
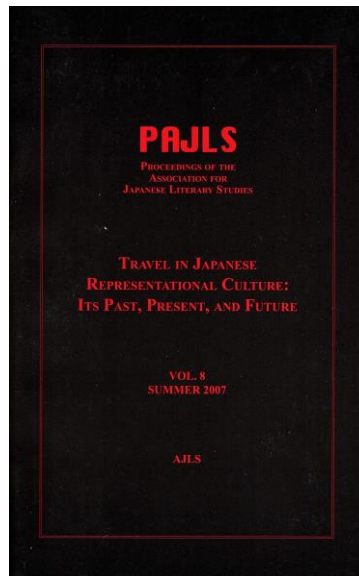


“Travel in Memoirs by Heian Women’s Writers:
The *Sarashina nikki*”

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**TRAVEL IN MEMOIRS BY HEIAN WOMEN’S WRITERS:
THE SARASHINA NIKKI**

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**1. THE JOURNEY TOWARDS THE OTHER:
FROM KAZUSA TO HEIANKYŌ**

Probably written sometime around 1060, the beginning of the *Sarashina nikki* (The Sarashina Memoir) describes a girl who has grown up in a remote province far from the capital who, like many women of her time, found her only leisure pursuit in the reading of stories. Given the rarity of circulating manuscripts, above all in areas far from the capital, it was necessary to listen to summaries of works learned by heart by someone, with the inevitable omissions from and variations on the original texts. The dissatisfaction that these kind of botched stories brings about and the desire to read the works in their original form, urges the protagonist to worship a statue of the Buddha Yakushi. She asks the divinity to help her return to the capital as soon as possible where, she feels, she will finally be able to read numerous tales and at the same time immerse herself in the refined atmosphere in which the heroines of the stories she had heard lived.

After spending four years in the province of Kazusa, the protagonist’s father, having completed his term as vice-governor, decides to go back to the capital, thus satisfying the aspirations of his daughter who in turn abandons the places where she had spent her childhood. They begin a long and tiring journey which will take her finally to the place of her dreams.

Right from the first few lines of this memoir, the stories and the capital seem to be inextricably linked in that both bring to mind the image of an elegant lifestyle with a higher social status. For the young protagonist the capital represents “the Other”, the political and cultural heart of the country, the world of *miyabi* (elegance) to which she originally belonged, but from which she was sadly excluded when, at the age of just nine, she had followed her family to a distant eastern province.

Numerous sources testify to the fact that in the Heian period the provinces situated along the Tōkaidō were considered “wild and savage”. For this reason being forced to live far from the capital was seen as a genuine misfortune which could leave an indelible mark on a person’s life, to the extent of making difficult, if not actually impossible, any

successive reintegration into the elitist environment of the court. It is not by chance that the *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, ca. 1010) offer numerous examples of heroines whose misfortune is brought about exactly by their provincial origins. Among these, the daughter of Sugawara no Takasue seems to have a predilection for Ukifune, with whom she shares a sad destiny, characterised by solitude and marginalisation.

The protagonist of *Sarashina nikki* is a woman who lives out of the “centre” (the capital), and right from her first appearance she is seen to be an impatient creature, one who is anxiously seeking something, with the emphasis on “seeking”. In her case, the desire for the “other” is not only motivated by the necessity to get back a culture to which she originally belonged, but also by the hope of reaching mid-range aristocratic status thanks to a fortuitous marriage. It is interesting to note that, from this point of view, the desires of the protagonist coincide perfectly with those of her parents, her father above all. On several occasions the father appears to be seriously worried about his daughter’s future. This troubles him to such an extent that after having returned to the capital he decides to go back to the eastern provinces alone, so as not to tear her once again from an environment in which it will be much easier to find a good match. Taking into account the fact that during the Heian period the provinces were Japan’s principal productive sources, Sugawara no Takasue, acting as vice-governor outside the capital certainly would have had the opportunity to accumulate notable wealth for himself, yet this sadly did not guarantee the possibility of acquiring a higher social standing. Only a daughter, much more than a son, was able to guarantee this, by means of strategic marriage.

