

Women's In-jokes in Heian Japan: *Makura no soshi*

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In this study, I address the issue of women's humour and laughter in Heian Japan, particularly as handled in Sei Shonagon's *Makura no soshi*, a key text in the tradition of women's writing and reading. Despite the sighing and lamentation that dominate Heian literature, and the declining political influence of the court in which the author serves as a lady-in-waiting, Sei creates a narrative saturated with humour and laughter. Tears women usually shed are replaced by exuberant laughter and jokes, especially in passages that recount moments of intense vulnerability and instability for the female attendants to empress Teishi. By examining some of the scenes in which women laugh in unison, I attempt to identify the sources and functions of their laughter as represented in the text. I also argue that through laughter the author creates an image of the female attendants as provocateur, and aims to subvert the literary convention of representing women as passive, obscure the vulnerability of the ladies-in-waiting in a declining court, and challenge the misconceptions about the socially active women as immoral.

At the beginning of the eleventh century a female writer, known as Sei Shonagon 清少納言 (966-?), composed *Makura no soshi* 枕草子, a narrative centered around her service at court. Shortly after Sei was recruited as a lady-in-waiting in 993, her patron, Empress Teishi 定子(977-1000), began to lose influence in palace politics, and her salon underwent years of despair and humiliation. Nonetheless, in her accounts Sei imbues her reality with an optimistic and elated tone. Moreover, in contrast with the literary

discourse of lamentation prevalent in the Heian period (794-1185), Sei's version of her court experience is saturated with humour and laughter.¹

Scholars of *Makura no soshi* have attempted to analyze the frequent appearance of laughter in Sei's work by assigning it various functions. What has been left unexplored however, are the numerous instances of women laughing in unison. In my presentation today, I would like to re-examine laughter as represented in *Makura no soshi*, in terms of its sources and its function, focusing specifically on the role laughter plays among women. I will attempt to answer such questions as: Why did Sei Shonagon include so many instances of laughing women in her "pillow book"? What does it mean when women are laughing as a group? Is laughter at men aimed to deride them or does it signify something else? Finally, I will consider the question posed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, authoritative scholars in the field of women's autobiography, "How does the narrator win the reader's belief and seek to have the "truth" of the narrative validated?",² considering the incongruity between the image of Teishi's milieu as constructed in *Makura no soshi* and the historical "truth" that other written sources about

¹ Despite this dominant mode of expression, scenes of laughing characters can be found in other Heian works as well. In her article on laughter, Ogiwara Saeko 荻原さえこ provides a chart of the instances of laughter and smiling in the following Heian and Kamakura women's diaries: *Kagero Nikki*, *Izumi Shikibu Nikki*, *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki*, *Sarashina Nikki*, *Sanuki no Suke no Nikki*, *Tamakiharu*, *Keireimon'in Ukyo no Daibu no Shu*, *Ben no Naishi no Nikki*, *Nakatsukasa no Naishi no Nikki*, *Takemuki ga Ki*, *Utatane*, *Izayoi Nikki*, and *Towazugatari*. According to the chart, the diaries without even a scene of smiling or laughing are *Utatane* and *Izayoi Nikki*. Those with the largest number of such instances are *Kagero Nikki* (19), *Towazugatari* (16), and *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki* (14). To compare, in *Makura no soshi* verbs related to laughing and/or smiling greatly outnumber the instances in the women's diaries considered by Ogiwara, reaching 145 (according to Haraoka Fumiko, 93). In *Makura no soshi* laughter occurs throughout the work and encompasses a wide range of characters across the hierarchical structure of the Heian society. See Ogiwara Saeko, "Towazugatari no warai," *Komazawa Kokubun* 39 (2002) 265-288. See also Haraoka Fumiko, "Makura no soshi nikkiteki shodan no 'warai' o megutte," *Makura no soshi: hyogen to kozo* (Tokyo: Yuseido, 1994).

² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (London: U of Minnesota P, 2001) 173.

the period disclose.³ I will limit my study to the instances of laughing ladies-in-waiting, rather than attempting generalizations about “woman” as a gender category because of the rigid division of the society into classes and the numerous socio-political factors that shaped Heian women’s lives.

Through scenes in which ladies-in-waiting laugh together as a group that Sei has included in her *Makura no soshi*, the author constructs an image of women that differs from the notions prevalent in the male-centered society, and also emphasizes the pleasures and advantages women acquire through court service. Her strategy of self-representation, however, is striking: instead of portraying such women as modest and thus countering the way they are perceived, Sei creates an image of the lady-in-waiting as provocateur. Thus the serving women who appear in the pages of *Makura no soshi* are instigators of jokes, women who enjoy humour and laugh heartily.

