

Histories of the Self

Women's Diaries from Japan's Heian Period (794–1185)

By Sonja Arntzen



Detail from the print *Murasaki Shikibu*, Edo period, 1765. Attributed to Komatsuken. From the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/o39hqhh>.

This essay outlines three diaries written by women in Japan a millennium ago. The sidebars provide exercise suggestions that are intended to provide a basis for an instructor to generate essay or classroom discussion topics but could also be used by the individual reader to deepen appreciation. These three texts, *The Kagerō Diary* (c. 974), *Murasaki Shikibu Diary* (c. 1008), and *The Sarashina Diary* (c. 1060), are selected from the largest body of premodern personal histories extant in the world. There are five major texts¹ and several minor ones,² and, extraordinarily, most of these texts are by women.³ Why were so many women at this particular time in Japan from (roughly 950–1100) moved to write personal accounts of their lives? How did they see themselves? To what social and personal needs were these women responding? What mirrors do these texts present to our own culture and time? The mid-Heian period was an epoch in which literate, intelligent

ic writing script, (as opposed to official writing in literary Chinese, *kanbun*) enabled the production of vernacular writing. This script/language was so associated with female literacy that its alternate name during the Heian period was *onnade*, “women’s hand.” Thus, these aristocratic women lived at a time and place when women’s literary activity had social and economic value, and they had a flexible writing medium related closely to the spoken language.⁴ These conditions did not pertain to women until much later in Europe and other parts of Asia.

The language these women had at their disposal was not “vulgar” but had been refined by its intimate connection with poetry. Since the exchange of impromptu poetry was a feature of everyday interactions among aristocrats, poetry was woven into the records of people’s lives. When these women thought of themselves as “serious” writers, they would have considered themselves first as poets. The prose of their diaries (with the exception of the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary*) arose in large part to provide narrative contexts for their poetry. The primary form of poetry, the five-line, thirty-one-syllable *waka*, was focused on expressing feelings, particularly those arising from romantic love and the observation of nature. The shortness of the form meant that there was no room for narrative or explanation, just the encapsulation of emotion.

The Heian Period Historical Background

In 794, the Imperial court moved from Nara to a site occupied now by the city of Kyoto. The new capital was called Heian “Peace,” and indeed the Heian period (794–1185) was characterized by relative peace and stability. Tax revenues flowed in from the agrarian provinces to support a small, urbanized aristocratic society, which prized civil virtues and aesthetic taste. Successive heads of one branch of the Fujiwara clan monopolized political power by forging close marital relations with the throne and ruling particularly from the mid-tenth century as regents for young and weak emperors. Accordingly, a steady supply of attractive, marriageable daughters to place as Imperial consorts was one of the most important political resources of the day. Although Chinese learning remained the foundation of government management and most of men’s literary activity, writing in vernacular Japanese flourished from the tenth century, first in poetry, with the compilation in 905 of the *Kokinshū*, the first Imperial anthology of *waka* poetry, and then in the production of fiction and autobiographical texts. Most of the surviving prose texts from this immensely creative period are by women. In foreign relations, the Japanese court turned away from direct contact with China to adapt and naturalize the Chinese modes of thinking and forms of government that had been absorbed wholesale in the Nara period (710–794). The aristocratic society of the court turned inward and ignored the countryside. Middle-ranking aristocratic women serving in the lively courts assembled around the Fujiwara consorts also turned inward and examined themselves, producing a body of “self-writing” that is unique in the world.

women could find a kind of employment based on their creative skills. The large courts around the emperor’s principal consorts were filled with women whose work consisted primarily of creating amusement through conversation, writing, and other artistic pursuits. Amusement may seem an inessential part of human life, but we have only to look at the huge economic and social role played by the entertainment industry in our own culture to realize that human beings, when the least bit of economic surplus arises, exhibit an unquenchable need for amusement. At the Heian court, the chief entertainment was the reading and writing of poetry and fiction (*monogatari*, “tales”). A phonet-

EXERCISE 1

Imitate women writers of the Heian period by writing diary entries for a few days of your life, focusing on your emotional response to the natural environment and/or personal events. Each entry will include a poem in more or less *waka* form (minimum definition: a poem of five lines) that will sum up your feelings. Option: If it suits you better, you may embark on this exercise in the spirit of parody, comically exaggerating the style of writing you see in the women’s diaries. The object of the exercise is to appreciate a frame of mind that focuses on experience in terms of the poems that can come out of it.

