Power Play in Heian Japan
Sei Shōnagon’s *Makura no sōshi*

By
Jillian Barndt

Professor Hank Glassman
East Asian Studies Department
Bryn Mawr College Graduate
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ABSTRACT

Within the Heian period, *nikki bungaku*, diary literature, began to be produced in great numbers. Written by female members of the court, the prime purpose of *nikki* was their use as a form of political power. As there was a known audience prior to the writing of *nikki*, authors would highlight their friends and families within the text, in order for them to receive more prominence within the court. Sei Shōnagon’s *Makura no sōshi* is one such text, which she used to highlight her patroness, the Empress Sadako, who had fallen into disgrace in the late-tenth century. Sei’s use of power within her text is compared to Murasaki Shikibu’s *Murasaki shikibu niki*, produced in the beginning of the tenth-century, but focusing on the birth of Fujiwara no Michinaga’s grandchild. Despite the differences in these two texts, the main purpose, to promote others, remains strong.
“In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.”¹ With this beautiful scene, tenth century lady-in-waiting Sei Shōnagon begins her work, *Makura no sōshi*. Written at a time in which noble women spent most of their life hidden behind curtains of state, away from the public eye, Sei’s words reached past those curtains, addressing the rest of the court, and today the world at large. Yet the reason why Sei’s work lasted through the ages, to be published in a myriad of languages and versions today, goes beyond the beauty of the work itself, hidden in the deeper meanings of its original production over a thousand years ago.

The Heian period, lasting from 794-1185, was a time of military peace, full of political intrigue. With the Fujiwara clan controlling the power of the imperial family behind the scenes, politics in the court were much more complicated than they appeared. Since the Fujiwara clan controlled the emperor and his family, men in the bureaucracy could hold significant influence, and even women could expand their reach, providing opportunities for both themselves and their families. A prominent way for women to gain power were via *nikki*, diaries or journals written by women within the court.

*Nikki* were extremely popular in the late Heian period. Often written by middle-ranking aristocratic women and ladies-in-waiting to the imperial house², *nikki* not only provided some of Japan’s earliest prose literature, but also served as a means of political influence and power for the writers of these *nikki*. The writing of their daily lives allowed aristocratic women to describe distinctive moments not only of themselves, but of their friends, family, and lovers. Most of the *nikki* that survive today were not meant for private use, and were actually shared among

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members of the court. With the knowledge of their intended audience prior to writing, women writers would describe themselves and others in such a way that other court members might look kindly upon them, thereby entreating the subject with more honors and privileges. In this way aristocratic women could hold some sway over the will of the court, building for themselves their own power structure.

One woman who took advantage of this system was Sei Shōnagon, who served as lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako in the last decade of the tenth century. The *nikki* that she produced in her lifetime is quite unlike any other from the time period, containing a myriad of texts such as lists, poems, small thoughts, and long sections of prose. The text, *Makura no sōshi*, was also used as a form of power for Sei. She used her text to promote herself, her friends, and her patroness, the Empress Sadako. As the empress fell out of power in the end of the tenth century, Sei used her writing to take other court member’s eyes off of the faults of the consort, and directed them to more pleasant moments while highlighting the empress’ virtues. By attempting to win the court’s favor of the declining empress, Sei worked to allow her patroness to gain more support despite the political power against her.

Sei was not the only woman to use her work in such a way. *Murasaki shikibu Nikki*, written by Sei’s contemporary, Murasaki Shikibu, was also used for political purposes. Murasaki was a member of the salon of Empress Sadako’s rival, Akiko, and though Murasaki never knew Sei personally, she was familiar with Sei’s writings. While Murasaki also promoted her patroness to an extent within her work, the true purpose of the text was to promote Akiko’s son, the grandson of the powerful Fujiwara leader Michinaga. Despite the differences within the texts, the tactics that Sei and Murasaki used were very similar, so when the two *nikki* are viewed
side by side, a better understanding of the tactics used by aristocratic women within the Heian court can be understood.

This thesis will explore how Sei Shōnagon used *Makura no sōshi* to not only promote her patroness, the Empress Sadako, but also bring herself and other acquaintances to power. By also examining Murasaki’s work, this thesis will also articulate a better understanding of the wider uses of *nikki* in the Heian period for political purposes and the popular motifs within them.

**Secondary Literature Review**

The genre of *nikki bungaku*, diary or memoir literature, of the Heian period has attracted some scholarly attention in English, though not to the same extent of what is available in Japanese. The English view of Heian *nikki bungaku* focuses on a number of different texts, with Sei’s work only receiving a very small portion of study. Thus, secondary literature for this thesis comprises of essays not necessarily concerned with Sei, but also with a wider sample of other writers in the Heian period.