As part of their duties, female court attendants in the mid-Heian period interacted with a wide variety of people and participated in social events (festivals, ceremonies, and poetry contests). Thus they were visually more accessible than women who remained outside court service,⁴ which entailed disparagement of their reputation in the eyes of male courtiers. Such negative attitudes toward female attendants have been recounted in one of Sei’s passages.

Women without prospect, who lead dull earnest lives, and rejoice
in their petty little pseudo-pleasures, I find quite depressing and despicable.

³ Some of which are [Eiga Monogatari](#) and [Okagami](#).

⁴ Wakita Haruko, [Women in Medieval Japan: Motherhood, Household, Management and Sexuality](#), trans. Alison Tokita (Tokyo: U of Tokyo P, 2006) 79. See also Joshua Mostow, “*E no Gotoshi*: the picture similitude and the feminine re-guard in Japanese illustrated romances,” [Word and Image](#) 11:1 (Jan.- March 1995) 37-54.

People of any standing ought to give their daughters a taste of society. They should show them the world and let them become familiar with its ways, by serving as attendants at the palace or other such positions.

I can't bear men who consider women who serve at court to be frivolous and unseemly. Though mind you, one can see why they would....there would be very few men who don't catch sight of us at some point. And have you ever heard tell of a lady who served at court shyly hiding herself from her own servants or others who came from her house...

I can't see why a lady who has served at court could be considered less than suitably refined when she's later installed as someone's wife and is treated with due respect.⁵

This passage confirms not only the unfavourable perception of female attendants but also Sei's awareness of it. In addition to their vulnerable position within the court, their instability increased with the decline of Teishi's salon since the fate of attendants was contingent on the political influence of their patrons.⁶ And yet, it is precisely in passages narrating moments of such intense vulnerability and instability for Teishi's female attendants that numerous scenes of laughing women emerge. Through laughter, Sei attempts not only to obscure the disadvantageous situation of her patron during the

⁵ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006) 22.

⁶ Yoshikawa Shinji points out that the status of female attendants much improved upon their patron's promotion from a junior consort to an empress (Yoshikawa, 292). See Yoshikawa Shinji, "Ladies in Waiting in the Heian Period", trans. Paul Atkins, *Gender and Japanese History*, eds. Wakita Haruko, et al. (Osaka: Osaka UP, 1999) 283-312.

last five years of the tenth century, but also to rescue the reputation of the female attendants by voicing their subjectivity with regard to their sexual objectification by men, and by emphasizing their prowesses cultivated through court service.

The phenomena of humour and laughter have proved to be difficult for psychologists to fully define because “[h]umour plays a myriad of roles and serves a number of quite different functions,” and because “no classification has yet done justice to the tremendous diversity of situations which can evoke laughter.”⁷ Some of the attempts to define laughter are illustrated by the following example: “laughter [can be attributed] to triumph, relief from anxiety, agreement, sudden comprehension, embarrassment and scorn”,⁸ laughter can be categorized as “humorous, social, ignorance, anxiety, derision, apologetic and laughter in response to tickling,”⁹ and “laughter is generally a response, it is just as much a response to non-humorous stimuli as it is to humour stimuli”.¹⁰ In addition, humour has been viewed as expressing “superiority and disparagement,” “as a means of resolving incongruity,” and as being “elusive and ephemeral.”¹¹ Experiments have proved that amusement and laughter are not identical, as an amused person may opt out of laughing, and the situations in which one laughs are not limited to amusement.¹² Apparently, humour and laughter are multi-faceted and can

⁷ Citation. Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, “Introduction 4”, Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications (New Brunswick, USA, and London, UK: Transaction publisher, 1996).

⁸ Berlyn (1969) as cited in Chapman and Foot.

⁹ Giles and Oxford (1970) as cited in Chapman and Foot.

¹⁰ Champan and Foot, Introduction.

¹¹ As summarized in Chapman and Foot, “Preface” and “Introduction”.

¹² Dolf Zillmann and Joanne R. Cantor, “A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth”, Humour and Laughter (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1976) 80.

hold manifold functions depending on the situation. What are the functions, then, of the numerous scenes of women’s laughter that Sei included in her *Makura no soshi*?