The habit of poetry composition had other ramifications. Take this poem from *The Kagerō Diary*. It occurs in a passage recording a period when the author’s husband had stopped visiting in order to pursue an affair with another woman. When, one night, the author hears the arrival of her elder sister’s husband (married women of the Heian period remained in their family home and were visited by their husbands), accompanied by remarks from her servants noting the absence of her own husband, she feels “hot tears rolling down”:

*I stifle these thoughts
but the flames in my breast
do not appear,
they just go ahead
and boil up these tears.*⁵

Note in this poem the presence of an observing “I” that regards the passionate feelings of chagrin and frustrated desire from a distance. She is trying desperately to dissemble so that her servants will not consider her even more pitiable, but she can only look on as her emotions get the better of her. This hard-won distance, however, allows her to survive the night by repeating the poem, as she notes poignantly, “in a place away from my bed.” This capacity for self-observation is emblematic of all three diaries to be discussed in this essay. As University of Cambridge Professor Richard Bowring has observed of the autobiographical prose of the Heian period:

There is a willingness, indeed an insistent drive, to subject oneself to analysis and to broadcast the results of this curiosity, and it is in great measure this obsession that laid the foundation of the production of works of prose fiction that have, for their time, an astonishing degree of psychological maturity and penetration.⁶

The individual “self” has been posited as a Western invention, but these texts by Heian women provide thought-provoking counterexamples.⁷ The long tradition of writing poetry that not only expresses but also contemplates the emotions may have contributed to the development of their self-awareness.

The Kagerō Diary

The first of the major women’s texts, *The Kagerō Diary*, written by Michitsuna’s Mother, opens with a declaration that having found the “old tales . . . just so much fantasy,” the author is going to provide a record of her own life, even though she is “really nobody,” which might answer the question, “What is it like, the life of a woman married to a highly placed man?”⁸ True to her expressed intent, she keeps the account of her life over twenty years (954–974) closely trained on her relationship with Fujiwara Kaneie, a scion of the most powerful branch of the Fujiwara clan. The author was a member of an inferior Fujiwara branch, hence her self-deprecation, but she was still firmly part of the middle-rank aristocracy, from which wives for the highest rank often came. The fiction-fueled fantasy she is writing against is that marriage to a “Prince Charming” is the happiest fate for a woman. She writes with an awareness that her own marriage would indeed have appeared fortunate to her contemporaries, and she could count on their avid curiosity. Perhaps an analogy to help appreciate the context of this work is to imagine if Princess Diana had been a superb writer and had composed a poetic diary about her marriage to Prince Charles. It can be argued that although Michitsuna’s Mother’s account of her marriage concentrates on its negative aspects, at the same time, the text celebrates that marriage, as well as pride in her power as a woman and poet.⁹ Michitsuna’s Mother did not come from a powerful family nor have the good fortune to bear daughters, which would have assured her status since her husband needed daughters to play the game of marriage politics upon which Fujiwara control of the throne depended.¹⁰ Still, Michitsuna’s Mother managed to hold her husband’s affections for the better part of twenty years. Time and again, she recounts how she was able to bring her straying husband back with a poem, and she carefully records all the poems he sent her. Traditionally, Japanese love poetry centers on the suffering of love, not its joys. If she

lets out all the stops on the descriptions of the pain of her marriage, it may also be because that offered the greatest scope for poetic expression.¹¹

Margaret Childs, specialist of premodern Japanese literature at the University of Kansas, has opened another lens of interpretation for *The Kagerō Diary* and the other diaries of the period in her article “Pre-modern Japanese Autobiography as Therapeutic Writing.” She posits that the *Kagerō Diary* author, along with other authors of the time, may have turned to life-writing as a way to regain a sense of control over their lives after suffering traumatic loss.¹² Michitsuna’s Mother does portray the anxiety of her marriage as traumatic, but the latter third of *The Kagerō Diary* displays a greater equilibrium of mind. Close reading reveals the author turning away from her own troubles to appreciate other people and what Virginia Woolf has called “moments of being,”¹³ a kind of consciousness that was displayed earlier in the diary primarily in records of her pilgrimages.