John R. Wallace has focused on how memoirs can be used to negotiate and affect “some important aspects of one’s relationship to society” for the women who wrote the diaries. Wallace notes that the diaries could have been used for political agenda to raise the social position of both the writer and her friends. He argues that Murasaki Shikibu’s diary was used as a record of Michinaga’s grandson’s birth, in order to continue to help Michinaga’s political supremacy. Though Wallace focuses on Murasaki Shikibu, he does not look at Sei’s work to any great extent. I believe the political use argument used for Murasaki can be expanded to Sei’s work, as the two *nikki* share a multitude of similarities.

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4 Ibid., 6.
Edward Kamens approaches Heian *nikki* as a use of gender criticism, discussing how the use of *hiragana* by woman established a new form of writing, completely different than the Chinese *kanji* used by the males of the court. Men’s *kanji* writings tended to be for bueracratic purposes, and women were not supposed to know how to read or write them. *Hiragana* however was used exclusively by females, opening up writing to a new group of people. Poetry and stories soon flourished from the brushes of court ladies, producing numerous texts that are still studied today. Kamens views diaries as an integral part of court ritual, a necessary aspect of interactions between men and women.\(^5\) Fukutō Sanae examines how these diaries were used as forms of power within private, not public, spaces, but her study does not focus upon any specific diary of the period.\(^6\) Kamens and Fukutō’s arguments are important to keep in mind when reading the *nikki*, as the writings women produced within the court were very different from those of men. With the boundaries of language and private spaces firmly implanted in the culture of the court, the move to hold some power through private, women-only means is unsurprising as such a system did not go beyond the prescribed cultural boundaries of the period.

Edith Sarra believes that the diaries of the Heian court were written with a very limited audience in mind of only female readers or familial relations. Due to this limited audience, women allowed a more critical reflection on themselves and their world.\(^7\) However, the distribution of such writings could forseeably affect the female writer’s chances for marriage and thus required the approval of the father or other male guardian.\(^8\) I doubt that this was an issue for Sei or Murasaki, as they were well-established in the court by the they wrote their respective


\(^8\) Ibid., 28.
works, and there is no discussion of any guardians within their texts. Additionally, Sei’s prose sections discuss a wide variety of topics, but very little on herself, so it is unlikely that it was written as a form of self-reflection.

Sarra also presents a claim found not only in Sei’s work, but in many other court-lady’s diaries: the wish to present the talent and beauty of their “mistress.” While Sarra doesn’t go into great specifics of how Sei handles the treatment of her patroness, she does admit that Sei’s presentation is “slightly off-center, didactic, and perhaps even protofeminist.” While Sarra believes this is mainly due to her predominantly female audience within the court, I believe that Sei meant it to go to an even wider audience, particularly men of the court, in order to get her messages about Sadako across to those in power, to help both herself and her mistress. Sarra seems to go part of the way in the argument that I wish to present, but I will take it a step further in this paper.

Translators of the diaries have their own particular views of the nikki’s usage as well. Sonja Arntzen, a translator of the Kagerō nikki, believes that the narrator uses only formal language in regard to her husband and family in order to maintain political correctness, even in her own private writing. This trend is also seen within the works of Sei and Murasaki, who make sure to use the correct titles for all people that they mention. The trend to use titles instead of names is common among other Heian works. In fact, Sei and Murasaki are the titles of the woman rather than their real names. The women needed to keep a “professional” distance from the people depicted in their nikki if they were to be taken seriously by the court, and thus needed to show proper respect to those depicted via titles.

9 Ibid., 224.
Ivan Morris, the translator of *Makura no sōshi*, approaches Sei’s work as a historical document for daily life in the Heian court, though he does not delve into the political agenda behind Sei’s writing. Morris does have a myriad of notes about the world Sei lives in, allowing a deeper historical analysis that is very supportive of my own argument.

Terry Kawashima views the diaries as a way for women to negotiate living on the margins of society. He believes diaries were used to hold some value in the political world by women, while still generally being private. Kawashima does not define all women in the Heian era as marginal however, instead examining only entertainers, prostitutes, and poor older women. Although Sei was not socially under any of these groups, I believe that Kawashima’s theories can also be addressed with her work. He believes marginal writings were used to negotiate textual representations and forms of power, an integral part of my own thesis.

Kawashima’s theories may have only been used for his own defined examples, but I believe this theoretical framework is very important in all diaries of the Heian period due to how the diaries were used to negotiate power within the court. Ladies-in-waiting may not be the most marginalized members of society, but they still held minimal power compared to members of the male bureaucracy.