In her insightful study of laughter in the memoir passages of *Makura no soshi*, i.e. the passages in which Sei recorded events that had happened at court as one would in a personal diary,¹³ Haraoka Fumiko 原岡文子 divides such passages into “bright” 明 and “dark” 暗 sections, the former referring to those that describe events during the regency of Teishi’s father, Fujiwara Michitaka 藤原道隆 (953-995), and the latter encompassing the episodes after Michitaka’s death. She further considers the frequency of occurrence of words related to “laughing,” “smiling,” and “amusement” within each group of passages, and concludes that in the “dark” passages, those that describe the demise of Teishi’s salon, the author employs the adjective *wokashi* をかし (amusing) and the verb *warau* わらふ (to laugh) much more intensively than in the “bright” passages, as shown in the table below.¹⁴

| Periods | Total No.of passages | <i>wokashi</i> -related | <i>warau</i> -related | <i>emu</i> -related |
|----------|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| “bright” | 16 | 46 | 33 | 6 |
| “dark” | 35 | 77 | 84 | 4 |

Further, Haraoka explores the functions of laughter in each group of memoir passages and argues that laughter during the “bright” period incurs from exchanges of jokes (*sarogoto* 猿楽言) between Michitaka and high-ranking nobles around him,

¹³ Haraoka, 93-104.

¹⁴ Based on the chart in Haraoka, 103.

whereas in the “dark” passages laughter usually is directed at people outside Teishi’s salon, or at Sei herself who is presented as one who is laughed at (*waraware mono* 笑われ者). As a result, Haraoka asserts that laughter in Sei’s work is a narrative device similar to fictionalization (*kyoko* 虚構) that has been employed in order to construct and maintain a world of *wokashi* in the literary portrayal of Teishi’s salon.¹⁵

Next, Mitamura Masako 三田村雅子, leading scholar of *Makura no soshi* in Japan, in her essay on the link between laughter and “narrating” (*katari* 語り) as shown in Sei’s work,¹⁶ discusses laughter as a unifying principle within the text. She focuses on the circumstances under which people laugh before and after Michitaka’s death. During the “bright” period, praise about Sei by the Empress or the Regent, which is usually accompanied by laughter, is declared in her presence and never circulated by others. By contrast, in the period subsequent to Michitaka’s death, as Mitamura observes, laughter often occurs within the act of narrating, and is usually preceded by a verb related to “telling” (such as *iu* 言ふ “to say”, *mosu* 申す “to speak to a superior”, *keisu* 啓す “to say to a superior”, *kikoshimesu* 聞こしめす “to listen”, *katarau* 語らふ “to talk”). Thus, praise about Sei’s talents by a third party (mainly high-ranking courtiers) circulates within the court. Gossip reaches the Emperor and then the Empress, who relates it to Sei and the two share laughter.¹⁷ By circulating rumours about the quick-wittedness and eloquence of Teishi’s ladies-in-waiting, Sei attempts to attract attention to her patron, and

¹⁵ Haraoka, 97-101.

¹⁶ Mitamura Masako, “*Makura no soshi* no ‘warai’ to ‘katari’”, *Makura no soshi: hyogen to kozo* (Tokyo: Yuseido, 1995) 105-119.

¹⁷ Mitamura, 113.

thus creates an image of Teishi as a central figure, one that cannot be ignored despite the fading radiance of her court. Mitamura further notes that by performing as a jester (*doke* 道化) who fluctuates between being a subject and an object of laughter, Sei “appropriates life,” and constructs a portrait of Teishi’s salon as thriving and powerful.

Now let us turn to women’s laughter in *Makura no soshi*. Two passages have a common motif: ladies-in-waiting tease a male courtier and when he responds, they thwart him with their laughter. These scenes are described in the passages *Daijin Narimasa ga ie ni* 「大進生昌が家に」, known to English readers as “When the Empress Moved,” and “It Was during the Abstinence of the Fifth Month” *Gogatsu no goshojin no hodo shiki ni* 「五月の御精進のほど、職に」. Despite the purposeful avoidance of chronology in Sei’s accounts, scholars have identified the actual historical events behind the narrative, and specifically the former as referring to the eight month of 999, and the latter as describing episodes from the fifth month of 998.¹⁸ In the episode “When the Empress Moved” Sei distracts readers attention from the historical events that necessitated the transfer of Empress Teishi to a residence not appropriate for the status of her patron. *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (*Eiga monogatari* 栄華物語 (1028-1034)), however, informs us that the empress had moved to the house of Taira no Narimasa 平生昌 (a Senior Steward who held a sixth rank post in the Office of the Empress’s Household)¹⁹ to await the birth of her second child, since she had been forced to leave her

¹⁸ Sei Shonagon, *Makura no soshi*, ed. Hagitani Boku, Vol. 2, *Nihon Koten Bungaku Shusei* Vol. 22 (Tokyo: Shincho, 1977).

