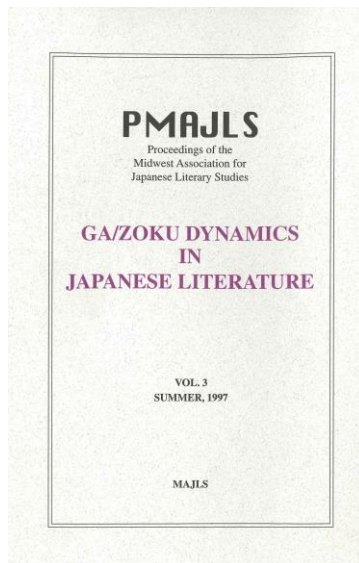


“Sei Shōnagon the Essay / *Ese-ist*: Delineating Differences in *Makura no sōshi*”

Naomi Fukumori 

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**Sei Shōnagon the Essay/Ese-ist:  
Delineating Differences in Makuranosōshi**

NAOMI FUKUMORI  
*Columbia University*

Within the ga/zoku framework of Japanese literature, where does Sei Shōnagon's Heian classic Makura no sōshi (The Pillow Book, early 11th century) fit? Because ga (high culture, that marked by courtly elegance, the orthodoxy) and zoku (low culture, the common) became paradigms within the practice of Japanese literature in the Edo period when writers such as Matsuo Bashō used the distinctions to conceptualize their creative efforts, the application of these historicized terms to an analysis of a Heian work may seem inappropriate. However, the ga/zoku framework can be used to analyze the process of canon formation and help us trace the fluctuating tastes which determined Makura no sōshi's history of reception. Furthermore, as I will show through analysis of the usage of the term ese (エセ), meaning roughly "lowly" and "fake" in Makura no sōshi, the dynamics between ga and zoku are essential to the delineation of the courtly world in Sei Shōnagon's work.

In the history of Japanese literature, the works of the Heian period have become monuments of the elegant or ga in the imaginations of later writers and readers. In the Heian period itself, however, Chinese writings were held in highest esteem, while the Japanese vernacular was just beginning to gain sanction as a medium for art with the compilation of the first imperial anthology of waka, the Kokinwakashū (Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poems, ca. 920). Other writings in Japanese from the Heian period--the monogatari (prose narratives), the nikki (memoirs), setsuwa (didactic narratives), and the zuihitsu

(miscellaneous writing genre of which Makura no sōshi is the Japanese progenitor and sole Heian example)--all undoubtedly would have been considered zoku in their time. It was through later evaluations of these Heian works, specifically through re-readings of them as sources of allusion for the composition of waka by influential poets like Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241), that some of these works became canonical, ga texts. In simplest terms then, ga and zoku are distinctions of power in literary history, whereby what is considered artistic and supported by arbiters of taste such as writers, scholars, and politicians is considered ga and that which lacks this backing is relegated to zoku.

However, as ga and zoku are labels of somewhat arbitrary and variable cultural standards, the objects of these labels can float freely between these categories over time. Thus, a literary genre or individual work which was at first new, unorthodox, and therefore zoku might later be adopted by those in authority to revitalize their artistic concerns. This ga and zoku framework is predicated on the assumption that the power of the arbiters of taste lies in their ability to determine what exactly is high culture or low culture.

An incident narrated in Makura provides a clue about the literary tradition in, or rather perhaps against, which the work could have been written. According to the final passage (batsubun) of the Sankanbon and Nōinbon recensions of Makura,<sup>1</sup> Sei

<sup>1</sup> In the Sankanbon version, see Ishida, vol. II 175. In the Nōinbon version, see Matsuo and Nagai 466. For the English translation refer to, Ivan Morris vol. I 267-68. To describe the textual lines very briefly, the four extant textual lines of Makura no sōshi are of two types, the randomly organized--in which the memoir passages, lists, and essays are intermingled with seemingly little order--and the organized texts--in