H. Richard Okada also builds on this idea of marginalization, describing the diaries as “texts of resistance.” Most important to Okada is how western scholars approach and read texts of this period. He sees a number of problems within modern scholars’ attempts to close-read texts of the Heian period, and how a Western background clouds and alters their understanding.

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12 Ibid., 2.
understanding of such texts. He argues that western scholars cannot approach the writings of this period as “literary” works, but rather as “texts” in order to keep readers from placing them in “universal generic categories”, and inscribing modern stereotypical interpretations upon them. It is important to contemplate Okada’s presentation of the many problems that arise while examining these materials when reading them. I intend to avoid inserting modern ideologies when reading the writings of Sei and Murasaki.

My argument for the use political uses of nikki builds upon the arguments presented here, creating a theory that has not been fully explored by western scholars. By expanding upon the ideas raised within these sources and taking a closer look at Sei’s work itself, the political use of the nikki as a form of power for women is evident.

Background-Sei and the Heian Court

The main document for this study is the tenth century collection of a miscellaneous work Makura no sōshi, written by the lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako, Sei Shōnagon (966-1017). Before delving into the source material itself, however, I will include some background information about Sei and the world that she inhabited.

Historians today know of Sei via Makura no sōshi, but as she did not write extensively about her own life beyond her years in the court, little is known about her. Born in 966, Sei was a member of the Kiyowara clan, and was daughter of Kiyowara no Motosuke, a provincial official as well as a scholar and poet. Her title in the court was Sei Shōnagon. Since she is not referred to by any other name in her own text or other Heian texts, her real name remains unknown. While she spent her later life as lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako, it is possible that she may have been married to a government official named Tachibana no Norimitsu, though

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14 Ibid., 2.
15 Ibid., 3.
this is unconfirmed.\textsuperscript{16} Sei’s life after her time in the imperial court is also unknown, though there is a belief that she became a Buddhist nun and died in a state of poverty.\textsuperscript{17}

Sei was a lady-in-waiting under the Empress Sadako (also known as Teishi) near the end of the tenth century. Sadako was the sister of Fujiwara no Korechika, the leader of the Fujiwara clan when Sadako entered the court as empress. Through the end of the tenth century Korechika was involved in a power struggle with Fujiwara no Michinaga over the main post in their family. Sadako became empress to help secure political power for Korechika’s side of the family, but as the feud wore between Korechika and Michinaga, her position came into jeopardy. Throughout the 990s, Michinaga gained more and more power, and Korechika was eventually sent to govern in the west, far away from the palace. Already facing a decline in influence, Sadako found her courtly power falling even faster once isolated from her brother. When Michinaga installed his eleven-year-old daughter Akiko as Imperial lady in 999, thus securing further support from the emperor, it was only further insult to injury of the now unpopular Sadako.\textsuperscript{18}

The young empress Sadako was only seventeen years old when Sei joined the court. The lady-in-waiting herself was only twenty-eight years of age.\textsuperscript{19} Sei could only stand by Sadako as she faced troubles with Akiko and Michinaga, giving support through her writing. Though Sadako did give birth to a son in 999, this did not improve her situation within the court. Michinaga would not allow his nephew to rise to the throne of emperor, and Sadako could not stay in the same position of power she had once held.\textsuperscript{20} In the year 1000 at only twenty-four

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Sei, \textit{Pillow Book}, 1: xiii.
\item Morris, \textit{The World of the Shining Prince}, 58-59.
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\end{footnotesize}
years of age, Sadako died in childbirth. Akiko continued to rise in prominence in the court, and the thirty-five year old Sei found herself without a mistress to serve.\textsuperscript{21}

Sei lived under Empress Sadako took place within the salon, a collection of women who served the empress. Major consorts each held their own salons, and rivalries would grow between salons as they strove to build the prominence of their patronesses.\textsuperscript{22} These groups of women were sometimes known as “literary salons”, due to the high amount of writings they produced. While lower-status court members would not have much access to paper and would thus only have been able to produce oral stories and poems, powerful women such as Sadako could easily distribute such material among the members of their salon and receive long stories, elegant poems, and miscellanies such as \textit{Makura no sōshi}.\textsuperscript{23} While both men and women produced poetry, the production of narrative prose occurred only within these salons, allowing production of \textit{nikki} and \textit{monogatari} (stories) of various lengths.\textsuperscript{24} Powerful men such as Michinaga would make sure that relatives ending up as consort to the emperor, the salon surrounding that relative would be full of women of great literary talent that would further cement the consort’s place within the court. Michinaga made Akazome Emon (one of the women who helped write the Heian-era history \textit{Eiga monogatari}) head of his daughter Akiko’s salon, along with other prominent women, such as Murasaki Shikibu and Izumi Shikibu.\textsuperscript{25}

