

The 'feeling of things':

Communication, Boundaries,
Women

in *Pillow Book*, sections 126-185

October 21, 2003

Communicative Triumphs: conversation as a strategy game



Sections 89, 157

Having the last word

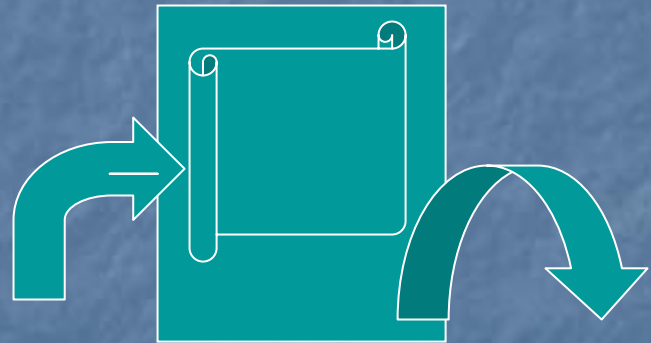
- Competition
 - 'I understand you, you don't understand me'
 - Shonagon and Tadanobu
 - Men and women – Shonagon and Yukinari
 - Servants and masters
- The rewards

Boundaries

- ... Create and indicate difference
 - Screens of state
 - Visibility of the imperial couple (cf sec 70)
- ... Correlate with communication
 - Being an "insider"
 - Letters
- ... Are vulnerable to attack
 - Okinomaro (sec. 8)

Communication

- Speaking through things (gifts, tokens)
 - Plum blossoms
 - Snow
 - A bit of seaweed
- Exchanges
- Competitions



Communication as a game

- An ecology of meaning
- An utterance is a move
- All players are simultaneously judges too
- Standards of reference: prior moves, the usual and expected moves, ideals from fiction
- The limits of the game
 - Grace and favor

Role play

- Empress Sadako's forced retirement
 - Intrusion of tragedy into the world of beautiful surfaces?
- Sei Shonagon's exile from the (exiled) empress's court
- How the part of the neglected woman should be played (sec. 112, sec. 94)
- Aesthetic fatalism? Recognition of limits?

Transgressions

- Writing as an experiment with boundaries, with rank, with autonomy
 - Compare section 62: "A man snatches a letter..."
 - Section 51: "I was most vexed at the idea that all those gentlemen had been sitting in judgment on me without my knowledge."

The Tale of Genji, chapter 51

- Nakanokimi: "It's not good manners to look at private notes between women." "You really must let me see them," said Prince Niou. "What might it be like, I wonder, a letter from one woman to another?"
- Voyeurism?
- Discovery of individuality?

“I still regret”

- Section 184: “This notebook of mine happened to be lying on the mat, but I did not notice it in time. I snatched at the book... but the Captain instantly took it off with him...”
- Section 185: “Everything that I have seen and felt is included.... I was careful to keep my book hidden. But now it has become public, which is the last thing I expected.”

(My) life as (my) art

- Sei Shōnagon's role as narrator
 - The games of description, narration (history), evaluation: all prescribed in courtier's role
 - Autobiography: not prescribed in that role (your social "score" should suffice for that)
- The book as substitute for the body
 - It goes where the female body can't go
 - Regret and renown

One judgment

- “So we have Sei Shōnagon, who left this world, bequeathing only her carefree laughter and ready wit on that splendid paper she received from Empress Teishi [=Sadako]. *The Pillow Book* is truly, and through and through, the legacy in prose of ‘a skilled performance.’ How many tears of blood did she shed over its pages?— no one can sneak a peek inside the bamboo blinds of a thousand years ago.”
– Ogino Ayako (1991), cited in Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity* (1999).

And another

- “Leaving out nothing that was charming, full of pathos, impressive, or splendid, she wrote in minute detail about everything having to do with the magnificent flowering that was Empress Teishi’s reign, yet it seems she was prudent to the point that she said nothing at all about the ruin brought on by the death of Michitaka and the exile of Korechika. Perhaps because she had lost her most reliable patrons, she went off to stay in the countryside with her wet-nurse’s daughter. Someone glimpsed her going out into the fields to dry some sort of greens and muttering to herself: ‘It’s the figures wearing those court robes I cannot forget.’ She was wearing a plain robe and a headcloth of rags. So sad! Truly, how she must have longed for the past.”

– *Mumyōzōshi* (The notebook without a name; ca. 1200), cited in Sarra (1999)