In the light of these considerations, the journey of Sugawara no Takasue’s daughter to the capital is much more than a simple movement through space. For her, it marks her *début* in court society and, at the same time, her entry into adulthood, accompanied by a search for an ideal husband who can satisfy both her expectations, and those of her family.

The description of the journey, which lasts some three months, takes up a fairly sizeable portion of the work. This highly-detailed account, which takes us around various places in the Japan of that period is a kind of story-within-the-story, autonomous with respect to the events which precede and follow it, to the point of making it appear possible that the work’s origin may have been in a travel diary, to which modifications were later added.

The narrative structure of the journey is similar to that of the *kikōbun* (travel diaries) of classical Japanese literature. It lends importance to the move and places the modest young girl from a remote province at the centre of a plot which follows the routes and verses of the great poets of the past. Its itinerary is the inverse of that of its illustrious predecessor, “the man” (*otoko*, traditionally identified as being Ariwara no Narihira) of the *Ise monogatari* (The Ise Tales, 10th century) both from geographical and symbolic points of view. The protagonist of the *Ise monogatari* goes east in exile, as he wishes to distance himself from the world of the court with which he is no longer satisfied. She, on the other hand, goes in the other direction, westwards, to escape from the monotony of provincial life. Even if both pass through the same places, the story of Sugawara no Takasue’s daughter surprises the reader in that it reveals differences and disturbances precisely in those places where it would be logical to expect the same descriptions as its predecessors.

Of the forty-five places visited, around seventeen are poetic place names¹ (*utamakura*) which recur throughout collections of poetry from the period.² The author often finds these places to be highly different from how they are described. In Kuroto no hama (“Black Sand Beach”), vast dunes of fine white sand roll away as far as the eye can see, while the plain of Musashi, famous for the sight of the *murasaki* plants in autumn, turns out to be nothing more than a burnt, desolate landscape. Even the expectations aroused by the sight of the plain of Morokoshi, famous for its *yamato nadeshiko* “brocade”, reveal themselves as disappointments due to the presence of just a few sad small shrivelled flowers, and at Yastuhashi (“Eight Bridges”) there is nothing of interest whatsoever to see as there is no longer any trace of the bridges which had so fascinated the protagonist of the *Ise monogatari*.³

The re-evocation of this journey, made many years later, shows up mistakes and imprecisions regarding the names of the places visited which, in the text do not even appear in the same progressive order as they are found along the Tōkaidō. The lack of geographical precision

¹ For a study about *utamakura* see: Sagiyama Ikuko, “Pratiche di riscrittura. L’affermazione e l’evoluzione degli *utamakura*”, in *Atti del XXVI Convegno di Studi sul Giappone*, (Torino, September 26–28, 2002), Venezia, Cartotecnica Veneziana Editrice, 2003, pp. 423–442.

² Sugitani Jurō, “*Sarashina nikki no tabi to uta*”, in Imai Takuji (ed.) *Sarashina nikki, Sanuki no suke nikki, Jōjin Ajari no haha shū, Joryū nikki bungaku kōza* 4, Tōkyō, Benseisha, 1990, pp. 102–103.

³ Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity. Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women’s Memoirs*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 97–99.

does not seem to bother the author, who is more worried about verifying the existing connection between certain places and the literary culture of her time. This proof has a double aim for her: 1) to demonstrate that, even living outside of the “centre”, she shares the aesthetic sensibilities and culture of people from the capital; 2) to bring to the reader’s attention the dubious reliability of literary language, prefiguring her later “condemnation” of the tales.

The itinerary along the Tōkaidō whose length (around three months) seems excessive when compared to the actual distance between Kazusa and the capital (probably reachable in a month) gives us lots of information regarding travel during the Heian period. It describes the superstitions related to departure (the need to leave on a certain day and travel in a particular direction), the pain of separation from people who are close which, in some cases, could end up being definitive (the difficult separation of the protagonist from her nurse who, having given birth to a son during the journey was forced to stop for a few days) and the fatigue and the dangers which travel brought about, above all in cases of bad weather (think of the fear which the protagonist feels when she is forced to spend a rainy night in a small improvised shelter).