Shōnagon wrote her work on paper which she received from her patron Empress Teishi. The paper is delivered to the empress's quarters by her brother Korechika, who explains that the gift comes from the emperor who is himself having Sima Qian's *Shi ji* (Records of the Historian, Ja. *Shiki*, ca. 100BCE) copied on a similar stock of paper. Sei, who is attending the empress as her lady-in-waiting, displays the skill for repartee for which she is famous by saying that she will make a "makura" or pillow out of it. There are various theories as to what Sei might have meant by this remark, but she is undoubtedly operating on word association. That is, the Japanese pronunciation of the *Shi ji*, "shiki," is homonymous with a word 敷き/底 which means "a mat upon which a person or object sits" or "bottom."<sup>2</sup> Playing off of this, Sei offers the empress a "makura" or pillow, which is something that is laid beneath the head and, of all the theories that have been advanced, perhaps most likely a generic name for personal notebooks which are kept at one's side and a book of makura kotoba--the poetic epithets conventionally attached to certain words--and uta makura--the words, phrases, and images codified for use in poetry, as well as the names of places made famous

which each of the three types of passages are grouped into separate sections. The *Sankanbon* and *N'inbon* are randomly organized, while the *Sakaibon* and *Maedakebon* are organized texts. It appears that variants of the work arose over the centuries as a result of shifting tastes and interpretive strategies. As a result of research during this century, scholars now concur that the organization of the proto-Makura text was random, and that of the two randomly organized texts, the *Sankanbon* variant bears the least trace of editorial corruptions. Thus, for the purposes of talking about general characteristics about Makura no sōshi in this paper, I will be referring to the *Sankanbon* variant unless otherwise specified. For a summary of the variants see Shioda 74-101.

<sup>2</sup> See Matsumura 586.

through poetry.<sup>3</sup> The list passages of Makura do resemble poetic catalogues, so it is possible that Sei's comments referred to the creation of a poetic manual.<sup>4</sup> However, the contents of the existing work extend far beyond this description. In any case, the title of the work was probably derived from this passage, although it is unclear whether Makura no sōshi is the title by which Sei referred to her collection or if it is a later appellation.

This passage reveals various interesting possibilities about the conditions by which Makura came into being as a literary and historical work. First, there is the public nature in which the empress gives Sei the paper. Would it be reading too much into the passage to think that the work Sei was to write was intended to serve the empress's salon in much the same capacity as The Records of the Historian? This work which traces Chinese dynastic history was revered by Heian Japanese as a prime example of historical writing (in fact, it is included in the Sankanbon version of the list "Fumi wa" or "Writings in Chinese" which presumably catalogues Chinese works that were widely read by Sei's contemporaries<sup>5</sup>); being written in Chinese, it signified the male, public, orthodox--in other words ga sphere--of Heian court life. Through the gesture of granting Sei Shōnagon permission to write her "makura," Empress Teishi was sanctioning the creation of a work written in vernacular Japanese that could stand its own ground in comparison to the classic of Chinese writings of history. Makura would be the female, unorthodox, and zoku version (or

<sup>3</sup> The various theories and their proponents are presented in Shioda 52-65.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Morris 33.

<sup>5</sup> It is passage #200 in Ishida, vol. II 86.

perhaps subversion) of the canonized Records of the Historian.

Joshua Mostow has also placed Makura in the same tradition as Records of the Historian in his analysis of Japanese “political memoirs”, and he suggests that Sei Shōnagon perhaps functioned “as a contemporary (Japanese and feminine) counterpart to the classic (Chinese and male) recorder [i.e. Sima Qian].”<sup>6</sup> His categorization of both Records and Makura as “political memoirs” is illuminating, for it captures their primary interest in presenting the lives and careers of political figures. In contrast to the self-reflective, private nature of other Heian female memoirs such as Kagerō nikki (The Gossamer Diary, late 10th century) and Sarashina nikki (As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams, mid-11th century), Makura is a nyōbō nikki, or a record of service as a lady-in-waiting. Rather than narrating her own life within her work, Sei Shōnagon concentrates on recording the events of Empress Teishi’s court salon. Even when Sei does focus attention upon herself in her writings, it is usually in connection to the events of Teishi’s salon and her own role as lady-in-waiting to Teishi. An example of this is the passage discussed above in which Sei displays her wit by suggesting that a “makura” be made with the paper that the empress receives. Although it is easy to read a strong ego into the voice of the narrative (especially in English translation where a first-person narrator is written into the text), Makura is a collective record of Teishi’s salon, not a personal diary.

This reading of Makura as a work commissioned by Empress Teishi is not without ambiguity, however. Sei begins the passage we have been discussing by saying,

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<sup>6</sup> Mostow 112-3.

I wrote this notebook during an idle residence at home, filling it with everything that I have seen and felt, since I thought that no one would look at them. Since there are some things which simply might be construed as harmful to people and excessive, I tried to keep this book well hidden. However, it has leaked out into the world against my expectations.

