

# Writing Behind a Screen

*The Pillow Book* , sections 1-  
51

(October 14, 2003)



# What kind of book is this?

- Style
- Narrative ordering
- Subject matter
- Speaker's personality
- Relation to an outside world
- What's left unspoken
- Like or unlike the *Crito*?
  - A word of caution about cultural typing



# How to read it?

- As a novel (fiction)?
- As a diary (fact)?
- As a notebook (sketches)?
- As a series of prose poems?
- Available genres:

- Chronicles

- nikki (日記) (“diary”),

- casual writing (雑言)

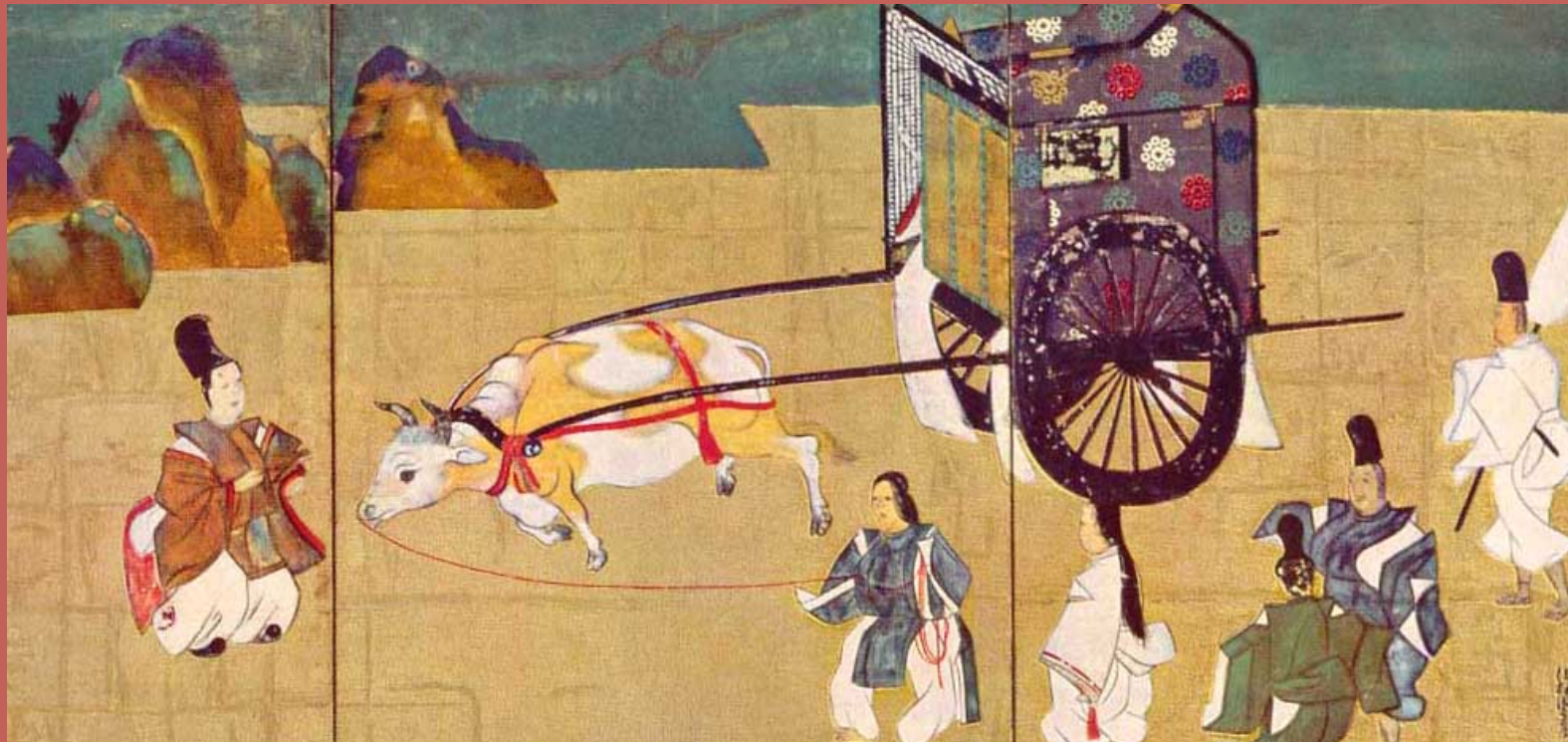
- “n” (日記)



# What's in a list?

■ Section 13: “Depressing Things”

■ Section 14: “Hateful Things”



# “The Lesser Recorder of Words”

- Sei Shōnagon (白河院), ca. 965-ca. 1020?
- □ (Kiyowara, Chinese pron. Sei): clan name
  - Literary and official family, famous for its poets
- Ca. 993-1001: lady-in-waiting to Empress Sadako



# Writing in 'Japanese' ...

■ A “feminine” medium?