EXERCISE 2

In order to reveal mental growth in *The Kagerō Diary*, list episodes in the text that record positive experiences and a calm state of mind. It will become clear that they cluster in the latter third of the diary, but aside from bringing the positive passages of the diary into greater relief, the process of deciding whether an individual episode records a positive or negative experience will deliver the real insights.

Although this fact is often overlooked, accounts of travel occupy a lot of space in *The Kagerō Diary*. The author records several pilgrimages she took, and although the express purposes of these trips may have been religious, the trips also provided opportunities for appreciating scenery: “Gazing out, I see the surface of the water sparkling in between the trees and find it so moving”¹⁴; and for appreciating the situation of others: “I . . . see all these people crossing paths; I think to myself that they must all have their own concerns and worries that would bring them on a pilgrimage like this”¹⁵

Murasaki Shikibu Diary

Murasaki Shikibu (d. 1014?) is best known as author of *The Tale of Genji*, a work enshrined both in the canon of Japanese literature and the emerging canon of world literature. A member of the middle-ranking aristocracy, Murasaki was invited in 1007, probably in her mid-thirties, to serve in the court of the consort Shōshi, daughter of Fujiwara Michinaga. Michinaga incidentally was the son of Kaneie, husband to *The Kagerō Diary* author; the closeness of Heian aristocratic society is apparent the moment one starts to trace affiliations between writers. It is conjectured that Murasaki was invited to join Shōshi’s entourage because her *Tale of Genji* had begun to attract attention. Her diary mentions the tale itself in several places, including an anecdote telling how her nickname at court, the only name we have for her, was given to her by one of her male readers.

The *Murasaki Shikibu Diary* is the most fragmentary of the Heian diaries, but it has a carefully crafted beginning that sets the stage, introduces her patron Michinaga as a main character and hints at a possible dalliance between herself and her patron before launching into a detailed

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Murasaki Shikibu Writing.
Woodblock print by Kunisada
(1786–1865). Source: Wikipedia at
<http://tinyurl.com/qawt4dv>.

account of the politically important birth of a male child to Shōshi, which is recorded in several *kanbun* (literary Chinese) diaries of the time by male courtiers who also witnessed the event.

EXERCISE 3

Michinaga has been suggested as a possible model for the hero in *The Tale of Genji*. Glean a portrait of Michinaga from the intimate vignettes in the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary* and discuss the ways in which Genji resembles Michinaga.

It has been suggested that Michinaga may even have commissioned Murasaki to write up a vernacular account of the event for posterity since she covers the event in a factual style similar to a courtier's *kanbun* diary and not so different from that of a modern journalist.

EXERCISE 4

Richard Bowring's translation of the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary* includes an appendix with translated excerpts from the *kanbun* diaries by male courtiers describing the same ceremonies recorded by Murasaki Shikibu. Are there differences between these accounts of the same event that make it possible to generalize about differences between a female and male point of view?

But in the midst of objective description, the novelist in the author cannot restrain herself. Recording the ceremony of the first bathing of the prince, for example, she describes the finery of the ladies-in-waiting in attendance and then goes on to discuss their fans:

*All the appropriate phrases were inscribed on them, just as if they had discussed it among themselves. Everyone must have thought they were being very original, but now, as they looked at each other, they realized with a shock how much of a muchness they all were.*¹⁶

This observation delivers an ironic twist of the knife worthy of Jane Austen, and the superficial hothouse atmosphere of court society stands deftly revealed. Furthermore, a few pages later, the author shifts from objective description to self-examination. Pondering why she was unable to lose herself in the splendor and excitement of court life, she wonders “—if only my appetites were more mundane, I might find more joy in life . . .”¹⁷

EXERCISE 5

Compare the view of court life presented in the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary* with that in Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, which gives a detailed view of the contemporary rival court of the consort Teishi.