Ironically, this comment is followed immediately by the description of how Sei received paper from the empress--an incident which would suggest that Makura was a commissioned work. Given the nature of the contents of Makura, including Sei's reference at one point to an audience which tells her to "leave nothing out,"<sup>7</sup> it would seem that this claim to privacy at the beginning of this passage is disingenuous. It should be read as a disclaimer aimed to absolve the author should the contents of her work offend someone. The conflicting messages in this concluding passage can be interpreted as reflections of the author's apprehensions about creating a work which had no precedent in form or content.

A vital issue to consider in conjunction with such concerns of literary legitimacy is the socio-political circumstances of Empress Teishi's salon when Sei Shōnagon wrote Makura. Teishi became a consort to Emperor Ichijō in 990 when her father Fujiwara no Michitaka was the most powerful political figure in Heian politics (he was Regent [kanpaku] from 990-993 and Chancellor [daijō daijin] from 993 until his death in 995). With her father holding the top post in government, Teishi and her salon symbolized the pinnacle of cultural power. However, when Michitaka suddenly died in an epidemic, power passed onto his brother Michinaga, who proceeded to present his daughter Shōshi

<sup>7</sup> Ishida, vol. I 138. Morris, vol. I 112.

as another consort to the emperor. Sei may have begun writing the work during the heyday of Michitaka's power, but by the time she wrote the passage which concludes her work (sometime between 998-1001), Teishi's salon had lost its political backing.<sup>8</sup> When Teishi died giving birth to a child in the year 1000, the milieu which was the center of Sei's writing vanished. Thus, Makura no sōshi became a record to legitimate the authority of a faction politically demised.

Given that such socio-political circumstances informed Makura's composition, one of the most striking characteristics of the work is its presentation of a consistently flattering portrait of Empress Teishi's salon. This is not to suggest that Sei Shōnagon completely eliminates details about the political demise of her patron. In fact, there are memoir passages which narrate events specifically taking place after Michitaka's death (as overtly as in passages which refer to Michitaka as kodono or the Late Lord<sup>9</sup>), and Empress Teishi's frequent changes of residence to run-down mansions as a result of her weakened status are recorded as well.<sup>10</sup> What characterizes Sei's treatment of these incidents is her decision to locate the narration in potentially tragic circumstances and then to depict scenes filled with laughter and amusement. For instance, an incident in which Teishi's ladies-in-

<sup>8</sup> Sei Shōnagon received the paper for her "makura" sometime between 994 and 996. Probable dating for the final passage as having been written between 998 and 1001 is based on the court rank assigned to a courtier who is mentioned in it. All dates are based on the timeline in Ishida, vol. II 425-449.

<sup>9</sup> Ishida, vol. II 20,49.

<sup>10</sup> See for example passage 156 "Kodono no onbuku no koro (Ishida, vol. II 49-55). In the English translation it is passage 159 "While We Were in Mourning for the Chancellor" (Morris, vol. I 165-166).



waiting are sewing a mourning-robe for her is diverted from its potential gravity by framing the scene around the teasing which ensues after one woman sews a section inside out.<sup>11</sup> It is the combination of the description of the robe as being made of plain silk (mumon) and the location of the event in Michitaka's Southern Palace which allows us to infer that the robe was ordered in haste to prepare for Michitaka's imminent death. The details are laid out for the discerning reader to piece together, but without prior knowledge of the historical background, Sei's rhetoric of memory recall may seem simple or even superficial.

What all of this suggests is that Sei Shūnagon was not only writing against the tradition of male historical writing/political memoir. She was writing also against the tragic circumstances that cast shadows over her service in Empress Teishi's salon. She was a double renegade--writing counter to both the orthodox literary grain and history. After Fujiwara no Michinaga's political ascent, the salon of his daughter Shōshi gained the cultural prestige once enjoyed by Teishi salon. The survival of numerous literary products from Shōshi's salon attests to this; Murasaki Shikibu's Genji monogatari (The Tale of Genji, early 11th century) and Murasaki Shikibu nikki (The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu, covers the years 1008-1010), Izumi Shikibu's Izumi Shikibu nikki (The Diary of Izumi Shikibu, covers nine months in the years 1003-1004), and Akazome Emon's Eiga monogatari (The Tale of Flowering Fortunes, ca. 1092) all are works attributed to Shōshi's ladies-in-waiting. On the other hand, Sei's Makura no sōshi is the only extant literary work to represent the culture of the rival salon of Empress Teishi.