【九】うへにさぶらふ御猫は、かうぶりにて命婦のおとどとて、いみじうをか  
 しければかしづかせ給ふが、はしにいでてふしたるに、乳母の馬の命婦、「あな  
 まさなや。入り給へ」とよぶに、日のさし入りたるに、ねぶりてゐたるを、お  
 どすとて、「翁丸、いづら。命婦のおとどくへ」といふに、まことかとして  
 ものははしりかかりたれば、おびえまどひて御簾のうちに入りぬ。

朝餉のおまへに、うへおはしますに、御覽じていみじうおどろかせ給ふ。  
 を御ふところに入れさせ給ひて、をのことも召せば、藏人忠隆、なりな  
 たらば、「この翁丸うちてうじて、犬島へつかはせ。ただいま」とおほせらるれ

古事記上卷 并序

臣安萬侶言。夫、混元既凝、氣象未レ效。無レ名無レ爲。誰ニ其

形。然、乾坤初分、參神作ニ造化之首、陰陽斯開、二靈爲ニ其  
 之祖。所以、出ニ入幽顯、日月彰ニ於洗目、浮ニ沈海水、神

於滌身。故、太素杳冥、因ニ本教ニ而識ニ孕レ土産レ嶋之時、  
 綿邈、賴ニ先聖ニ而察ニ生レ神立レ人之世。寔知、懸レ鏡吐レ珠、而百

王相續、喫レ劍切レ蛇、以萬神蕃息與。議ニ安河ニ而平ニ天下、論ニ

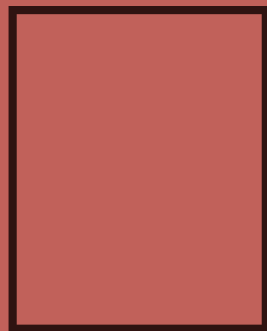
Sino-Japanese, from Kojiki

Sei Shōnagon's writing

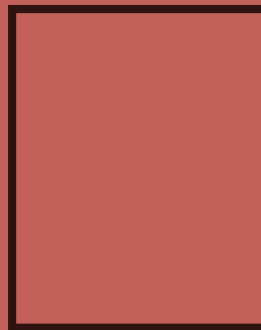
# Same origins, different functions

■ Ch. “mei,” J. “bi”  
(represents the  
word or concept of

‘beautiful’)



■ J. hiragana “ma”  
(represents syllable)





# ... but thinking in Chinese?

- Section 51: “Grass Hut”
- Battle of wits
- Having cards and showing them
- Reputation, curiosity, value
- Interplay between male and female worlds, between Chinese and Japanese learning
- Sei Shōnagon vs. Murasaki Shikibu



# A chessboard packed with daughters

- Fujiwara clan (Empress Sadako's family)
- Fujiwara no Michitaka, empress's father and chief minister (d. 995)
- Struggle between empress's brother, F. no Korechika, and uncle, F. no Michinaga, for supremacy
- Michinaga wins; Sadako demoted, Michinaga's daughter Akiko becomes chief consort



# The rules of the game

- Court life
- Emperor vs. father-in-law of emperor
- (father-in-law is grandfather of next emperor)
- Women and political power: “set apart,” indispensable but impotent
- Sei Shōnagon’s loyalties



# Jade Tower and Grass Hut

- Section 7: “When the Empress moved”
- Section 12: “When I make myself imagine”
- Section 49: “It was during one of Her Majesty’s periods of residence”
- Living on the outside



# Inhabited space

- How do actors in this drama recognize each other, maneuver for authority, pursue their desires, resign themselves to the inevitable, through the organization of space?
- Architecture, maps, room decoration
- Letters and poems
- Dogs and shoes
- It's all meaningful