The mood of the salons centered around competition, with favoritism of certain members ending in bouts of jealousy among the other ladies-in-waiting. While Sei was involved in some of the spats within Sadako’s salon, she was unusually confident for a \textit{nikki} writer of her time

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotenum{21} Fukumori, “The Development of…”; 7.
\footnotenum{24} Ibid., 444.
\footnotenum{25} Wallace, \textit{Objects of Discourse}, 153.
\end{footnotes}
period about her place in Sadako’s retinue. Other women, such as Murasaki Shikibu, were less sure of their status within the salons and often worried how their actions would affect their positions. With court politics always changing, the position of ladies in a salon was never secure, for if their patron fell, then they too would fall from power.\textsuperscript{26} Separation from the court was not an option for the ladies-in-waiting; court life was so isolated from the rest of Japanese culture that those within it could imagine no other existence. The center of arts of the period flourished within these salons, and any separation for a prominent aristocratic woman was unthinkable.\textsuperscript{27}

Of the books created within the salons was \textit{Makura no sōshi} is a miscellaneous collection of writings associated with Sei. Covering her period in the court at the very end of the tenth century, the book provides an intricate view not only of Sei herself, but of everyday court life and intrigue. While a number of diaries exist from the Heian period, only \textit{Makura no sōshi} contains such a mixture of poetry, lists, and prose.\textsuperscript{28} The origin of the book is described by Sei herself; a bundle of notebooks were brought to the Empress, and she had no use for them. “Let me make them into a pillow,” [Sei] said. ‘Very well,’ said [Empress Sadako]. ‘You may have them.’”\textsuperscript{29} Sei thus began to write musings, lists, poems, and prose, leaving the text that survives today.

\textit{Makura no sōshi} exists in four different text forms: the “Maedakebon” version, “Sakaibon” version, “Sankabon” version, and “Nōinbon” version. The former two have sections divided by style, such as lists, prose, and poems, while the latter two have different styles mixed throughout the text.\textsuperscript{30} The “Maedakebon” version is the oldest of these, dating back to the mid thirteenth century, “Sakaibon” and “Nōinbon” both trace back to the sixteenth century, and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 42.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Paul Varley, \textit{Japanese Culture} (Honolulu; University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000), 58.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Sei, \textit{Pillow Book}, 1:xv.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 1:267.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Fukumori, “The Development of...”, 92.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
“Sankabon” dates to the fifteenth century. The modern translation of *Makura no sōshi* by Ivan Morris, used for this thesis, draws heavily on the “Maedakebon” and “Sakaibon” versions, due to the style of the writing as well as the age of manuscripts.\(^{31}\) The original copy of the text has not survived.

The text that survives today raises some questions among historians, the main being if *Makura no sōshi* ever had an intended audience beyond Sei herself. The book was known to the Heian court at that time, but Sei herself denies this was ever meant to be the case: “Since much of it might appear malicious and even harmful to other people, I was careful to keep my book hidden. But now it has become public, which is the last thing I expected.”\(^{32}\) Yet when looking closely at the text it is evident that there was an intended audience for the work from the beginning.

Some information about the circulation of *Makura no sōshi* has surfaced in recent years. Private drafts of *nikki* and other writings produced in salons would have existed on cheap, inexpensive paper, but Sei used paper of a much higher quality for her book. Minamoto Tsunefusa collected Sei’s drafts and recopied them, in turn circulated throughout the court. The existence of vast differences within the surviving manuscript copies of *Makura no sōshi* today leads historians to believe that Sei carefully edited and added sections to the book after the initial recopying and circulation, including a postscript section where she denies that the book was ever meant to come to light.\(^{33}\)

The malicious sections of Sei’s text focus on members of lower classes instead of the court. These sections may name members of lower classes in particular, but never those of

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32 Ibid., 1:267.
higher classes due to the possible backlash when they were read. Far more common are passages within the text meant to be entertaining or praiseworthy. Although the book’s intended audience can only be hypothesized by historians, it is presumed that the book was intended to be read by members of the court.\textsuperscript{34} Women were probably the main readers of the work, as they had the most time and would have been the most comfortable with reading in the \textit{hiragana} script that comprised the text. Male members of the court may have also read the book, as works by women, such as Murasaki’s \textit{Genji monogatari}, were widely read even beyond the salons.