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<sup>11</sup> Passage 91 "Netaki mono" (Ishida vol. I 124-125). In the English translation, it is passage 91 "Annoying Things" (Morris vol. I 100-101).

Makura's non-linear narrative composed of randomly ordered memoir, lists, and essay passages; its unique time frame established by its lack of chronology in the ordering of the memoir passages and the use of the present tense; and the bright tone maintained throughout the work by the repetitive use of the word okashi (amusing, charming)<sup>12</sup> --all set the work apart from other extant works of the mid-Heian period. Specifically, these elements work together to preserve in writing a complimentary portrait of Empress Teishi's milieu--one in which the empress and her ladies-in-waiting maintain an ebullient atmosphere in the face of imminent disaster. Teishi's salon may have lost the cultural legitimacy which had been guaranteed by Michitaka's prominence in politics, but a new system of dynamics has been established in Makura to give semblance of Teishi's continuing influence in the cultural sphere. These effects can be interpreted in terms of ga/zoku dynamics.

In Makura, Sei constructs an "aesthetics" of Teishi's salon--that is, a particular ideology of what is courtly (ga) and not (zoku) within the literary framework--by not merely depicting all that is beautiful (ga) in the eyes of the Heian court, but through the delineation of courtly elegance in contrast to the vulgar, non-courtly world (zoku). The large number of list passages with negative subject titles (e.g. "Nikuki mono," or "Hateful Things") suggests that Makura's aesthetics are more often than not founded upon identification of that which is not courtly. As discussed earlier in this paper, the assignment of ga or zoku status is the arbitrary act of those with the authority to determine artistic

<sup>12</sup> Makura no sōshi is often called the "literature of okashi" (okashi no bungaku). See for instance the chart comparing Genji monogatari and Makura no sōshi as respectively mono no aware no bungaku (literature of the pathos of things) and okashi no bungaku in Katō 36.

value. In Makura, Sei stages Teishi's authority by placing the empress at the high culture end of the ga/zoku spectrum against a host of people, objects, and situations condemned by Sei. In other words, an alternate system of value is established in which Teishi as the political victim in the "real world" becomes arbiter elegantiarum in the pages of Sei's record.

Sei manipulates the distinctions between ga and zoku elements in her writing to highlight the exacting aesthetic standards of Teishi's salon, but she also recognizes the unstable nature of this binary framework. What is considered high culture in one time-context may be low culture in the next. I would like to examine this ambiguity in the delineation of Makura's courtly aesthetics through close examination of the uses of the word ese エセ, the term which I introduced briefly at the beginning of the paper. Sei's ironic use of ese to describe certain subjects reflects the manipulation of the ga/zoku aesthetic that characterizes the work as a whole.

Scholars have noted Sei's intolerance for low-ranking people and commoners as a character flaw, and they identify ese as one of the descriptive terms used for Sei's denigration of the lower social order. In his complete translation of Makura no sōshi, Ivan Morris translates esemono エセ者 as "people of humble station" and explains in his notes that this word literally means "'false people', i.e. those who are not genuine or (socially) good people. The word reflects the current attitude to the plebs."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Ishida Jōji, the annotator of the Kadokawa edition of the work, translates ese as "tsumaranai"/ "of no consequence" or "kudaranai"/ "boring" in his modern translation of the work. We

<sup>13</sup> Morris, vol. II 25.

shall see when we closely examine particular passages, however, that the ese in Sei Shōnagon's usages are far from being "of no consequence" or "boring," nor mere "plebs" who suffer Sei's condemnation.

Let us begin with a general overview of the etymology of ese. It is a prefix of native Japanese origin, although Chinese characters were applied to its transcription as 似非 or 似而非 at a later time.<sup>14</sup> These Chinese characters have fixed the meaning of ese, suggesting through the compound that it means, as Ivan Morris noted, "something that resembles, but is not genuine." Etymologists have tried to pin down the original meaning, coming up with various theories including 1) that ese is derived from the word nise or "fake" through several stages of euphonic shifts, or 2) that it is akin to oso 鈍 which means "lowly" or "dull."<sup>15</sup>

What is certain is that the term holds a unique place within the vocabulary of Makura, appearing 12 times in the currently most widely read version of the work, the Sankanbon, compared to the single instances of it in literary works prior to it and in The Tale of Genji.<sup>16</sup> The definition of ese in dictionaries is always

<sup>14</sup> Ōno 39. I have not traced down the exact period when the Chinese transcription of the term appeared in Japan. Major classical Japanese dictionaries such as Kadokawa kogo daijiten (Nakamura 496) and Shōgakukan's Kogo daijiten (Nakada 240) list the Chinese character transcriptions of ese after the kana entry.