¹⁹ Ivan Morris, ed. and trans, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, Vol.2 (New York: Columbia UP, 1967) 7.

usual residence following the exile of her brothers Korechika 伊周 and Taka'ie 高家.²⁰ Earlier that day, Sei had criticized their host about the humble dimensions of the north gate of his house. Later, during the night, Narimasa determined to take advantage of his position as a master of the house and enticed by Sei's remarks, entered the room in which the serving women are sleeping. Sei noticed him by the door and called everyone's attention to Narimasa. All the women burst into laughter and Narimasa left the room in frustration.

In the second passage, "It Was during the Abstinence of the Fifth Month," Sei relates the attendants' visit to the bridge behind the Kamo Shrine to hear the song of the *hototogisu* (cuckoo). On their way back to the Empress's Office, the ladies-in-waiting stopped next to the Palace of the First Ward and sent a servant to call Fujiwara Kiminobu 藤原公信, the first cousin of the empress, who was a gentleman-in-waiting. While he was changing his clothes hurriedly, the women set off. Kiminobu ran after the carriage and asked them to stop so that he could see them, but the carriage sped up. Realizing that his chase would yield no fruit, Kiminobu eventually gave up and headed back home. The ladies-in-waiting in the carriage laughed, and later when they related the story to her Majesty, she also joined them.

The two episodes allude to a scene in *Tales of Ise* (*Ise monogatari* 伊勢物語, 9th c.) in which "several attractive ladies [who] were in service at a neighbouring imperial establishment" flirt with a man famous for his amorous pursuits.²¹ The women are

²⁰ *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, eds. William H. and Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford, CA: Stanford U Press, 1980) 208.

²¹ *Tales of Ise: Lyrical Episodes from Tenth-Century Japan*, ed. and trans. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP: 1968), 106-107.

identified as ladies-in-waiting to one of the daughters to Emperor Kammu (桓武天皇 r. 781-806).²² Considering the fact that male pursuit of a woman was the “norm” in the *monogatari* 物語 (romantic tales) genre of Heian literature, by alluding to a deviation from the standard, *Makura no soshi*’s author hints on subverting literary conventions on the depiction of women. In the romantic tales, the passive role assigned to women in public life was carried into the intimate realm of sexual relationships. It was considered unusual for a woman to initiate an affair, and although she could choose whether to reply to a poem sent to her and thus encourage her suitor, or ignore a letter (and thus encourage the suitor’s perseverance), with enough determination, a man would often attain his amorous goals. As Joshua Mostow notes, women in the Heian and Kamakura periods perceived themselves as characters of “the early fairy tales, romances, and novels [which] were written by men with an aim to show girls how they should behave themselves... demonstrating the wonderful things that would happen to them if they did, or the awful things that would happen if they didn’t.”²³ Women’s initiative in the episodes described above, may be interpreted as a play on the *kaimami* topos in which, according to the conventions, a woman is a passive recipient of the voyeuristic male gaze. As Edith Sarra suggests, when the gaze is reversed,²⁴ it is the female who gains authority and control over the narrative, the state of “reality” in which the characters are placed. Building upon Sarra’s observation that the Narimasa episode allows Sei to return the gaze of the men,

²² Tales of Ise, 225, n. 58-1.

²³ Joshua Mostow, “On Becoming Ukifune: Autobiographical Heroines in Heian and Kamakura Literature”, Crossing the Bridge: Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers (The New Middle Ages), eds. Barbara Stevenson and Cynthia Ho (U.S.A.: Palgrave, 2000) 45-46.

²⁴ Mostow, 243-250.

thus refusing to create “conventional figures of femininity, especially the image of the heroine as passive recipient of transient, unstable masculine desire,”²⁵ I would like to further explore the function of laughter in the scenes of women teasing men.

