



THE STRAITS OF LITERATURE AND HISTORY

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With whom does history empathize? For Walter Benjamin, "The answer is inevitable: with the victor."¹ The reciprocity between historian and ruler is tacit: the historian makes official the ruler's authority and the ruler's authority gives the historian's work validity. This is not to suggest that no histories exist that subvert this premise. Literature is a "history" which in most cases serves the prevailing order because its very existence confirms that order's cultural richness. But literature is privileged because it can employ language's nuance and allusiveness and from the inside gently or joltingly criticize that order. Because literature is by implication a cultural artifact of a ruling order, subversive or not, it is a historical spoil owing as much to the anonymous toil that gave the writer time to pursue an idea as to the original mind that conceived it.

The connection between a ruling order and its cultural artifacts is like a strait separating two bodies of water intimately linked in time and geography. The straits of literature and history are evidenced in Japanese writing of the Heian period (794–1185 A.D.) which commands interest because of its richness of description, its pioneering of new forms, and the fact that its leading practitioners were women. Many social and cultural conditions set the stage for this unprecedented predominance of literary women. According to Ivan Morris, "Though they [peasants, fishermen, foresters and other laborers] contributed to the vast majority of the [Heian period's] population and were the only economically productive class in the country, we virtually have no authentic information about their lives."² What we today know of Heian life has been garnered from the literature of that period—especially from Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* and Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*—but these literary milestones detailing Heian court life treat a population of only about one-tenth of one percent of the five million population in Japan at that time.³

Murasaki's and Sei's originality of form and observation is unparalleled in the history of literature. These two women were

contemporaries; both were brought to court from the provinces because of their talent and intelligence. Due to the complications of Japan's clan politics, there was a "court" with many satellite courts, and it is not known whether these two women ever lived in the same palace, although they were aware of each other's writings. Their social position was substantially different from that of the women outside the court who "toiled arduously, were subject to harsh treatment by their men, bred young, and died early."⁴

Murasaki and Sei are figures of incalculable significance because they were pioneers, because they produced work in a period which had articulated for itself a distinct masculine and feminine aesthetic, and because they wrote in Japanese at a time when the language for official and theological affairs was Chinese (cf. the European use of Latin as an "official" language). Not only did they establish traditions of the psychological novel and the diary, but their writings preserved the Japanese language for subsequent generations. In their day women were restricted to the use of Japanese while men exchanged ideas and conversation in Chinese. Even today the distinction between native syllabary and the Chinese characters incorporated into the language reflects this gender dichotomy. The native characters are called *onnade*, or "woman's hand," while Chinese characters are known as *otokomoji*, "man's letters."⁵ Sei's writings are still studied today for the purity of her Japanese diction; she avoided Chinese-isms—an accomplishment comparable to writing in English without using any Latinate words.

In the time of Murasaki and Sei there were no narrative literary traditions to maintain. Japanese literature before their time had been poetry of a calculatedly oblique nature; a long prologomena was necessary to explain the poem's meaning. What a remarkable achievement to conceive a psychological novel—as Murasaki did—where a poem appears as an organic expression within the context of a narrative and requires no annotation to be understood. Murasaki fused the traditional poetic form

with her narrative innovation, the intimate epic. Sei's *Pillow Book* was so called because she suggested to the empress that notebooks of historical documents could be recycled by making them into a pillow (a word that referred to a diary as well as a head rest); Sei filled her notebook with lists, odd facts and observations from the present, thereby annotating the leaves of official history with her lively opinions.⁶ For both these women, objectivity was the domain of the historian and untenable because it neutralized differing positions. Objects and people, in the writings of Murasaki and Sei, have innumerable facets. They intimated the spirit of an object or a person by bombarding the reader with dense description: lists, textures, physical and natural detail. Collectively their historical truth is compelling because they replace "objectivity" with opinionation.

But these two contemporaries reflected different attitudes about their culture. Sei begins a chapter of her book with: "When I make myself imagine what it is like to be one of those women who live at home, faithfully serving their husbands—women who have not a single exciting prospect in life yet believe they are perfectly happy—I am filled with scorn."⁷ In a passage where Murasaki describes Genji's (and by implication her own) view of the novel, Genji observes, "Without it what should we know of how people lived in the past from the age of the Gods down to the present day? For history books . . . show us only one corner of life; whereas these diaries and romances which I see piled around you contain, I am sure, the most minute information about people's private affairs."⁸ Sei and Murasaki charted divergent routes in their writing: Sei was an empiricist recording impressions of contemporary Heian manners; she lacked the self-consciousness of Murasaki, who fashioned a world in the indeterminate past in order to best intuitively comment on life in her immediate present. Sei's literary concerns were the refined tastes of the nobility and the freshness of nature. Murasaki was less impressionistic and more analytic in her evaluation of Heian society. She continuously tells us that it was best to be born a man of

imperial blood and live at the court. But she was keenly aware of the hierarchies within the aristocracy and observed the tension between provincials and the court clique, as well as sensitively articulating the social restrictions limiting the mobility of the lower ranks within the court.