<sup>15</sup> ^ no 38-40 and Tai 306.

<sup>16</sup> See Seki 91-93. For the frequencies of certain key words in Makura, I consulted Sakakibara Kunihiro, et al., eds., Makura no sōshi sōsaku-in. The passages in Shinpen Makura no sōshi are: #20, 21, 105, 116, 118, 121, 139, 151, 154, 248, 290, and 291. In the Morris translation, they are: #22, 23, 114, 115, 118, 137, 154, 157, 245, 285, 286, and 324. Note that the use of ese is sometimes obscured by Morris's rendering in the English translation.

led by examples from Makura no sōshi, and both the Kadokawa kogojiten and the Shōgakukan Kogo daijiten note that this term appears most frequently in Makura.<sup>17</sup> One wonders, however, why Sei Shōnagon specifically used this term in favor of others which are more common in Heian vocabulary such as “waroshi” わろし, meaning “lowly” or “unimpressive,” or “gesu” 下衆, which specifically refers to people of lowly status. Negoro Tsukasa, a specialist in the stylistics of Heian prose, offers an explanation. He explains that ese is a “vulgar expression” (zokugo) rather than a “refined expression” (gago), and that Sei intentionally used it as a denigrating term. This is based on his theory that Sei Shōnagon despised the lowly (gesen, hizoku) and therefore tried to distance herself from them through differentiation and condemnation. According to Negoro, the stronger the term of disparagement, the more effective the distancing would be.<sup>18</sup> Negoro’s analysis of ese’s function as a “vulgar expression” can be understood in terms of ga/zoku dynamics; because ga and zoku are set in a polarized relationship, Sei becomes the ga by setting herself against the zoku term ese. It would seem, however, that Negoro explained the use of this non-literary word through a general observation of aesthetic dynamics in Makura, without close analysis of how ese is being used within specific passages.

While it is true that ese refers to the low-ranking, two passages-- passage 139 “Shōgachi tōka yohi no hodo” (Morris passage #137 “On the Tenth Day of the First Month”) and passage 151 “Esemono no tokoro uru ori” (Morris passage #154 “Trivial Things That Become Important on Special Occasions”)--suggest that Sei did

<sup>17</sup> Nakamura 496. Nakada 240.

<sup>18</sup> Negoro 233-235.

not simply use the term to set ga against zoku. I quote passage 139 in full:

On the tenth day of the First Month there are thick clouds in the sky but the sun shines through brightly. In a rough, uncultivated field behind a lowly (ese) dwelling grows a young peach tree. Little branches sprout thickly all over it; the leaves are green on one side while on the other they are dark and glossy as if colored with a deep red dye.

A slender youth, with beautiful hair and wearing a torn

hunting costume, climbs the tree. At the foot stands a little boy; he has on short clogs, and over a plum-red under-robe he wears a white hunting costume tucked up so that it bulges at the waist. 'Come on!' he calls to the youth in the tree. "cut me a *gichō* stick.'

Just then a group of three or four girls arrive. They too have pretty hair and though their vests are worn and their skirts faded, their jackets are of fine quality. 'Please cut us some branches,' they shout to the lad. 'Choose some that we can make into nice hare-sticks. Master

sent us for them.'

When the youth in the tree starts to throw down branches, the children run for them helter-skelter, each taking her share and crying, 'Lots for me! Lots for me!' It is a delightful scene.