In an illuminating article, Margaret Childs argues about the dynamics of love affairs in pre-modern Japanese literature, that “romantic love is frequently associated with the impulse to nurture someone who is weak or frail or in distress in some way.”²⁶ Childs considers vulnerability as crucial in enticing male amorous desire. She points out that in order for a woman to avoid unwanted sexual advances, “[b]ecause reluctance was a convention,...[r]efusal had to be definitive and unrelenting,”²⁷ and asserts the adverse effect that tears had when shed in such situations. Childs’s approach proves helpful when attempting to understand the scenes of laughing women in these two episodes. The author purposefully depicts women who call upon men and then refuse to yield to them. By presenting women as initiators of the exchange between the two sexes in the scenes above, Sei plays on the stereotype of ladies-in-waiting as frivolous. Laughter, which unlike tears, can serve as a powerful strategy of refusal, discourages men, and helps create an image of the ladies-in-waiting as invulnerable. In addition, their flight (by seeking the company of other women as in the episode about Narimasa, and by speeding up their carriage as in the episode about Kiminobu) can be interpreted as a manifestation

²⁵ Edith Sarra, “The Poetics of Voyeurism in *The Pillow Book*”, Fictions of Femininity: Literary Conventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women’s Memoirs (Stanford UP: Stanford, CA, 1999) 259.

²⁶ Margaret Childs, “The Value of Vulnerability: Sexual Coercion and the Nature of Sexual Love in Japanese Court Literature” The Journal of Asian Studies 58:4 (Nov. 1999) 1059-1079. 1060.

²⁷ Childs, 1064.

of their refusal of the male desire for intimacy.²⁸ Thus, by creating an image of authority and superiority of the ladies-in-waiting as a group, Sei obfuscates their vulnerability as women as well as their marginal position as attendants to a patron whose salon is losing political influence. Consequently, the functions of women's laughter in these two passages can be interpreted in the following ways: 1) to subvert the literary convention of representing women as passive, 2) to obscure the vulnerability of Teishi's female attendants, and 3) to challenge the misconceptions of ladies-in-waiting as immoral.

The second set of examples consists of passages in which women attack men with respect to improper conduct. The first one is the passage known as "Masahiro Really is a Laughing Stock" (*Masahiro wa imijiku* 「方弘は、いみじく」). Minamoto Masahiro is a Chamberlain and subsequently governor of Awa Province.²⁹ His imperfect speech often arouses laughter among women. He uses proverbial expressions inappropriately and makes meaningless remarks at which everyone laughs. For example, he seems to find the phrase *gotai* 五体 which he has overheard, extremely intriguing and unusual. He is amazed at the use of the phrase which literally means "five parts," but is actually used as an elegant expression toward one's lover instead of the ordinary phrase "your whole body." Masahiro's ignorance on this and other occasions is ludicrous and everyone is convulsed with laughter.³⁰ Another example comes from the passage "Once during a Long Spell of Rainy Weather" (*Ame no uchi wa e furu koro* 「雨のうちはへ降るころ」). Fujiwara Noritsune 藤原, a Secretary in the Ministry of Ceremonial, boasts about

²⁸ Childs suggests that flight (which often included "retreat to inner rooms and the company of other women") was a common strategy to avoid unwanted male's amorous pursuits. See Childs, 1064.

²⁹ Morris, Vol. 2, 55.

³⁰ 笑はるることぞ限りなきや.

his flair for composing poetry on the spot. Yet disappointingly, when the Empress proposes a subject for a poem, he runs away exclaiming “How frightening” (*ana osoroshi*).³¹ One of the attendants informs the rest that because his handwriting in both Japanese and Chinese is terrible, he tries to conceal it.

Laughter in these two passages originates from the discrepancy between the men’s lack of sophistication and the stature of the official posts they hold. Through laughter and judgment, the ladies-in-waiting exclude the two men from their group because they have failed to meet the established requirements for taste and cultural knowledge. The flip side of this negation is that it also emphasizes women’s education and mastery of proper conduct. It is precisely because the women served at court, that they gained specialized knowledge and cultivation of their minds and hearts. Thus by highlighting the advantages of serving in the Palace, women justify the nature of their work and at the same time claim superiority over insufficiently educated males who nevertheless have access to power in one way or another.