In the Heian period, going to another place often also sadly meant upturning one’s life, yet it did also lend travellers the possibility of experiencing some extraordinary opportunities: meeting new people, seeing magnificent landscapes for the first time and widening one’s own personal knowledge by listening to mysterious and fascinating stories told by people met by chance on the road. (With reference to this, we remember the legend of Takeshiba who tells the romantic story of an affair between a princess and a palace guard). Moreover, there were also pleasurable moments of distraction, such as, for example, the opportunity to see a show improvised by some beautiful courtesans who, with their beauty and their talent, made it possible to forget the hardships of travel.

2. THE PROTAGONIST’S INTERIOR JOURNEY: FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

The arrival in the capital immediately disappoints the young woman who stays with her family in a large decaying house which has nothing of the sumptuous residences which she had imagined hearing the descriptions of her stepmother and her sister:

That huge house, fallen into dreadful condition, hardly seemed to be a house in the capital: I felt the same sensation of loss that

I had felt among the thick forests and the enormous, terrifying mountains we had passed through.⁴

The capital shows itself to be a hostile place, almost frightening, yet it still however represents the ideal point from which to start a search for the tales. In a short time this ends up involving various women who share an interest in reading. Reading becomes the protagonist's main occupation. Instead of actively participating in society, she slowly closes herself into a kind of cloistered retreat during which the monotony of the days is sadly only interrupted by some painful episodes in her life: the death of her nurse caused by an epidemic, the loss of her sister during childbirth, the departure of her father for a distant eastern province. A new, exciting life appears on the horizon when, after her father's retirement from politics, she is asked to become a lady at court. This experience which seemed to guarantee entrance into aristocratic society, against her wishes, causes her from start to finish nothing but worry and a growing sense of inadequacy, and finishes much earlier than expected due to a marriage arranged by her parents. Even life as a married woman has nothing in store for her such as she had imagined from reading the romantic adventures described in the *Genji monogatari*, and even if her husband guarantees her security and social power, in no way does he correspond to her ideal man, Prince Genji. However, a gentleman met by chance one evening at court, does.

Overall, the years spent in the capital, leave the protagonist with nothing but the disappointment of all her hopes, and the painful awareness of not being able to share the same destiny as some of the lucky heroines in the stories she has read. The dreams and the enthusiasm of adolescence make way for a disenchanting vision of life and the maturity of adulthood, marked by grief and separation. It coincides with the beginning of a spiritual journey in search of truth.

3. THE JOURNEY THROUGH A FANTASTIC WORLD: READING THE *MONOGATARI*

With the passing of the years, the protagonist becomes increasingly aware of the necessity of thinking about her future rebirth, yet these good intentions notwithstanding, she is not able to distance herself definitively from the stories which continue to be the only chance of escape for her.

⁴ Sekine Yoshiko, *Sarashina nikki*, vol. 1, Kōdansha gakujujutsu bunko 172, Tōkyō, Kōdansha, 1977, p. 87.

The *monogatari*, as their own etymology suggests (telling something to someone out loud), are a narrative form which have not yet been freed from the support of the storyteller. In the Heian period, they were often read by “voices off”, by a handmaid to the listener who would leaf through illustrations while listening. These were an indispensable visual aid, a help in imagining characters and settings at court, the centre of culture and power.