Another diary written shortly after Sei’s \textit{Makura no sōshi} is \textit{Murasaki shikibu nikki}, or “The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu.” A contemporary of Sei’s, Murasaki was lady-in-waiting to Empress Akiko, Sadako’s rival. The book mainly covers the birth of Akiko’s son, the first imperial grandson of Fujiwara no Michinaga. There is belief that Michinaga requested the book be produced, who wanted documentation of his grandson’s birth in order to further secure his own political power in the imperial court.\textsuperscript{35}

Murasaki Shikibu was a member of the Fujiwara family, though not from the main branch. Her father, Fujiwara no Tametoki, was well known for his work in Chinese poetry, which may explain why Murasaki was so well versed in Chinese poetry herself. She married Fujiwara no Nobutaka in her late twenties, but the marriage lasted only three years due to her husband’s death in 1001. She entered the palace as a lady-in-waiting in 1005 to the Empress Akiko.\textsuperscript{36} Her novel, \textit{Genji monogatari}, was well known by members of the court, and she was invited to the court after word of her writing spread.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} While documentation about life in the Heian period is vast, the readership of smaller works such as \textit{Makura no sōshi} cannot be determined based off of documentary evidence. We can assume some levels of readership based off mentions of this work in other works, such as \textit{Murasaki Shikibu nikki} and \textit{Eiga monogatari}.
\textsuperscript{35} Wallace, \textit{Objects of Discourse}, 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Shively, \textit{The Cambridge History of Japan}, 445.
While many say that Sei and Murasaki were rivals, it is unknown if they even knew each other. Murasaki entered the imperial court after the Empress Sadako had died, and Sei was obviously no longer in service to the empress. Although it is possible that Sei worked in other women’s quarters after the death of her mistress, the only connection we see between Sei and Murasaki is within Murasaki’s diary itself. Even if Murasaki did not know Sei personally, she must have known of *Makura no sōshi*, which Murasaki likely read within the court of her mistress. Sei does not speak of Murasaki in her work due to the different times that the two were in the court.

**Writing for Herself- Sei in *Makura no sōshi***

When I first read *Makura no sōshi*, I thought that Sei’s main purpose for writing was to present her own accomplishments in the court in order to make herself more prominent. Though I have since discovered that Sei used her work to also gain advantage for others, passages that clearly work to her own benefit are prominent. These include scenes to show off her intellect, depict how she maneuvered messy political situations, or even the fame gained through the writing and publication of her book.

Sei showed off her vast knowledge of both Japanese and Chinese poetry within the text. In the section titled “The Captain First Secretary, Tadanobu,” Sei and the government official, Tadanobu, were infatuated with each other. One evening, Tadanobu and his friends decided to send the first half of a Chinese poem to Sei and anticipated her response. This poem was a classic text with which a woman like Sei would be very familiar. Tadanobu may have thought Sei would have responded with the second half of the poem, but Sei did not want to respond in

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38 For discussion in this, see Wallace, *Objects of Discourse*, 170.
Chinese as “my somewhat faltering Chinese characters would make a bad impression.” Instead, she cleverly used lines from a Japanese poem of the same theme, which stumped Tadanobu and the other men. “We stayed up until late at night cudgeling our brains for the right words, but in the end we had to give up,” Tadanobu reported. This scene allowed Sei to show off not only her knowledge of poetry, but also her quick-wittedness in any situation. While she could have chosen to write in Chinese (a skill many women did not hold), she instead chose to play to her strengths and proceed with Japanese writing. By putting Tadanobu and the other men in such a stumped position, Sei positioned herself on an equal or even higher intellectual level than the men in government. While the men involved in the situation would have been intimidated by such a response from a lady-in-waiting, by writing the event down, Sei was able to make sure that even more members of the court were privy to her actions, thereby allowing herself further opportunities to be held in prestige in the court.

At one point of her career as lady-in-waiting, rumor circulated amongst her peers that Sei was working for Michinaga, the man who strove to put the Empress Sadako out of power. Sei described how she discovered this in “When His Excellency, the Chancellor, Had Departed.” While walking along, she heard some of the ladies saying, “she is on close terms with people who are attached to the Minister of the Left.” Sei eventually left the court for a short while to spend time at home due to certain “troubles.” Though she was never any more specific, the rumor of her association with Michinaga was almost certainly the reason. After some time away from the court, Sadako sent a note to Sei, with the first line of a poem: “He who does not speak his love.” Sei realized quickly the second line of the poem (“Yet feels its waters seething

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41 Ibid., 1:73.
42 Ibid., 1:149.
43 Ibid., 1:150.
Underneath,") and met with the Empress: "'I am afraid it was not much of a poem,' she went on, 'but I felt it was the sort of thing I should write. When I do not see you, Shônagon, I am wretched all the time.'"\(^{44}\)

The presentation of this event allowed Sei to prove that such an unfounded rumor has no facts to back it, as the Empress would not have met with Sei if it were indeed true. This section is also shows readers how such unfounded rumors can harm a person. The meeting with the empress would have been a private affair between Sei and Sadako, unknown to the rest of the court. By presenting it within her writing, Sei is able to prove without a doubt that the rumors that were spreading about her were not founded in any truth whatsoever, and that the empress herself was hurt by such things (as she became "wretched all the time" when Sei was not around.)

