Between the Sheets: Looking at Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* with Gender-Translation Theory

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Abstract

Sei Shonagon's, *The Pillow Book,* is a text that stands out from ancient literary genres as one that transcends barriers created from antiquity and culture. Over a thousand years has passed since it was written, and this iconic diary continues to be translated into not only many modern languages but also as intersemiotic translations such as films, plays, and art installations. Because much of what we know of Heian Japanese court life derives from this text, it is imperative to analyze these translations with a critical lens to ensure that Shonagon's intent is preserved and that both translators and readers do not culturally appropriate the text into one that aligns with their own personal agenda. Therefore, Gender-Translation theory provides an ideal framework for examining this text because of it's nature to draw from interdisciplinary theory. This paper will discuss the history and framework of Gender-Translation Theory in order to then use its translation tools to compare two English translations of Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*—those of Arthur Waley (1928) and Meredith McKinney (2006). By using tools provided by Gender-Translation Theory, such as analyzing the translator's version of the female subject in translation, we will be able to understand the significance of examining gender in translation.

Keywords: Ancient Japan, Gender-Translation Studies, Feminism

"What is a correct translation?" and "how do we translate?" are questions that have been asked in regard to tackling literary translation projects for many years, but they exist merely on the periphery of translation theory that continues to be developed. Today, we are able to make intersections between translation theory and other academic disciplines in order to become as intimate as possible with the original text. Since the 1980s, gender theory has been a key component of translation theory in regard to the materiality of texts and how they contribute to our world both socially and culturally (Simon 7, Santaemilia 6). Gender-translation theory has developed chronologically with feminist movements that focus on feminist theories of language (Bassnett 70). This allows us to explore the relationship among writing, reading, and the gendered body, and how this interconnected relationship affects the process of translation (ibid 63). Since these developments, we are able to look back at many classical works that have been translated numerous times, and apply gender-translation theory in order to gain a more profound relationship with the original texts. Since being written during 10th century Heian Japan, Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, proves to be an excellent example of a classical text with a multitude of translations in which we can practice using gender-translation theory as a tool for critical analysis. Although the plethora of versions of this text may be considered a sufficient and thorough understanding of *The Pillow Book*, by applying a gendered translation lens it is possible to reveal assumptions of culture and society—and of Sei Shonagon herself. To achieve this, this paper will discuss gender-translation theory and how it can be used as a tool for uncovering nuances and misunderstandings within various versions of *The Pillow Book*, including the first English translation by Arthur Waley (1928) and a contemporary English translation by Meredith McKinney (2006).

The feminist movement was an essential component for initiating the study of gender and translation as we see a shift towards the "(re)feminization of the translation profession" thanks to theory initiated by Simone de Beauvoir in the 1950s (Santaemilia 6). Thanks to her work, language has also been included in the scope of research and discussed as a manipulative force, rather than a tool for communication, and as a result, how the gendered use of language can affect social hierarchies (ibid). Much of the gender-translation theory that we operate with

today is the outcome of research conducted by several Quebecois feminist experimental writers who "attempted to subvert the dominant patriarchal language through their work" (Santaemilia 6). They reclaimed translation as a (re)creation, manipulation and (woman)handling, rather than an inferior profession only suited for women (ibid). Susan Bassnett explains that, "thinking in terms of gender serves to heightened awareness of textual complexities in the roles of both writer and reader", as we take into consideration the implications of writing from the periphery of society versus the core (the subjugated woman as compared to man) (70).

Considering theoretical translation practices are especially important for reading translations of *The Pillow Book*. Pilar Godayol notes in "Frontera Spaces: Translating as/like a Woman" that translating as/like a woman should mean "translating from a borderland, a reflective and self-critical space in which the representations of the feminine subject translator are constantly modified and recreated" (13). As we analyze translated passages of *The Pillow Book* from multiple authors, we will be able to look at how the 'liminal experience' of being a female translator can affect the translation of a female subject. For Godayol, the female subject translator should "ensure her style of work embraces the implications of reading and interpreting the interactions of gender/text, keeping in mind that all text and all subjects say what they say on the basis of what they do not say" (14). This will prove to be particularly challenging given that *The Pillow Book* is the first-person narrative.

Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* (枕草子, *Makura no Sōshi*) carries significant weight not only as a timeless piece of world literature, but as a historical document that dominates our understanding of tenth century Heian Japanese court life. Thus, the way we interpret this text through its various translations has a significant impact on our comprehension of Japanese history and culture. Valerie Henitiuk's *Worlding Sei Shônagon: The Pillow Book in Translation* includes forty-eight excerpts of the diary in a multitude of languages, and begins with contextual information regarding the life of Sei Shonagon and tenth century Japanese court lifestyle. This text, in addition to the full English translations by Arthur Whaley and Meredith McKinney will be used to showcase the application of gender and translation theory.

Sei Shônagon lived from approximately 966 to 1017, and for nearly a decade of her young adulthood, she served as a lady-in-waiting to the Japanese Empress Sadako, daughter of Prime Minister Fujiwara (Henitiuk 2, Waley 21, McKinney xi). Although the daily life for women at this time was extremely restricted to being hidden behind walls, curtains, and screens, they did have the social privilege to freely recite, write, and critique the writing of others, albeit in Japanese (Henitiuk 5). As translation used to be considered a women's profession, written Japanese was known as "women's hand" and male counterparts would have been trained in classical Chinese calligraphy (Henitiuk 6).

Genre is one of the aspects of ancient Japanese culture in which gender plays a big role. Predominantly, *The Pillow Book* can be considered a diary, but there was little like it at the time. Gentlemen of the court certainly kept record of their daily routine as well, in documents known as *nikki*. However, according to McKinney, *nikki* "were largely dry notations in Chinese of dates and event" and did not have the personality or artistic creativity that Shonagon's diary did (xxv). Furthermore, although it is over a thousand years old, the tone and structure of *The Pillow Book* has more of an air of modernism—or even post-modernism—and therefore it is difficult for it to fit into any other genres of writing from that time period (9-10). Within structure and genre are ways where notable issues in translation are found. Henitiuk mentions in her book that translators often opt to translate in the first person, which to Western readers makes perfect sense of a diary-style text, yet, she also mentions that "a characteristic feature of Japanese in both its pre-made and modern forms the general avoidance of personal pronouns" (16). As a result, anyone translating abstract notions into the first person would be taking the liberty to embodying Shonagon and speaking for her.

Structure also plays a significant role in ancient Japanese literature. This is evident in the tendency to work within time-neutral verb tenses, which would result in giving the text the timeless impression that it conveys (McKinney xxiii). In terms of translation, it is difficult to translate the traditional Japanese poetic form, the *waka*. This poetic form focuses on syllables, rather than rhyme, meter, or rhythm, and as McKinney explains, and "largely depends for its effect on subtleties of pervasive poetic allusion and other linguistic duties that are untranslatable and requires copious notes for a foreign reader (and even for a

modern Japanese one)" (xxxiv). Bassnett and Lefevre confirm this point when they state that sacrificing meaning for poetic form comes with great loss to the intention of the text, yet in this case the *waka* form has such a strong cultural meaning that it is difficult to domesticate it for the sake of the western reader (Bassnett 84, Lefevre 71, Eco 90).

Even without having the original Japanese version of the text, it is still beneficial to compare two translated versions. According to David Damrosch, comparing translations allows us to examine the linguistic and social choices the translators have made with their versions, and to also see how language has changed for the target audience to "avoid nuances from being lost in translation" (Damrosch 68, 71). We cannot necessarily debate about McKinney or Waley's knowledge of ancient Japanese or their relationship with the text itself in order to champion one translation over the other, but we can look into *transformance*, as the Feminist Quebecois writers called it, to evaluate the effectiveness of their stylistic choices. *Transformance* is an amalgamation of both *translation* and *performance*, which puts emphasis on the interpretation of the translation by the target audience. It is an effective replacement metaphor for the the sexist roots of the outdated term "belle infidèle", as *transformance* illustrates translation as an act of skilled manipulation and also gives the translator more agency and authority as it directly addresses the translator's involvement with the new version of the text. Considering this concept, how would have readers interpreted McKinney's Sei Shonagon versus Waley's?

Firstly, we can examine the way in which Shonagon herself is being represented in translation. In "Frontera Spaces" Godayol emphasizes the importance of translating the female subject into a place of authority and addressing problems that arise while translating the female subject. One of the biggest issues faced in translating *The Pillow Book* is the notion of the subject. McKinney explains in her introduction that in ancient Japanese, there often is not a specified subject, leaving the reader asking, 'is it I, you, we, or she?' (xxii). Therefore, if a translator had decided to implement a subject in place of a notion of the self that is supposed to be more abstract, we are therefore constructing an identity of Sei Shonagon and of Japanese court life that possibly could never have

existed. This can be seen as problematic in Waley's rendition of *The Pillow-Book*[1] in the way he has structured his translation. Waley, as the translator, is an omnipresent narrator and inserts bits of commentary throughout the text[2]. From what we know of other translations, *The Pillow Book* was indeed written in a diary-like format, thus having his summaries of the text inserted within the main narrative gives the translation a sort of dissonance that seems to subjugate Sei Shonagon as merely a character from a thousand years ago that we watch through a glass case, rather than as the "quirky" young woman that she comes across as in other translations.