The latter part of the diary embarks on capsule descriptions of other women at court (including other women writers such as Izumi Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon), then morphs into a kind of letter without a specific addressee. Given the recurring advisory tone of this section, it has been suggested that it was written for her daughter. It is also in this section, however, that the diary comes closest to Western-style autobiography, in that the author examines her life to explain the person she has become. She goes back to her childhood and relates how she was so much quicker at learning literary Chinese than her brother, whose lessons

from their father she was merely observing, that the father was moved to exclaim, “Just my luck . . . What a pity she was not born a man.”¹⁸ This is the key to her discontent with court life; she was not just intelligent but a born intellectual and far more literate than was fashionable. She describes the anxiety of trying to hide this aspect of herself from all those around her, and yet, she left the diary as a testimony to that intellect and knowledge.

EXERCISE 6

Consider whether intellectual women (or intellectual men, for that matter) suffer a stigma in our own time.

The Sarashina Diary

The author, Sugawara Takasue no Musume, born in 1008 (coincidentally the same year that *The Tale of Genji* began to circulate as a completed text), centers the narrative of her life on the beguilement of literature. She portrays herself as being more interested in reading than “real” life. And of all the personal histories of the Heian period, this one displays the greatest number of intertextual references to previous works. She tells us that, at the age of fourteen, she read *The Tale of Genji* so assiduously that “I was amazed to find that passages I had somehow naturally learned by heart came floating unbidden into my head.”¹⁹ The next moment, she recounts a dream in which a monk admonishes her to memorize the *Lotus Sutra* (instead of fiction, it would seem), but she is not inclined to follow this advice. In several key retrospective passages, she sounds a lament that if only she had not been so addicted to fiction and poetry, perhaps she could have devoted herself more diligently to Buddhist practice and thereby have achieved a more successful life. Since options for women were few, Buddhist devotions were the only conceivable means available to women at the time for influencing their fate. Yet, the content of most of her diary contradicts her lament by demonstrating just how consoling and enlightening reading actually was for her.

She began her diary in her thirteenth year. The first fifth of the diary recounts a two-month journey taken by the author and her family from the eastern province of Kazusa up to the capital.

EXERCISE 7

Compare and contrast a selection of travel descriptions in *The Kagerō Diary* and *The Sarashina Diary*. Consider what travel in the premodern period does and does not have in common with travel in our own age in terms of purpose and effect.

Through the fresh eyes of a child, the author creates an indelible impression for the reader. Even though this diary covers the longest period of a woman's life, nearly forty years, and ends with the author in old age, something of the child's vision is present in her writing right up to the end. Perhaps her theme of literature's fascination also makes her seem “forever young.”

Although this diary has a limpid prose style and seems simple, even naïve, on the surface, it has the most finely orchestrated structure of all the Heian diaries. Attention to the underlying structure of the work reveals a counter-theme to her explicit message, which enables the unfolding of a doubletrack of meaning.

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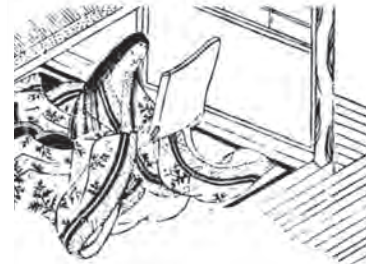


Illustration from the title page of *The Sarashina Diary*. ©2014 Columbia University Press.

To have these carefully crafted testaments by women from a thousand years ago seems like an incredible fluke.

EXERCISE 8

There are two complete English translations for both *The Kagerō Diary* and *The Sarashina Diary* in English. Thus both texts lend themselves to the following type of exercise:

Select a few passages with which to compare translations. Consider the ways in which two translations of the same passage differ and what might account for those differences.

Likewise, compare the introductions of each translation and reflect on how differently interpreters can present their subjects. Such an inquiry raises the intriguing and thorny issue of the subjectivity inherent in any objective scholarly enterprise, always good food for thought and discussion.