Then a man in a dirty trouser-skirt comes running along and says that he too wants some branches. The boy asks him to wait for a moment, whereupon the man begins shaking the tree. The boy is terrified and clings on like a monkey, which is most amusing. One is likely to come across similar scenes when the plum trees start bearing fruit.<sup>19</sup>

This passage is traditionally categorized as an essay, although

<sup>19</sup> Based on Ivan Morris's translation, with some changes (Morris I 152-153). Passage numbers are from Ishida's *Shinpen Makura no sōshi*. The Japanese text can be found at the end of this paper.

it very well could be a scene which Sei Shōnagon witnessed. An esemono or an ese person is the owner of the house at which this scene takes place. The setting is the tenth day of the First Month; the children depicted here are trying to gather plum tree branches to use for annual celebrations of the First Month. The branches are used to make *gichō* sticks, or sticks decorated with colored string and used to hit a wooden ball as an amusement during the First Month, and also “hare-sticks” (uzuchi), the decorated sticks hung in rooms on the first day of the Hare to ward off evil spirits. From the beginning of this passage, Sei’s narrative perspective is ambiguous, fluctuating from positive to negative description. The *sky is dark* and the *clouds are heavy*; however, *sunlight breaks through* the oppressive cover. In the *uncultivated fields* of the ese person, there is a *young, lush plum tree*. The boys and girls who play out this scene are probably servants of this household. Sei pays particular attention to their appearance, noting that they have *beautiful hair*--a signifier in Heian literature of high birth or high moral bearing<sup>20</sup>--and that they are wearing *fine clothes* in combination with *tattered* ones. Although these children are obviously not a part of the court culture observed in service to Empress Teishi, they are depicted with care and obvious amusement. Furthermore, this depiction suggests that the positive and negative, or in the world of Makura no sōshi the courtly and non-courtly aspects, co-exist in the ese.

Let us now look at passage 151, “Esemono no tokoro uru ori”. It is an example of the list-type passage--the type of passage to which scholars devote the most detailed notation. The inclusion of some entries in a list are sometimes not apparent, since their

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the symbolic meaning of hair in Heian culture see, Mitamura Masako, “Kurokami” 44-63.

source of significance relies heavily on the reader's discovery of qualities in an object that can be highlighted only in connection with other certain entries in the list. The passage reads as follows:

When the esemono come into their own--

Radishes in the First Month. Ladies of the Escort when they accompany the emperor on his processions. The Ladies in Charge of the Emperor's Keys during the imperial accession ceremony. Lady Chamberlains during the breaking of the knots on the last days of the Sixth and Twelfth Months. Masters of Observances during the seasonal Sacred Readings. How dazzling they are as they in their red surplices read out the roster of the priests.

Assistant Officials of the Emperor's Private Office when they decorate the hall for the Sacred Readings, the Naming of the Buddhas, and other ceremonies. Imperial Attendants at the Kasuga Festival. The girls who taste the Imperial wine in the First Month. The priests who present the Emperor with hare-wands. The women who dress the hair of the dancers during the rehearsals of the Gosechi dances. Palace Girls who serve at the Imperial Table during the Palace Festivals.<sup>21</sup>

This passage would seem to support the claim of Ishida Jōji that the need for voluminous notes in modern editions of Makura no sōshi renders the text a "cultural record of Empress Teishi's salon" rather than a literary work.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, much of this passage is incomprehensible without the notes of scholars. The opening phrase announces that this passage will list esemono who in a specific occasion find themselves in the limelight. Our task as

<sup>21</sup> Translation is mine. The Ivan Morris version is based on the Nōinbon variant, which differs from the Sankanbon in some of the items listed in this passage. The Japanese text of this passage can be found at the end of this paper.

<sup>22</sup> See Ishida, "Naze" 2-7.



readers is to search for the reasons why these particular people/things were chosen as most befitting this description.

Let's start at the beginning of the list.<sup>23</sup> The radish of the First Month is the radish which is served to the emperor as part of the ceremony of Tooth Hardening held on the 3rd day of the year. Tooth hardening was pursued for the promotion of health and longevity, and foods believed to strengthen the teeth were served. In the First Month, these ordinary vegetables suddenly spring into eminence and are served to the emperor. The Ladies of the Escort are women of low rank, fifth to be precise, who accompany the emperor on horseback during the imperial processions and hold his shoes. These women enjoy the attention of crowds who gather to watch the imperial procession, but probably were never in the public eye outside of this occasion. The title of the next office holder is self-descriptive: the Ladies in Charge of the Emperor's Keys. These women were part of the office responsible for maintaining the keys to the inner chambers of the imperial palace. However, they have another special role: that of attending to the new emperor around his curtain of state just before his first public appearance.