The production of the book itself helped Sei to become more famous within the court. Murasaki mentioned Sei in her own work, for Sei's work remained popular long after Sei herself had left the court. Sei admitted the circulation of the work at its end, and the praise she received. "How could my casual jottings possibly bear comparison with the many impressive books that exist in our time? Readers have declared, however, that I can be proud of my work."\(^{45}\) As a well-known figure within the court, Sei must certainly have had more visitors and admirers flocking to her. And those who flocked around her would also pay more attention to her patroness, the Empress Sadako.

**Writing for Others- An Example**

Though Sei used *nikki* for her own ends, she more prominently used her work to highlight those around her. The Empress Sadako proved to be a popular subject of the work, but there

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 1:150-151.  
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 1:268.
were also stories of Sei’s friends within the court. These tales, once read by other court members, brought attention to the individuals mentioned, allowing Sei to be part of the transfer of favor from higher members of the court to other members that she called friends.

“The Eastern Wing of the Palace of Today” section of the text provides an example of how Sei’s text may have been used to empower others. In this section, Sei described a massive oak that grew next to the northern guard house. Her friend, Provisional Middle Captain Narinobu, suggested that they cut down the tree in order to create a fan for the Bishop Jōchō. This Bishop was later appointed as the Intendant of Yamashina Temple and came to the palace to give his thanks to the emperor. Sei turned to Narinobu and asked why he didn’t bring the fan, and Narinobu smiled and said “You forget nothing, do you?”

This section of the text allowed Sei to provide a fun episode to present her friend, Narinobu, in a positive light. Minamoto no Narinobu was a grandson of the Emperor Murakami and the son of Prince Munehira. He had been adopted by his uncle, Michinaga, who was part of the opposing circle to that of Sei and the Empress Sadako, but despite this Sei and Narinobu were good friends.

Although at this particular moment Narinobu was not doing anything explicitly important in the eyes of the court, this wish to create a fan for the Bishop Jōchō could be seen as showing great respect beyond what is necessary for Narinobu’s status. As the emperor somewhat favored Jōchō, he would have approved of Narinobu acting kindly to the bishop. In light of this action, the emperor might think to give Narinobu a higher position and more power as well.

Creating a fan for the bishop would probably go unnoticed by the rest of the court if Sei did not write about it in her book. Narinobu may have originally stated his desire to create the

46 Ibid., 1:13.
48 Ibid., 2:14.
fan as a joke, but written in the book, it is presented as a kind act that Sei wishes to be noticed by the wider court, and thereby praised.

This section of the text also serves a dual purpose: turning the court's attention away from the current political maneuvers of the time in order to focus on an interesting moment. The Empress Teishi had fallen out of favor with the emperor at the time Makura no sōshi was written, and it is likely that Sei wanted to emphasize happy moments of the court in order to "veil the sad facts of its decline." While presenting her good friend forward to gain favor, Sei also hoped that there would be more focus on this enjoyable moment in the court, rather than with the sad political undertones threatening her and the Empress' station.

Sei's mentions of court members throughout her text were placed with an express purpose in mind: to help them gain more prominence and favor throughout the court. Her other motivation was to help her patroness, the empress, regain the power that she once held, and by turning attention away from Sadako's troubles by focusing on interesting court moments, Sei hoped to bring court member's eyes away from Sadako's disgraced state. Sei's main weapon for the purpose of helping the empress came from writing about the empress herself.

Sei and Sadako

The original intention of Sei Shōnagon for writing Makura no sōshi may be unknown to historians today, but in examining the text itself, it is evident that as the diary was written, the Empress Sadako became a central focus in the work. While list sections in the book cover a variety of topics, it is the prose sections where the empress' presence dominates, and Sei's respect and love of the woman are placed predominantly for the reader to see.

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By putting the scenes regarding the empress in the prose sections, rather than the list sections, allows for more emphasis on the woman performing the deed, rather than the deed itself. The lists tend to provide only a line of information about any given thing, and usually do not name anyone in particular. For example, in her list of “Things That Give a Pleasant Feeling,” Sei mentions, among other things, “well-blackened teeth,” “to throw equal numbers repeatedly in a game of dice,” and “fine strands of silk that have been entwined.”50 Sei does not expand on examples of who has blackened teeth, times when dice throws went well for her or others, or from whom you might purchase fine strands of silk. In the prose sections, however, Sei can describe a conversation that pleased her, and add more information about those involved and what specifically they said, thereby showing favor to specific individuals through simple description. As Sei wished her book to highlight her mistress, she used the prose sections for this purpose in order to present the empress as much and as well as possible.