Finally, there are two instances of female attendants who laugh at commoners. One is the passage “One Day I was in the Apartment” (*Sotsu no kimi no omenoto migushigedomo* 「僧都の君の御乳母、御匣殿」) which usually strikes readers for Sei’s cruelty. A man whose house has been destroyed by fire approaches Sei and complains about his wretchedness. Sei writes a ridiculing poem and gives it to him, leaving him with an impression that the piece of paper indicates the amount of alms she has offered him. Again, everyone laughs. In another passage, “It Was during the Abstinence of the Fifth Month”, (mentioned earlier), women’s laughter is aroused by the

³¹ あなおそろし.

song of female commoners who are threshing rice. Indeed, it is difficult to accept this type of humor in our time. However, ladies-in-waiting, like the female representatives of the lower classes, were known as women “who uncovered their face and worked.”³² Moreover, the two groups are marginalized in society in one way or another. Thus, by laughing at commoners, ladies-in-waiting exclude themselves from the lower classes and represent themselves as of a privileged position. Here again, laughter is a means of asserting their identity as a group engaged in an activity that is the prerogative of a highly cultured stratum of society. Through laughing at commoners and claiming no bonds with them, female attendants also assert that working in the Palace is not shameful.

The common aspects in all these scenes is that women laugh in unison and in each type of situation laughter allows them agency and superiority. Laughter expresses solidarity and creates a special bond among them symbolizing their power. Writing allows Sei a space in which she can control the way women like her are represented. As a creator of an autobiographical narrative she provides her own version of reality. By asserting that she recorded everything that “stuck [her] eyes and mind,” she justifies her writing strategy which consists of selecting certain episodes and leaving out others.³³ The fragmented structure of her work in terms of chronology and narrative liberates her to manipulate reality.³⁴ To borrow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s words,³⁵ in autobiographical narratives “memory is a subjective form of evidence, not externally

³² Citation. Wakita, 81.

³³ See Sei Shonagon, *Makura no soshi*, eds. Matsuo Satoshi and Nagai Kazuko, *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshu 11* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1975) 465-468.

³⁴ Naomi Fukumori, “Sei Shonagon’s *Makura no Soshi*: A Revisionary History”. *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese*. 31 (Apr. 1997) 1-44.

³⁵ Citation. Smith and Watson, 6.

verifiable, rather it is asserted on the subject's authority." The discrepancy between the tragic socio-historical context and the optimistic tone of her work betrays the narrator's awareness of an implied readership. By recreating her experience as a lady-in-waiting and by providing various kinds of evidence, such as rumours circulated by politically influential nobles that reiterate her own views, poems that have been exchanged, dialogues, etc., Sei-the-narrator expects readers to accept her version of the life in Teishi's court as authoritative. Through the immediacy of her narrative which is most prominent in "The Epilogue" passage of the Noinbon textual line of *Makura no soshi*, and the intimacy she seeks to gain with her readers, the narrator attempts to convince the audience that her accounts allow them genuine glimpses into the court life.³⁶

In conclusion, laughter flows throughout the text and by replacing women's tears found in *monogatari* narratives, it becomes a special feminine language that challenges the misrepresentation of women in such tales. Unlike the *monogatari* heroines, female attendants construct their identity as intellectually and sexually independent. In addition, laughter empowers women to challenge the gender conventions of the day. Through such an observable behaviour as laughter, they seem to refute women's invisibility in Heian society and "[seem] to wish to establish other measures for judging women."³⁷ No longer objects but subject of laughter, ladies-in-waiting are able to assert their identity as masters of proper conduct, holders of a privileged position that grants them access to knowledge, and of having control over males' sexual advances.

³⁶ Gergana Ivanova, "Textual Variations of Sei Shonagon's *Makura no soshi*: Perception of the Text and the Narratorial Voice," MA thesis, U of Toronto, 2006.

³⁷ Sarra, 248.

A society which is grounded on fallacy can only be challenged with a language that, according to Julia Kristeva's signification paradigm, originates from the *semiotic* dimension and is unsignifiable, unintelligible, uncontrollable and ambiguous, like the body drives.³⁸ Laughter transgresses the body and breaks boundaries. It is loud because it comes from the margins and has to be heard in order to bring about change. Its overwhelming presence in Sei's text stands out as another aspect of the unconventionality of the work, along with its non-linear narrative, open-ended structure, and transgressive language.³⁹ Or even laughter may be considered another aspect of the open-endedness of *Makura no soshi*, whose functions are boundless. In any event, Edith Sarra's words referring to Sei, as "hers is the only dry sleeve in Heian Japan"⁴⁰ appear to me as a precise metaphoric description of her narrative.

³⁸ The Norton Anthology of Theory and Practice, eds. Vincent B. Leitch., et al. (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) 2166-2179.

³⁹ Ivanova, 33-48.

⁴⁰ Sarra, 259.