

Michael Harrington

Professor Heldt

JPTR 3290

05 Dec 2018

Examining the Audience of *The Pillow Book*

The Pillow Book is an enigma. Just about everything concerning this work is wrapped in mystery, even down to the true name of its author. Why does this work exist? This amalgamation of the author's thoughts and ideas compiled into something that is not quite a tale, yet not quite a diary. Familiar yet unfamiliar, creating an almost uncanny existence. *The Pillow Book* was most certainly a very bold book, describing life of the Heian elite in such a way that no other author dared do, perhaps out of fear, or perhaps because of something else entirely. There are times where Sei Shōnagon writes as if she were the only person who would ever read her work. Similarly, there are times where she writes as if there is a clear audience in mind. What is even more confusing are the multiple origin stories of the work that exist within the text itself. With all of this in mind, the question remains: who did she write the book for? Who was her audience? Will examining these questions give further clarity to the work as a whole? The goal of this paper will be to examine how Sei Shōnagon responds to the audience of her work and if it ultimately affected the book as a whole.

First, it would be almost improper to begin this discussion without examining section S29. This section gives a very clear origin for the book, and she gives a direct explanation for why she wrote it. She remarks "I have written in this book things I have seen and thought, in the long idle hours spent at home, without ever dreaming that others would see it." (McKinney 2006, 255) She remarks quite clearly that she did not intend to write this story for anyone, yet one must

wonder just how true this is. Privacy for the Heian elite was certainly very different from what one would consider it to be in a more North American context, especially when considering how the book came about according to this section.

She states that “When Captain of the Left Tsunefusa was still Governor of Ise, he came to visit me while I was back at home, and my book disconcertingly happened to be on the mat from the nearby corner that was put out for him. I scrambled to try and retrieve it, but he carried it off with him...” (McKinney 2006, 256) The last line states that this is how the book was discovered. Would it have indeed been possible for her to keep this book so well hidden, free from prying eyes for so long? In her “Infuriating Things” segment she laments on how she hates when “you’ve received a letter you’re anxious to read, and someone snatches it from you and retreats to the garden, where he stands reading it.” (McKinney 2006, 95) One can tell from this example that she was no stranger to having things stolen from her, and with as long as *The Pillow Book* is, and with as much paper as would have been needed to write this work, it is doubtful that she could have gone for very long, if at all, without anyone noticing.

There are moments where it seems rather obvious that she might have been writing in a more public space and thus had to soften what she was saying. Take for example the rather unusual way that she refers to the emperor in section 21 “From His Majesty the Emperor, whose name can barely be spoken for reverence...” (McKinney 2006, 22) While this might not seem that out of place from how the emperor might be referenced in other works, this seems odd for Sei Shōnagon. While she most certainly does show her respect for her superiors in her work, she never shows this level of humility towards anyone aside from perhaps the empress. The argument could be made that she did not describe the emperor this way originally, but that a copyeditor later did, either because they felt that they themselves could not write about the

emperor so casually or as a means to preserve Sei Shōnagon's image. Considering that this seems to be the only section where she refers to him with such a lengthy title, the probability seems rather low, however. If the copyeditor truly felt that way, then they would have surely done so for all the other times that the emperor was mentioned. This is especially true considering that the concept of the "author's voice" was not quite as important as it is in contemporary popular society.

This can be seen in section 97 when the Counsellor, upon hearing a clever remark that Sei Shōnagon makes, steals all of the credit for it. (McKinney 2006, 105) While an interesting story in its own right, what makes this section stick out are the final two sentences. "Stories of this kind really belong in the 'Things it's frustrating and embarrassing to witness' section. I've only added it here because people have begged me not to leave anything out." (McKinney 2006, 105) This means that she did not believe that this particular scenario was distinct enough to truly be worthy of its own section, which means that this must have been something very common for her. So common, in fact, that she would not have bothered writing it down were it not for the audience. Not only does she mention a specific audience in this quote, but she also shows very clearly in this section that by this point, she was no longer writing solely for herself.