In contrast, McKinney's translation of *The Pillow Book* reads more closely as a diary, as she chose to follow "the traditional section divisions", and leaves personal commentary for the appendixes at the end, careful not to interrupt the original flow of the text (McKinney xxxiv-xxxv). Because of the nature of the diary, many translators, certainly including Waley and McKinney, have chosen to make the text their own by choosing passages that appeal to the agenda and goals of their translation. If we are to apply the post-modern translation theory which celebrates translations as a rebirth of the original text, this of course is encouraged, but we must also be careful, as Henitiuk advocates to "acknowledge notions of cultural appropriation and manipulation" when only "the most interesting" bits of the text are being used (23). It is compelling to note that Waley has chosen to omit one of the most iconic excerpts from *The Pillow Book*, the opening entry, which is the passage that Henitiuk uses to compare forty-seven other translations in *Worlding Sei Shônagon*. It reads as prose that elegantly describes the changing of seasons:

> *In the spring, the dawn* – when the slowing paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and wisps of faintly crimson-purple cloud float in the sky.

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[1] Waley is the first to translate *The Pillow Book* in English and uses a hyphen between pillow and book (Henitiuk 20)

[2] It should also be noted that his translation of *The Pillow-Book* is not a complete translation of the full original text, but rather a collection of passages that he found the most interesting (Henitiuk 20, Waley 5).

> In the summer, the night – moonlit nights, of course, but also at the dark of the moon, it's beautiful when fireflies are dancing everywhere in a mazy flight. And it's delightful too to see just one or two fly though the darkness, glowing softly. Rain falling on a summer night is also lovely.[3]

The tone of the opening passage effectively creates a window in the mind of Sei Shonagon that the reader can use to read the rest of her writing. Just in the beginning excerpt alone we have a sense of Shonagon's ability to capture the world around her from the way she illustrates the entirety of the sunrise, to her attention to detail in the fireflies. We also have a sense of her personality as she takes delight in the simplicity of nature. The last line of the second stanza almost reads as a second thought, yet adds a youthful nonchalance that makes her seem more like a lived being and asserts that the intention of the book is for it to be read as a diary rather than a cohesive novel.

In this passage McKinney is attempting both a metrical translation and a phonemic translation, as she states in her introduction that she follows the traditional syllabic 5-7-5-7-7 pattern of the *waka*, but when necessary for eloquence, she "frequently allow[ed] a modified iambic to stretch the syllable number into something that sounds more natural to the English reader's ear" (xxxiv). Bassnett describes the metrical translations as ones that focus on the source language's metre, whereas phonemic translation "attempts to reproduce the SL sound in the TL while at the same time producing an acceptable paraphrase of the sense" (84). By attempting to maintain similar structure to the original while also allowing for Shonagon's personality to shine through the passage is an effective application of *transformance*. The flow of the diary gives us a similar emotional connection to Shonagon without compromising intention.

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[3] Meredith McKinney's Version. Note that pre-modern Japanese did not use punctuation and had a fairly limited vocabulary, especially when it came to adjectives. It's common for Japanese writers at this time to repeat words often, which does not always translate as eloquently to English, in which the liberty of the translator is taken (Henitiuk 16-17).

Waley opens his version of *The Pillow-Book* with a short history of Heian Japan, of Sei Shonagon herself, and things to expect in the book—as many translations do. However, in contrast to McKinney, this section is not separate from the *The Pillow-Book* itself, but rather it bleeds in to the first translation of Shonagon he includes which is as follows:

> When the present Captain of the Bodyguard of the Left (Minamoto no Tsunefusa) was governor of Ise (ie. in 995 or 996) he one day called on me at my home. By accident a mattress that was pushed out into the front room for him to sit on had my book lying on it. The moment I realized this I snatched at the book and made frantic efforts to recover it. But Tsunefusa carried it off with him and did not return in till a long time afterwards.