Conclusion

It will be divined from the foregoing descriptions that all three of these texts are works of literary sophistication. This is what qualifies them for inclusion in the category of world literature. Nonetheless, they are equally of interest for the history of human consciousness, particularly the consciousness of self. Until the modern period, we have so few records of reflection by women on how it feels to live day by day. To have these carefully crafted testaments by women from a thousand years ago seems like an incredible fluke. *The Sarashina Diary* is particularly rare in that it provides a view of adolescent consciousness. In a high school setting, for example, excerpts from *The Sarashina Diary* could be read productively against excerpts from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Any of these texts can serve the ultimate purpose of the study of world literature, which is surely to foster an understanding of human beings across time, geography, culture, and gender.

Over the last forty years, I have noticed a subtle shift among American and Canadian students' reactions to these texts. When I first started working on the *The Kagerō Diary* in the late 1980s, the prevalence of the feminist approach made the diary easy to appreciate. The author's complaints about her marriage appear courageous, even an exposé of the inherent inequality in her society that by extension bolstered the movement for change in our own society. Recently, though, it seems that young women find it hard to identify with the anguish of Michitsuna's Mother, perhaps because the circumstances of their own lives have changed so radically. By contrast, the *The Sarashina Diary* used to be something of a hard sell, even twenty years ago, whereas now young students, both male and female, seem to find it easy to identify with an author who does not base her life story around her relationship with a man but is more interested in her interior world for its own sake. The invention of blogging where anyone can create fantasy identities for themselves with an Internet pen name makes *The Sarashina* author and particularly her absorption with fantasy more accessible than perhaps ever before. These shifts in reception reveal another way in which these texts are valuable. They can be held up as mirrors in which we can see ourselves and how profoundly our own time and social situation shape our ability to see and feel. When we bring our subjective reactions to these texts into objective awareness and then set those contemporary lenses aside,

these texts can reveal their full store of riches as windows into other states of being. ■

NOTES

1. For a full list of these texts and their translations into English, see "Heian Literary Diaries" in *Cambridge History of Japanese Literature* by Sonja Arntzen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 165–175. Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* could also be added to the list for a sixth. For translated excerpts of the major texts, see Haruo Shirane, ed., *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
2. For translations and a full discussion of some of the minor ones, see Joshua Mostow, *At the House of Gathered Leaves: Shorter Biographical and Autobiographical Narratives from Japanese Court Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
3. For an overview of the diary genre in Heian literature, its origins, and overlap with such Western genres as journal, memoir, and autobiography, see Arntzen, "Heian Literary Diaries," 165–166, and also Arntzen and Itō Moriyuki, *The Sarashina Diary: A Woman's Life in Eleventh-Century Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3–6. For the purposes of this article, the term "diary" will be equated with "personal history."
4. For a thought-provoking discussion of the relationship between the development of vernacular written languages and the possibilities it opened up for national literatures in the modern period, see Minae Mizumura, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 72–90. College students would find it fruitful to consider how well Mizumura's arguments fit Heian diaries.
5. Sonja Arntzen, *The Kagerō Diary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 219.
6. Richard Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 35.
7. See Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu* for a reprisal of Georges Gusdorf's argument about the connection between autobiography and development of a sense of self in the West. See also Margaret Childs's discussion of the Eurocentric bias in the study of autobiography that ignores these Japanese examples, "Premodern Japanese Autobiography as Therapeutic Writing" in *Desire for Monogatari: Proceedings of the Second Midwest Research/Pedagogy Seminar on Japanese Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University, 1994), 42–43.
8. Arntzen, *The Kagerō Diary*, 57.
9. My attention to this point was forcefully drawn by a lecture of Margaret Childs at the University of British Columbia in early 2015.
10. All four of Kaneie's daughters from his first marriage were placed as Imperial consorts, laying a firm foundation for his regency and giving great prestige to their mother.
11. See also Arntzen, *The Kagerō Diary*, 5–7 on the "discourse of sorrow" in Heian culture and literature.
12. Childs, "Premodern Japanese Autobiographies," 43–45.
13. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 22.
14. Arntzen, *The Kagerō Diary*, 153.
15. *Ibid.*, 157.
16. Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu*, 63.
17. *Ibid.*, 75.
18. *Ibid.*, 139.
19. Sugawara Takasue no Musume, *The Sarashina Diary*, trans. Sonja Arntzen and Itō Moriyuki (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 114.

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