Yet there also existed a solitary mode of use for this type of story, described by the author of the *Sarashina nikki* who expresses the great enthusiasm with which she reads all the booklets of the *Genji monogatari* given to her by her aunt, one after another:

The satisfaction that I felt when, all alone, lying behind a screen, I pulled all the booklets out of the box, one then another, in order to read them, was so great that I wouldn't have changed my place not even with that of an imperial consort! I read all day, and at night, when I was awake, I continued to read by lamplight.⁵

Through the pages of Murasaki Shikibu's work, she imagines herself becoming a beautiful woman with long flowing locks, like Yūgao (who, as we know, was abandoned by her husband and carried away by Genji to then die in his arms, killed by the spirit of a jealous woman), but above all she idealises Ukifune, the protagonist of the last few chapters of the *Genji monogatari*:

All that I wished was that at least once a year a high-born man would visit me, as handsome and as elegant as Genji, while I, like Ukifune, hidden away in a mountain village, contemplated the flowers, the red leaves, the moon and the snow during the impatient wait for a magnificent letter which every so often would distract me from my profound loneliness.⁶

A careful reading of this passage reveals not only an identification with the heroine, but also the attempt to rewrite the story along the lines of her own extremely personal viewpoint. This leads her to bring Ukifune closer to Genji, even though the two never actually meet in the *Genji monogatari* (Genji is in fact already dead when Ukifune comes onto the

⁵ Sekine Yoshiko, *Sarashina nikki*, vol. 1, p. 105.

⁶ Sekine Yoshiko, *Sarashina nikki*, vol. 1, p. 174.

scene).⁷ The long-anticipated meeting with the beloved which happens only once a year intersects with the scene described in the plot of *Tanabata*, while the idea of an amorous relationship experienced in a beautiful place, far from the world, recalls the legend of Takeshiba⁸ where a princess renounces the travails of palace life to follow the guard with whom she is enamoured as far as the province of Musashi. These textual quotations, more or less knowing, show the active participation in reading which amounts to an original reworking of known stories.

The experience of the protagonist of the *Sarashina nikki*, forced to live in a remote, “wild” province, with respect to the capital, is similar to that of the protagonist of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. She, too, finds herself “retired” to the countryside and married to a rather dull doctor, and has nothing other to do than use her imagination to conduct a fantasy life in which reading plays a dominant part.⁹ Sugawara no Takasue’s daughter idealises Heiankyō and the people who move through the court environment, while Emma Bovary dreams of Paris, even buying a map of the city so she can use her imagination to walk far and wide through the streets of the city. The tales make it possible to travel toward a virtual reality and develop in both a kind of morbid addiction which brings with it contempt for the environment into which they were born and the dream of a higher social standing. Indulging in the pleasure of reading can be considered misleading at best, if not even dangerous by the surrounding environment, yet for both women, forced to live “far from the centre”, it represents a pastime which they cannot give up, one which offers them a kind of inventory of the world which they can compare themselves with, to reflect on and imagine their own destiny.

4. THE JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH: PILGRIMAGES TO THE TEMPLES

It is possible to see two basic movements in the protagonist of the *Sarashina nikki*: a social quest and a spiritual quest. Both are present in

⁷ Joshua S. Mostow, “On Becoming Ukifune: Autobiographical Heroines in Heian and Kamakura Literature”, in Barbara Stevenson and Cynthia Ho (ed.), *Crossing the Bridge. Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers*, New York, Palgrave, 2000, pp. 47–48.

⁸ For a detailed discussion about the legend of Takeshiba see: Tsumoto Nobuhiro, *Sarashina nikki no kenkyū*, Tōkyō, Waseda daigaku shuppanbu, 1982, pp. 192–207.

⁹ Jack Goody, “Dall’oralità alla scrittura”, in Franco Moretti (ed.), *Il romanzo I. La cultura del romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001, p. 38.

the destinies of Yūgao, Ukifune and the other heroines of the *Genji monogatari*.