Next, the Lady Chamberlains are those responsible for measuring the emperor's body for the creation of a life-size doll used to represent the imperial personage for the purification rites held on the last days of the Sixth and Twelfth Months. "Breaking of the knots" refers to the "knots" of the bamboo by which they took the measurements. Although of low rank, they have the privilege of not only being in the imperial presence but of

<sup>23</sup> Details about the items listed in passage 151 are taken from Hagitani 399-406. Hagitani's work collects together the annotations from other key editions of Makura no sōshi and compares them thoroughly.

approaching close enough to the emperor to take his body measurements. The Masters of Observances are those who lead in the monks who read out the scriptures during the spring and autumn sacred readings in the imperial palace. This master finds himself in the limelight when he announces the names of the monks who will be reading the scriptures. This especially is an honor because he leads in and intones the names of those monks who are actually superior in rank to him.

The Assistant Officials of the Emperor's Private Office enjoy their moment of stardom when they are allowed into the emperor's private quarters of the imperial palace in order to prepare the halls for special occasions. Those allowed into these quarters (tenjōbito) normally had to be of the fourth and fifth ranks, so these Assistant Officials of the Emperor's Private Office who were only of the sixth rank were only allowed into the emperor's private quarters to fulfill special duties. Official retainers of the Inner Palace Guards served as the Imperial Attendants of the Kasuga Festival. On the occasion of this festival about 600 of these official retainers would be given temporary appointments, modelled after the official imperial appointments, and would parade from the imperial palace to the Kasuga Shrine in Nara. In other words, these low ranking men would be given temporary high appointments as messengers of the emperor on this special occasion. The next entry, the girls who taste the Imperial wine in the First Month, are virgins who specifically are appointed to taste the New Year's wine of the emperor in order to prevent possible poisoning of the imperial person. Another theory posits that virgins are chosen because of the belief that the vitality of the girl would be transferred to the emperor and thus prolong his life. The priests who present the emperor with the evil-dispelling hare-wands are given special recognition on this occasion because

they have the privilege of pronouncing “auspicious words” to the emperor; i.e. to wish for the emperor’s long and prosperous reign.

What I have done so far is to work through item per item the conundrum which Sei Shōnagon has set in this passage. Having gone through this much of the list, the pattern for selection becomes fairly clear. This is a list of people, and things--lest we overlook the humor involved in listing the radish--which suddenly gain importance because of their proximity to the emperor. All of the entries are things which would receive little attention in and of themselves; it is the emperor who assigns them significance. The final two entries fulfill this pattern as well. The women who dress the hair of the dancers during the rehearsals of the Gosechi dances--those dances held annually during the Eleventh Month--are those four women who are allowed to be in attendance when the emperor watches the rehearsals of the dance. The final entry, the Palace Girls, deserve special attention during the Palace Festivals, because on these occasions, these girls replace the regular attendants and serve directly at the imperial table.

From the context of the two passages I have discussed, what can we determine about the meaning of ese? As I pointed out earlier in discussing the first of these passages, the ese are ambiguous signifiers in Makura no sōshi. Both ga and zoku aspects, or in other words, the courtly and non-courtly aspects exist in the ese. They are the low ranking people surrounding the imperial court and imperial salon, the “fake” aristocrats, who on occasion can approach the perfection which is reserved within Makura no sōshi for the imperial personages and members of Empress Teishi’s family. When we remember that Sei Shōnagon herself was a low ranking lady-in-waiting who was allowed near the empress because of her literary prowess and wit, it is possible to see parallels

between the people described in passage 151 “When the Esemono Come into Their Own” and Sei Shōnagon. Sei “comes into her own” in the text because she serves the empress--the empress is Sei Shōnagon’s source of signification. The empress’s authority, ironically, exists only within the world of Makura no sōshi--that is, within the framework of power relations that has been constructed by Sei Shōnagon.

Mitamura Masako, the foremost scholar of Makura no s’shi studies in Japan today, has also focused upon ese as a fundamental characteristic of Sei’s writing, going as far as to call the work “a literature of ese.” She draws an analogy between the way in which the ese imitate the genuine and high culture and the way in which the work as a whole is based on an “appearance-dominant rhetoric” by which Teishi’s salon is portrayed as a center of culture even after its loss of socio-political power.<sup>24</sup> In sum, Makura no sōshi creates a semblance of legitimacy for a politically disfranchized social circle. The work undoubtedly would have been considered unorthodox or zoku to Sei Shōnagon’s contemporaries who would have read the work with knowledge of the socio-political background; however, within the work itself there operates a dynamics in which Teishi is the arbiter of ga tastes.