While it is unknown and perhaps even unlikely that the ordering of the current work was done in a way akin to how she had done it initially, with this version at least, she very clearly had an audience by the half-way point of the book. The question is whether or not she had that audience in mind from the beginning. It is difficult to tell if she was thinking of an audience when she wrote the first segment. There is no clear reference to one, and she does not mention any public figures, meaning that one cannot tell from her title usage whether or not she was

writing with the idea that people would be reading. Still, the issue of privacy during the time should not be taken lightly.

Several of her lists cite examples of this lack of privacy. For example, in her “Things it’s frustrating and embarrassing to witness” section, her first scenario is when “A guest has arrived and you’re sitting talking when people inside begin a conversation of a confidential nature, and you have to sit there hearing it, powerless to stop them.” (McKinney 2006, 95) In her “Startling and disconcerting things” section, she cites the example of when “Someone with a letter that’s to be delivered elsewhere shows it to a person who shouldn’t see it.” (McKinney 2006, 96) In her “Awkward and embarrassing things” section she lists times where “You happen to say something rude about someone, and a child who overhears it repeats your words in front of the person concerned.” (McKinney 2006, 127) In fact, most times that she lists out things that are regrettable, infuriating, etc., she mentions an example in which there is an invasion of privacy that she simply has to deal with. She cites so many examples of things that should be hidden being suddenly revealed that it seems highly unlikely that she would have believed that she could write so much about herself without anyone seeing it. Considering how much she is prided for her intelligence and quick-wit, it would also seem out of character for her.

On another note, the lists themselves are an anomaly. While the question of authorship is a complicated one when it comes to works from this period, one would need very strong evidence to conclude that the lists were written by anyone other than her, as these are the sections where her voice and personality come out the most. As such, one has to wonder just who she was writing these lists for. Following her classic *zuihitsu* style, they are very abstract, can sometimes be hard to follow, and in many ways, it seems like no one was really supposed to understand them other than her. These are classic signs of a work that were solely intended for

the author's private usage. While many modern authors and artists employ methods similar to this in their writing as a form of aesthetic choice, it is safe to assume that this would not have been the case for authors of this time period. After all, the act of reading silently and alone was enough to make the author of *Sarashina Nikki* revolutionary. Even private letters could have an entire community involved.

What makes this puzzle even more confusing are the final two sentences of section 97 that were cited earlier. Why is it that she felt the need to keep that moment separate from her lists? Her lists follow no structure, and there is no rule that states that she had to keep her stories separate from them. In fact, there are many cases where she starts out with a list before turning that section into a story. Her "Shrines" section is a classic example. She starts out by listing a series of shrines before eventually transitioning into a story about the god of that shrine, concerning an ancient emperor and his interactions with an emperor from China. (McKinney 2006, 197-200) What is it about the story of section 97 that makes it so special? She could have still included it in the list and preserved the story for others to see.

One could argue that perhaps she had simply forgotten the story and decided to write it later as a means of appeasing her audience. That is very much a real possibility. However, her need to clarify this is still a mystery. Why was her audience pestering her to add this story in the first place? If she had simply forgotten, that would be one thing, but her language indicates that her choice to leave that story out of her list might have been a conscious one. Considering that people requested that she include it, this must mean that there was something about this event in particular that people found worth recording. If that were the case, then despite the commonality of the situation, this event was memorable enough that it is unlikely that she would have simply

“forgotten” it. She referenced this specific list, rather than the many other lists that carried similar themes, which indicates that she was likely thinking of this scenario when she wrote it.

In either case, what this event shows is that people actually were reading her lists. While this may seem quite obvious, this raises the question of why she chose to write them the way that she did. She wrote them in a way that suggests that they were for her own personal usage, yet at the same time, there is very clear evidence that people were reading them along with her stories. Could it be possible that she wrote the work both for herself and for her audience? In other words, did she write the work for herself as the primary audience and for others as an unwanted but equally real secondary audience? This scenario seems the most likely, given the evidence that the book presents.