A number of factors informed the attitudes Sei and Murasaki expressed. The birth of a woman was a happy event because in the marriage politics of Heian society a woman might grow up to marry the emperor. It was much easier in their day for a woman of "inferior" birth to marry a man of noble rank than vice versa. The professions which brought a lower-rank man to the capital—scholar or priest, say—would not automatically give him ingress to the imperial circle, while it seems likely that Sei and Murasaki were brought to the court because of their reputations as women of wit and sensibility. In Heian Japan a woman was allowed both to inherit and own property. The civil codes expressly forbade wife-beating, although the punishment for this was two degrees less than assaulting "other people."¹⁰ But these facts don't pinpoint the complex and inbred quality of Heian life, which is best described by the Chinese proverb: "The people are as far from the Emperor as from heaven." Japanese appropriation of China's governmental centralization produced a bureaucracy so awkward in this land of decentralized clans that the delegation of authority was carried to extreme lengths; the source of authority was, accordingly, far removed from the functionary who directly wielded it. Because the real power was exercised by ministers and other imperial subalterns, the emperor was left with two functions: to encourage new art forms and fashion rituals of piety from the religious hybrid of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs. Women were excluded from public affairs, but they played a tremendous role in the Heian court. A well-born woman had leisure and imperial encouragement for creation and contemplation denied to male counterparts busy with official duties and polygamous pursuits (the man at the Heian court was expected to have a wife and a few mistresses).

If Murasaki's and Sei's writings are an index to female sexual options during the Heian period, aristocratic women enjoyed a multiplicity of partners as well. Later ages would revile Sei and Murasaki for their "fouly licentious"¹¹ descriptions, but promiscuity was a vital element of their culture. The largely endogamous Heian court was energized by the covert alliances of provincials with sovereigns and their subalterns. The ruling clan of the Heian period—the Fujiwaras—never commanded significant military strength but established power by marrying their daughters to sovereigns. The famous Fujiwara Michinaga was father-in-law of two emperors, grandfather of a third, grandfather and greatgrandfather of a fourth, grandfather and father-in-law of a fifth.¹² This kind of inbreeding was the substructure of the court clique. The nominal source of power, this clique was attractive because it nurtured the creation of art. But it needed the vitality of provincials like Sei and Murasaki to regenerate its incestuous ranks.

Once at court, Sei and Murasaki became insiders who made observations on the social arts at a time when manners were politics and politics culture. Murasaki wrote of a picture competition designed by Genji to rechannel court enmities to less destructive ends: "It was indeed a moment in the history of our country when the whole energy of the nation seemed to be concentrated upon the search for the prettiest method of mounting paper scrolls."¹³

Murasaki's and Sei's importance is that while they operated in a culture that regarded women as inferior to men, they never believed that of themselves. Although in her diary Murasaki repeatedly alluded to her father's regret that because of her great intelligence she had not been born male, she characterized the richness of both male and female experiences in *Genji*. Although it is clear in *Genji* that men have more options available to them, women are equal in wit, intelligence and style. Sei, perhaps because of her position as the empress' favorite, is much more interested in the doings of imperial ladies than those of gentlemen. Mur-

asaki's and Sei's writing was expressly power-identified at a time when power was not so much a link with male dominance as it was one expression in a complex social milieu in which women participated. Murasaki and Sei dealt with emotions that are universally intelligible and exist cross-culturally—unlike the objective specificities of the official histories and philosophies in which the men of their day engaged. Educated women were able to act and write less conventionally than were men of comparable status.

Could a Heian man have created work like Murasaki and Sei? The self-conscious Heian court was totally aware of the sexual division of speech and the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Only at court could women "circulate" and not be expected to hide behind fans and screens, the way propriety demanded women do outside the court. The "masculine" style, identified by scholars of Japanese literature as well as by Murasaki and Sei in various appreciations of male qualities, was "the directness of utterance and concern with society."¹⁴ The "feminine" preference was taken to be the interest in suggestion and intuition—which was the style imitated by men when they wrote to women or expressed themselves in affairs of the heart. A man could have written in the style of Murasaki and Sei, and, indeed, some men assumed the feminine voice and pretended to be women authors. But the incisiveness and sensibility of these female impersonators is inferior to the work of Murasaki and Sei. The inference that women sensed nuance in affairs of state while men were consigned blindly to conduct these affairs leads to a simplistic "women feel/men think" conclusion that fails to cut through psychology or historicism. Men couldn't create work like Murasaki and Sei, even though they tried. These women were successful in capturing the range of experience and feeling of both sexes.