The protagonist of the social quest initially finds herself in a situation of alienation. She could be a person who lives on the margins of society or an orphan who is trying to distance herself from the unsatisfactory reality in which she lives, in order to be integrated into a family or a larger social community where she may prosper. The attempts at integration into this new context do not, however, always have a positive outcome, and it is precisely when the protagonist decides to turn her back on a world which, contrary to her expectations, has proved to be hostile, begins her spiritual quest which is aimed at self-reconciliation. This is a process aimed at an interior transformation through a journey which has as its destination a “house” situated in the “other world.”¹⁰

In the years following her wedding, her disappointment and the growing sense of guilt caused by her neglect of religious devotions push Sugawara no Takasue’s daughter to undertake frequent pilgrimages. On several occasions she visits the temples of Hase, Kurama and Ishiyama. Among these, the Hasedera temple, famous for being a sacred place where it was possible to have revelatory dreams,¹¹ seems to take on a particular importance for her, so much so as to push her to undertake a long journey, even during a time when the whole country was in turmoil due to the emperor’s purification ceremony before the Great Festival of Thanksgiving, (*Daijōe*).

While floods of people arrive in the capital from all parts of the country, the woman moves with a group of companions in the opposite direction, under the amazed glances of passers-by. It is interesting to note that on this occasion, the reasons which have led her to go to Hase are not exclusively religious, but also personal, given that pilgrimage represents for her a valid excuse for not having to witness the purification ceremony during which the daughter her husband had had with another woman would have played a leading role.¹²

¹⁰ Shirane Haruo, *The Bridge of Dreams. A Poetics of The Tale of Genji*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987, pp. 169–170.

¹¹ For a detailed study about the meaning of dreams in the Heian period see: Saigō Nobutsuna, *Kodaijin to yume*, Tōkyō, Heibonsha, 1972, pp. 77–86.

¹² John R. Wallace, *Objects of Discourse. Memoirs By Women of Heian Japan*, Ann Arbor, Center for Japanese Studies The University of Michigan, 2005, p. 237.

The protagonist's continuous pilgrimages are not only a response to the warnings received from divinities in dreams, and often become a mere pretext to escape the capital and an unsatisfying life. One of the pilgrimages described towards the end of the work is introduced to the reader with these words:

In a period in which I was no longer satisfied with my marriage,
while I was at Uzumasa for a retreat, I received a missive from a
person who had become my friend in the period in which I was
in service at the Princess.¹³

Similar situations can be found in the *Kagerō nikki* (the *Kagerō* Memoir, after 974), when Michitsuna's mother retires to Narutaki, exasperated by the continuous philandering of Kaneie, and in the *Izumi Shikibu nikki* (the *Izumi Shikibu* Memoir, ca. 1008), where at a certain point the protagonist decides to go to the temple of Ishiyama, to distance herself from her unsatisfactory relationship with prince Atsumichi.

It is easy to see that in a society in which women led a highly cloistered life, pilgrimages were one of the few occasions which they had to distract themselves and enjoy the pleasures of travelling. It is also necessary to take into consideration the hypothesis that spiritual retreats in some cases led to the extreme decision to take vows, these too being for women a valid way of provoking the attention of their man, often involved in several relationships with different women at the same time.

Unfortunately, despite the dedication of Sugawara no Takasue's daughter, even the spiritual quest, just like the social one, ends in a failure which condemns the woman to live the last few years of her life in solitude, with no hope of any future rebirth. The old woman's feelings, characterised by profound unease, are summed up in the verses of one of the last poems included in the *Sarashina nikki*:

Why then tonight
do you came to visit
your abandoned aunt
obscured by the shadows
of a moonless night?¹⁴

¹³ Sekine Yoshiko, *Sarashina nikki*, vol. 2, Kōdansha gakujuutsu bunko 173, Tōkyō, Kōdansha, 1977, p. 111.

¹⁴ Sekine Yoshiko, *Sarashina nikki*, vol. 2, p. 147.

If, as is suggested in a passage from the *Mumyōzōshi* (the Nameless Book, ca. 1202), the moon is a reincarnation of Seishi who received the gift of light from Buddha Amida, in this poem the description of the dark night is a clear allusion to the uncertainty of a final salvation for the woman who is preparing alone to undertake her final journey to the other side, where she will find herself groping blindly in the depth of the shadows of a moonless night.