and beliefs, Shónagon's *Pillow Book* was disregarded as merely humorous musings of court women during the Heian period. It does seem as if she is simply bemused by the conundrum she witnesses, but her message is clear nonetheless—Shónagon attempts not only to depict court life, but to do so in such a way as would shed light on the imperfections of court society. If she had wanted to affect change, her position in society would not have allowed it, and thus the most she could do was push the boundaries of the walls defining her place in society. It is simple to fall into the trap of viewing satiric work as merely comic, but doing so deprives the reader of the depth it implies. The power of laughter is equal to the power of tears despite its light-hearted nature, and if we deign not to examine humor seriously, we chance losing a wittingly prepared and cogitative critique of the world we think we know so well.

[32] Shónagon, "Pillow Book," 143-144.

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