Why were they successful? They glorified a shining nobility. They catalogued and ordered a courtly etiquette rich in gestural nuance, which inspired contemporary court



behavior. They articulated a feminine position to which men could respond. Both provincials, they described a life outside the court that seemed raw and exotic to the inbred Heian court. Murasaki characterized the province/capital dichotomy when she wrote about Genji's scrolls made during his exile on the Suma coast: "Amid intense excitement . . . [they] produced a roll containing Genji's sketches at Suma . . . so masterly a hand working at complete leisure and far from the distracting influences which beset an artist in town. They saw so vividly presented both the stern manner of his life there and in some sort the feelings which this rustic life had aroused in everyone used to every luxury and indulgence."¹⁴ Soon after *The Tale of Genji* appeared at court, Genji was adopted as a Shinto deity.¹⁵

Sei's open competition with men—even with those of a higher rank—gave the Heian court a model of an openly combative woman who refused to acquiesce to the prevailing notions of female propriety. She writes with glee how she embarrassed the minister Nobutsune (who was Murasaki's cousin): "One day when Nobutsune was serving as Intendant in the Office of Palace Works he sent a sketch to one of the craftsmen explaining how a certain piece of work should be done. 'Kindly execute in this fashion,' he added in Chinese characters. I happened to notice the piece of paper and it was the most preposterous writing I had ever seen. Next to his message I wrote, 'If you do the work in this style, it will certainly turn out strangely.' The document found its way to the imperial apartment, and everyone who saw it was greatly amused—except, of course, Nobutsune, who was furious and after this held a grudge against me."¹⁶ Murasaki acidly noted in her diary, "Someone [Sei] who makes such an effort to be different from others is bound to fall in people's esteem and I can only think her future will be a hard one. She is a gifted woman, to be sure . . . how can things turn out well for such a woman?"¹⁷

Sei and Murasaki challenged the religious as well as social assumptions of their society.

They shaped as well as recorded their civilization; there are few other instances of such literary power and evocativeness. History regards Heian Japan as a golden age whose achievements rank with those of Byzantium, Athens, and Renaissance Italy. The work of these two women recorded that period with greater depth and insight than any other contemporary cultural products, so much so that virtually all that is known about the period has been learned from their writings.

Two questions remain: What is the deeper meaning of a "golden age"? What was Murasaki's and Sei's relationship to the golden age they so consummately characterized? An age is "golden" in contrast to the generations of dross preceding and succeeding it. An age is "golden" because cultural achievements complement political strength and together give the impression of an ideal social harmony. Cultural achievements in Heian were enjoyed, as is so often the case, by a few at the expense of many. Like two facing mirrors, the literature reflected the glory of the ruling class and vice versa. But there were some distortions. In reading these works—as literature or as historical documents—there is a striking double edge to each. Murasaki's choice to place her tale in the indeterminate past suggests two contradictory readings: Did the paucity of excitement and intelligence at the court encourage her to invent a perfect and brilliant hero, or was court life so thrilling she was inspired to glorify it? Whichever, there is throughout Murasaki's novel a wistfulness of "wouldn't it be nice if it were this way" which suggests dissatisfaction with the way it was, and the characters still alive at the close of the novel are so morally and intellectually inferior to Genji that her conclusion has a hopeless tone. Sei's devotion to the imperial family and her contempt for the lower orders (an attitude that prompted a Japanese scholar to call her a "spiritual cripple"¹⁸) reveals a mindset that for the Heian court was good breeding but for the modern reader is patronizing and blind. Sei's circumscribed vision and partisanship today says more about the exclusion of the

lower classes from Heian society by omission than do the scanty histories from the period.

Sei's and Murasaki's historical reflections are powerful and moving, simultaneously evocative of Heian pageantry and of the sadness of a society where leisure and culture was reserved for a chosen few. No culture, no "golden age" wants to be tarnished by an enumeration of its prejudices and oppressions. Murasaki's and Sei's literature both criticized and apotheosized their era and, in doing so, exemplifies the straits of literature and history.

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). From "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 256.
2. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964), p. 83.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Morris, p. 199.
5. Morris, p. 195.
6. Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1967). Translated and edited by Ivan Morris.
7. Sei Shonagon, p. 39.
8. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977). Translated by Edward Seidensticker.
9. Morris, p. 90.
10. Quoted in Morris, p. 45.
11. Morris, p. 44.
12. Murasaki Shikibu.
13. Donald Keene, in *Half the World*, edited by Arnold Toynbee (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 255.
14. Murasaki Shikibu.
15. Parker Tyler, "Prince Genji: The Hero and His Culture," *Art News*, Nov., 1958, p. 180.
16. Sei Shonagon.
17. Murasaki quoted in introduction to *Shonagon* by Morris.
18. Morris, introduction to *Shonagon*.

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Anonymous: *The Picture Competition* (1554)