Waley prefaces this passage that it is proof that *Makura no Sōshi* was never meant to be read by anyone other than Shonagon. This is certainly a provocative way to start a translated piece, however it fails to do a lot of things that McKinney's translation achieves for the reader. Firstly, our female subject in translation is lost. Instead of thinking about translating from a place of marginalization and subjugation as Godayol suggests, by beginning with this passage in which Shonagon is stolen from, Waley places Shonagon in a position of marginalization and subjugation, which is an inaccurate tone to begin this text. As we know from historical records, writing was the primary way in which women in Japanese courts were able to practice agency, yet starting with this passage suggests otherwise. Recall that Godayol explained that, "all text and all subjects say what they say on the basis of what they do not say", so by Waley choosing to omit the iconic opening stanza (as he did not find it "interesting" enough to include) he is not able to illustrate Shonagon's personality the way other translations have been able to do. Additionally, by failing to illustrate an accurate representation of Shonagon because of the way Waley has arranged his translation, it runs the risk of cultural appropriation. Here we can also refer back to Godayol when she said female subject translators should "ensure her style of work embraces the implications of reading and interpreting the interactions of gender/text". Because

of the male narrative voice that he implements between the translated excerpts of *Makura no Sōshi,* it then reads as if Waley is explain Shonagon's life to us, rather than giving her the agency to tell it herself.

Waley's narration limits the reader from any liberty to create our own understanding, while McKinney clearly indicates at the end of her introduction that "Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* speaks with a direct and vivid voice, and I attempt to convey this. I will have succeeded if readers can feel, as they read, the pleasure of her company" (xxxv).

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that Waley was working with literature far before any notions of gender theory were being used in translation, but by examining a text that is virtually oblivious to gendered structures, we can verify the importance of acknowledging a gendered reading of a text. Without gender theory, Waley could not have known that starting his translation of *The Pillow-Book* with that particular passage would place Sei Shonagon in a position of marginalization, or that by using his own narrative voice he was silencing Shonagon and telling her story for her. Thanks to gender-translation theory, we can now return to the text and have a better understanding of what can be lost and found within the female subject in translation, that could have previously been muffled do to a lack of acknowledgement of a gendered position.

For further translation analysis of *The Pillow Book*, we can turn to the following passage which includes a first person narrative, dialogue, and poetry—three different narrative structures that will give us the opportunity for a well-rounded translation analysis. The third page of section 20 of McKinney's translation is on the left which can be compared with the same passage from Waley's version on the right:

Her Majesty now turned to me and asked me to grind some ink, but I was so agog at the scene before me that I could barely manage to keep the inkstick steady in its holder. Then Her Majesty proceeded to fold a piece of white paper, and said to us, '**Now I**	Presently we heard those who had been handing the Imperial Dishes tell the serving-men they might clear, and a moment later His Majesty reappeared. He asked me to mix some ink… and presently folded a white poem-slip, saying to us gentlewomen:

want each of you to write here the first ancient poem that springs to mind.'

I turned to the Grand Counsellor, who was sitting just outside. "What on earth can I write?' I begged him, but he only pushed the paper back to me saying, **'Quick, write something down yourself for Her Majesty. It's not a man's place to give advice here.'**

Her Majesty provided us with the inkstone. 'Come on, come on," she scolded, 'don't waste time racking your brains. Just quickly jot down any ancient poem that comes to you on the spur of the moment. Even something hackneyed will do.' I've no idea why we should have felt so daunted by the task, but we all found ourselves blushing deeply, and our minds went quite blank. Despite their protestations, some of the senior gentlewomen managed to produce two or three poems on spring themes such as blossoms and so forth, and then my turn came. I wrote down the poem:

With the passing years
My years grow old upon me

'Write me a few scraps of old poetry—anything that comes into your head.' I asked my lord Korenchika what he advised me to choose. '**Don't ask me,' he said. 'Write something quickly and hand it in. This is entirely your affair. We men are not intended to help you.**' And he put the inkstand by me adding: 'Don't stop to think! The *Naniwazu* or anything else you happen to know…' Really there was nothing to be afraid of; but for some reason I felt terribly confused, and the blood rushed to my face. Two or three of the upper ladies tried their hands, one with a spring song, another with a poem on this or that flower. Then it came to me, and I wrong out the poem: **'The years go by; age and its evils crows upon me, but be this as it may, while flowers are there to see, I cannot grieve.'** But instead of 'flowers' I wrote 'my Lord.' 'I did this out of curiosity,' said the Emperor, while he was looking at what I had written. 'It is so interesting to see what is going on in people's heads.' (35-36)

yet when I see
this lovely flower of spring
I forget age and time[4]

but I changed 'flower of spring' to
'your face, my lady'.