The first appearance of the Empress within the text comes in the eighth section, “When the Empress Moved.” Though it is one of the earliest sections in the book, the scene actually takes place in 999, towards the end of the period covered by Sei.51 At this point the empress was pregnant, and had to move from the main palace to another building due to her unclean status. In the scene, Sei is displeased with the actions of the steward Narimasa in how he welcomes the empress and her ladies-in-waiting into the house. While Sei makes fun of the steward, the Empress is shown as being above such squabbles. “‘You should not make fun of him as the others do,’ the Empress told me afterwards. ‘He is a very sincere man, and I feel sorry for him.’ I found even her reprimand delightful.”52 While Sei is made ashamed in this scene, this actually plays in her favor for her decision to include this event. Sei brings herself above others within

50 Sei, Pillow Book, 1:32.
51 Ibid., 2:7.
52 Ibid., 1:9.
the text, making sure she is seen as an intelligent woman and well-versed in the ways of the court. Yet Sei’s true purpose of the production of this text is to highlight her patroness, as she does so in this scene. Even Sei at times feels the need to mock others publicly, and though Sei believes herself to be above other court-ladies, the empress’ virtues and manners excel beyond all. Sadako’s reprimand therefore reinforces her impeccable mannerisms above even Sei, highlighting the empress considerably.

The earliest scene chronologically where the empress appears is “When I First Went into Waiting” near the middle of the text. Sei was extremely embarrassed to be in the court at this point, and stayed hidden from the empress except at night, and even then before a curtain of state. In these early descriptions, there is a sense of how powerful Sadako was, bearing the ability to bring a woman eleven years her senior to states of embarrassment and tears. In this early scene, Sadako attempts to show Sei some pictures, but Sei is embarrassed, and instead looks at the empress’ hands.

[...]I could hardly see her hands; but, from what I made out, they were of a light pink hue that I found extraordinarily attractive. I gazed at the Empress with amazement. Simple as I was and unaccustomed to such wonderful sights, I did not understand how a being like this could possibly exist in our world.\(^\text{53}\)

Despite Sei’s fears in the court at this time, it is the beauty of the empress that grabs her attention. Like many scenes of the empress in the text, this moment is a very simple one, with the only description of the empress that being of her pink-hued hands. Sei thus presents the empress as a being beyond what she expected in the court, but also does not overwhelm the reader with description that one might not believe. It is also important to note that while Sei presents the empress in this way, she is complimenting the beauty of the hands, but does not overwhelm the reader with compliments that might bring the reader to distaste.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 1:178.
Sei continues her first encounters section with a description of listening to Sadako and her brother, Korechika. The conversation between the two is very simple, yet to Sei she accounts it as “the sort of exchange that is so eloquently described in romances,” with the empress herself holding “a beauty that I had seen in painting but never in real life: it was all like a dream.”\textsuperscript{54} While the rest of the scene involves embarrassing moments for Sei, where she is uncomfortable in Korechika’s presence and sneezes in front of the empress, it is this exchange between Sadako and Korechika that catches the reader’s attention early on. Sei’s bumbling behavior acts as a comparison, showing how Sadako is above the frivolities that affect normal women, and belongs to a set all her own. Sei is amazed by the empress who can exist in such a state, and wishes to express to her readership that a woman such as in the romances does exist in the real world, and is currently sitting in the imperial palace.

Sei’s love for the empress shines through in even the most simple of exchanges. In one section, one of the wet-nurses leaves the empress’ service:

In her own hand the Empress had written the following sentence as if it were an ordinary piece of prose: ‘When you have gone away and face the sun that shines so crimson in the East, be mindful of the friends you left behind, who in this city gaze upon the endless rains.’ It was a very moving message, and I realized that I myself could not possibly leave such a mistress and go away to some distant place.\textsuperscript{55}

This episode provides a two-fold purpose for Sei. First, it further establishes the love she holds for her mistress. The reader sees how such a simple gift from the empress, not even directed to Sei, is enough to keep the lady-in-waiting dedicated to her cause. Sei doesn’t need anything of substance from the empress; it is only the warm presence and kind words that flow from her that is enough to keep the elder woman by her majesty’s side. Secondly, the description of such a scene is used to benefit Sadako herself. While this book was written through the years that the

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 1:180.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 1:100.
empress found herself falling from power, a moment of Sadako showing kindness towards others might be read among other members of the court as a reason to favor her. The empress subtly mentions the troubles she faces in the piece of prose itself, "the endless rains" representing the political troubles that plagued her placement in the court. Sei includes this section of the text in order "veil the sad effects of [Sadako's] decline," but at the same time does not completely ignore the fact that the empress held sadness. In order to present her patroness as someone the court should support, she also needed to present Sadako as someone to whom court members could relate.