In much the same fashion as how the ese, or lowly imitators, demonstrate their variable aesthetic value through shifts in context and perspective, Teishi’s faction gains power through their transposition onto a literary plane. We can say that Makura no sōshi is Sei Shōnagon’s attempt to place Teishi’s milieu in the limelight--that is, to create a tokoro uru ori (“occasion in which one comes into one’s own”) for Teishi’s salon.

<sup>24</sup> Makura 269-271.

Did Sei's rhetoric have a lasting effect on Makura no sōshi's reception and on the interpretation of the history of Empress Teishi's milieu? The answer is yes and no. The earliest extant work to comment upon Makura's manipulation of historical representation is Shunzei's Daughter's literary treatise Mumyōzōshi (The Untitled Book, late 12th/early 13th century). In a section devoted to Sei Shōnagon, one of the female participants featured within Mumyōzōshi's literary discussion mentions that Sei wrote almost exclusively about Empress Teishi's prominence, while remaining guard over any reference to Teishi's socio-political decline.<sup>25</sup> This observation reveals that readers of this period understood Makura no sōshi's biased presentation of history. This awareness of the socio-political plight of Sei's patron and/or an interest in its presentation seems to wane in later periods.

Makura no sōshi stops being read as a historical text/political memoir by the time Yoshida Kenkō (ca. 1283-ca. 1352) lends literary authority to Sei's text by alluding to her sentiments in his Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness).<sup>26</sup> Kenkō drew from Makura for aesthetic inspiration, and probably did not read it as a historical account. Tsurezuregusa's allusions to Makura do seem to have been central in establishing Makura as a canonized ga text, for the link between the two texts was instrumental establishing Makura as the progenitor of the zuihitsu or essay genre by scholars in the Edo period.<sup>27</sup> Makura no sōshi also became a subject of parody in the Edo period, inspiring the creation of such works as

<sup>25</sup> Kuwabara 110.

<sup>26</sup> See for instance Kidō 22, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ban Kōkei, in his work Kunitsufumi yoyo no ato was the first to classify Makura as a zuihitsu (Konishi 383n).

Inu Makura. These parodies copied the list-style passage, but had little interest in Makura's historical representation. Sei's literary re-visioning of Empress Teishi's salon, it seems, was successful, because later readers appreciated her work as an expression of Heian aesthetics to which they could allude in both emulation and parody. As discussed above however, the literary worth of Makura no sōshi lies not just in Sei's creation of a literary aesthetic, but in her manipulation of ga/zoku dynamics to re-vision history.

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### Appendix:

Japanese texts of Passages 139 and 151 taken from Ishida Jōji, ed., Shinpen Makura no sōshi, vol. II (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1980) 37-38, 43-44.

#### Passage 139

##### 一三九段

正月十よ日んほど、空いと黒う、雲も厚く見えながら、さすがに日はけぎやかにさし出でたるに、えせ者の家の荒畑といふものの、土うるはしうもなほからぬ、桃の木のわかだちて、いとしもとがちにさし出でたる、片つ方は、いと青く、いま片つ方は濃くつややかにて蘇枋の色なるが、日かげに見えたるを、いと細やかなる童の、狩衣は、かけ破りなどして、髪うるはしきが登りたれば、ひきはこえたる男子、また、こはぎにて半靴

はきたるなど、木のものにと立ちて、「我に毬打切りて」など乞ふに、また、髪をかしげなる童の、相どもほころびがちにて、袴萎えたれど、よき桂着たる、三、四人来て、「卯槌の木よからむ、切りておろせ。御前にも召す」など言ひて、おろしたれば、奪ひしらがひ取りて、さしあふぎて、「我に多く」など言ひたるこそ、をかしけれ。黒袴着たるをのこの走り来て、乞ふに、「待て」など言へば、木のもとをひきゆるがすに、危ふがりて、猿のやうにかい付きてをめくも、をかし。梅などのなりたるをりも、さやうにぞするかし。

## Passage 151

## 一五一段

えせ者の所得るをり

正月の大根。行幸のをりの、姫太夫。御即位の御門司。六月、十二月のつごもりの節折の蔵人。季の御読経の威儀師。赤袈裟着て、僧の名どもを読み上げたる、いときらきらし。

季の御読経、御仏名などの御装束の所の衆。春日の祭の近衛舎人ども。元三の薬子。卯杖の法師。御前の試みの夜の御髪上。節会の御まかなひの采女。