Her Majesty ran her eye over the
poems, remarking, 'I just wanted to
discover what was in your hearts.' (20)

Firstly, there is a very apparent discrepancy between the two translations is the gender pronoun used for the Majesty. If it was not for the very similar plot points of the passage, a reader could think we are comparing completely different parts of the book as McKinney's version refers to Shonagon's superior as 'she' and 'Her Majesty', while in Waley's version it is 'he' and 'His Majesty. As previously discussed, ancient Japanese did not always have clear indications of gender pronouns of the subject at hand, but it is of particular interest to note that the more recent translation uses 'Her Majesty' while Waley's version uses 'His Majesty', especially when we know that Shonagon was the lady-in-waiting for the Emperor's daughter, so it would make logical sense that she was interacting with her the most frequently, and that the Emperor himself would have his own gentlemen and women. Is it possible that the gender pronoun was a conscious choice made by the translators as Damrosch says we can discover when comparing two translations of the same text? If so, there are very strong implications into each choice, if we are to consider that the Pillow Book is of our sole records of Heian Japan, and assumptions about women in power (or lack thereof) could have been made based on this interpretation of the diary.

The dialogue in both passages also have compelling linguistic choices. In McKinney's version 'Her Majesty' is fairly polite in her request for poetry as she

[4] From the famous Japanese anthology, the *Kokin Wakashu* (920)

says, "Now I want each of you to write here the first ancient poem that springs to mind", as compared to the order given by 'His Majesty' in Waley's version which is, 'Write me a few scraps of old poetry—anything that comes into your head'. The former comes across as more of a request, while the latter is more of a command. When considering the female subject in translation here (the Majesty) this effects the authority that each gender holds in this position (especially as they are probably the same person).

Furthermore, when we look at the dialogue of the Grand Counsellor/lord Korenchika, we are given a distinct example of gender roles in ancient Japanese court, but with recognizable differences. While in McKinney's version the Grand Counsellor says, 'Quick, write something down yourself for Her Majesty. It's not a man's place to give advice here.', in Waley's version, Lord Korenchika says "Don't ask me… Write something quickly and hand it in. This is entirely your affair. We men are not intended to help you.' McKinney version suggests that there are rigid gender roles in which men do not want to overstep, and the Grand Counsellor even addresses Shonagon's agency in the matter when he says "This is entirely your affair". On the other hand, the way Waley's version is composed, the gender roles are given hierarchy over each other in such an unequal way that men could not fathom helping with such a feminine task, as they are "not intended" to help women. This creates a very big discrepancy as to how women of the court were actually regarded at this time.

Lastly, without even reading the text, textual difference between the two structures is evident. This is important to note considering the aforementioned discussion on structure in ancient Japanese literature. While McKinney decided to separately typeset the ancient Japanese *waka*, Waley embeds the lines into the paragraph. This choice reaffirms his position was a narrator like it did in the first passage, while McKinney's version highlights the ancient Japanese poetic form. While Waley's version may be more familiar and easier to read for his audience at the time, it also creates a gendered social hierarchy in which he is telling the story.

By looking at excerpts from *The Pillow Book*, it is clear that gender is a necessary component to the translation of any project of our age. As gender continues to be a differentiating force in our society, we must understand the ways in which gender is constructed in the various cultures of our source texts in order

to effectively manage an effective *transformance* for our target audience. Taking a gendered perspective on translation allows us to become more intimate with our source author as we can have better understanding of the perceptions and conditions of their existence. Failing to acknowledge gender as a defining and driving force for any work of literature does a great disservice not only to the author of the source text but to our target audience for essentially leaving them the equivalent of a smokescreen between them and the original text. José Santaemilia says that "it is not clear or obvious where translation stops and original writing begins' the only sure thing is that both belong to a common category ('texts') whose main existential trait is that they depend on previous texts and are the origins of unending future texts", which refers to the importance of the sources that you work with for one's translation in order to continue to contribute to the literary world with works that can be built upon (11-12). Valerie Henitiuk's *Worlding Sei Shonagon* is able to achieve this by encouraging readers to interact with as many versions of *Makura no Sōshi* as they can in order for the reader to have an all-encompassing understanding of Shonagon's life. Using gender-translation theory with this particular book also adds a dimension to the text that it has been waiting for over a thousand years, due to its "ahead-of-the-times" nature, and will thus allow The Pillow Book to live for another millennium.

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