The question remains, however, of the other origin of the book that Sei Shōnagon presents to the reader. At the end of section 259, she states that “...these events, which seemed to us so splendid and auspicious at the time, all look very different when compared with the present, and this is why I’ve set it all down in detail, with a heavy heart.” (McKinney 2006, 230) What “these events” exactly means is hard to prove. Sei Shōnagon could just as easily be talking about the events of the section itself as she could be talking about the book as a whole. In either case, this goes against how she described the purpose of the book in S29 where she chose “to write about the things that delight, or that people find impressive, including poems as well as things such as trees, plants, birds, insects and so forth...” (McKinney 2006, 255-256) It is possible that over the many years that she wrote the book, her purpose for writing changed. Perhaps both statements are true. When she wrote section S29 at a likely younger age, it was just a project for her amusement, but as she grew older and more disillusioned with the world, her writing took on a new approach.

What is of greater importance is the question of who she is writing to in section 259. She is very clearly much older, and by this point, according to a footnote of this section, the empress and her father have long since passed away. (McKinney 2006, 355) If this is the case, and she is no longer in service, and the home that she could retreat to has no one to support and maintain it, this should in theory drastically decrease the amount of people who would be reading her work. However, that was clearly not the case. For one, the fact that she had the free-time and resources to be able to continue writing her book indicates that at least at that point in her life, even after she left the service of the empress, she was still in a relatively comfortable position. The work does not give off the impression that she had renounced the world just yet, so it seems less likely that she was at a monastery, where she would still have access to resources that she could use for writing. On top of that, the fact that this section managed to survive through antiquity and make it into a published translation 1000 years later indicates that someone, somewhere, was aware of this section.

As such, it is very likely that she still had an audience when she was writing, even years after she had left the service of the empress. As to who was reading this work or how large the audience was is a mystery. Given the effort that was put into preserving it, it is likely that whoever was reading it was someone of import. If she had truly fallen into obscurity like what was believed, then the story would have been lost. The question is whether or not the people reading then are the same people as who were reading earlier. There is a seeming universality to her work that indicates that regardless of if her audience was the same or not, they would have appreciated it in a similar fashion. Thus, that question may perhaps be on the more irrelevant side. It is unlikely that figuring out the answer to that question would reveal any secrets about her style of writing or her writing process. After all, the only people that she would truly care about

are her superiors, and there was no one higher than the emperor or the empress, so no new reader could possibly have made that drastic of an impact on her work.

The question of just who her readers were is a very complicated one. In many ways it seems as if she wrote the work with multiple readers in mind. There is a very clear personal voice to her work that would lead one to believe that she wrote it simply for herself. At other times, she directly references an audience, showing that she was writing it for others. Even still, due to the nature of privacy in Heian court life, the risk of her work being discovered, assuming that she actually did intend to hide her work, was very high, and it is likely that she would have written it with certain people in mind regardless.

Ultimately, it is hard to say whether or not finding out who her audience really was will provide any significant insight into the work as a whole. It most certainly did have an effect on her writing, some parts being more obvious than others. Whether that effect happened more on the surface-level of her writing, effecting simple cosmetic things like titles and honorifics, or if it went deeper is difficult to say. One thing can be easily said, however, and that is that the work as a whole is most certainly a unique one. Familiar in some ways, yet unfamiliar in others. Perhaps it is because of its uncanny nature that there is such a desire to figure out the audience.

There is this underlying idea that by finding out the mystery to the equation, by figuring out just who she was writing for, one will gain an extra amount of clarity to her writing. It allows the reader to connect with her on an even more personal level. Perhaps, though, in this case, it might not be necessary to really understand the work, as it's quite clear that even the author was unsure of what she was doing entirely. In either case, regardless of who she was writing for, the effect is still the same, and in the end, that is perhaps all that really matters.

Work Cited

Shōnagon Sei. *The Pillow Book*. Translated by Meredith McKinney, Penguin, 2006.