The troubles that Sadako faced are never presented directly to the audience, but Sei did not want her readers to forget why she was writing the book in the first place. Mentions of the larger political struggle occur very subtlety in the text, usually somehow coming from Sadako herself, rather than through Sei. One such instance is in the section "When the Empress Was Staying in the Third Ward." While those around Sadako are readying for the "Festival of the Fifth Day," various items are presented to the empress, including flowers, robes, and herbal balls.

Sei presents a small wheat-cake to Sadako, who replies with this poem:

> Even on this festive day,
> When all are seeking butterflies and flowers,
> You and you alone can see
> What feelings hide within my heart.57

The empress' melancholy was due to the recent elevation of Akiko to Second Empress, placing her rival closer to the emperor than ever before.58 Sei manages to depict in this scene not only the feelings of the empress, but the beauty of the court in preparation for a festival. Those who knew what were going on in the political scene would be able to understand why the empress

57 Sei, Pillow Book, 1:199.
58 Ibid., 2:154.
held such melancholy; those unaware would see the beauty of a festival and the fine poetic
talents of Sadako. Regardless of the background of a reader therefore, this scene could help give
Sadako more support.

The ways that Sei presented her mistress were varied in number and type. In some
scenes it is very simple, with just an image of the woman’s beauty: “[W]hen I turned back to Her
Majesty and saw her tranquil expression, her charming features which had recently taken on a
more adult cast [...] I realized that no one in the world could equal her.”\(^{59}\) Other scenes show
wider nature of the empress, such as her care for those not even related to her own salon. In a
scene late in the book, a girl in the court falls into a terrible illness. Sadako responds by sending
a priest “who was known for his skill in performing the Sacred Readings” to the girl’s side to
pray for her.\(^{60}\) While the girl herself is of no importance to Sei, and is in fact never named, it is
the action of the Empress that draws attention from the reader. While none of the other ladies-in-
waiting who were friends with the girl would help her, “none of them [seeming] particularly
concerned,”\(^{61}\) the empress herself was happy to offer some sort of assistance, though simply
bringing a priest to the sick girl’s side may seem like not much at all.

This is not the only scene within the book to show such a side of the empress. In scene
83, “Once When Her Majesty Was Residing,” a beggar woman comes to the palace. Dressed “in
a filthy cotton trouser-skirt which was so short and narrow that it seemed more like a sort of tube
than an article of clothing,”\(^{62}\) the woman received judgment and ridicule not only from Sei, but
from the other ladies-in-waiting as well. While the ladies-in-waiting joke with her in order to
have the woman “earn” the food they give to her, the Empress steps in. “Why have you made

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 1:116.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 1:256.
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 1:81.
her behave in such an embarrassing way?’ she asked. ‘I couldn’t bear to hear it and I had to stop up my ears.’63 Sadako chastises the women, and gives a robe to the beggar for her trouble. Another nun later comes, and the empress shows this beggar the same kindness as well.

These scenes all present Sadako as kind-hearted mistress who disregards the worry of her own situation in order to help those less fortunate. While her own political situation might make her in jeopardy, this does not stop Sadako from caring for a sick girl in the court, or offering help to a beggar woman, no matter how disgusting that may be. Sei finds these traits admirable, and thus presents them in prose in order to highlight them.

With the majority of prose scenes in the text focusing on Empress Sadako, it is safe to assume that Sei’s purpose in writing the text was to present her mistress in such a way that the empress would gain favor from others within the court. Although Sadako was falling from power when Sei wrote the text, Sei believed in her patroness and wished only the best for her. The book itself is filled with a mixture of poetry, lists, and other prose sections, but when read as a whole, it seems that the sections containing Sadako were the most important to Sei, and the ones which her readership would most likely remember.

*Murasaki shikibu niki- A Contemporary Diary*

Not long after *Makura no sōshi* was produced, another lady-in-waiting wrote her own diary. Murasaki Shikibu, lady-in-waiting to Sadako’s rival, Akiko, is famous for her fictional work, *Genji monogatari*, but Murasaki also produced her own diary. While it was not necessary for Murasaki to curry favor for her mistress via a text like Sei did, the text is at times very similar to Sei’s work, and can be viewed as a form of power for Murasaki, just as Sei’s work was for her.

Like Sei, Murasaki used her work to illuminate those she found worthy of praise, and also to present those whom she felt were not acting appropriately within the court. The latter use

63 Ibid., 1:82.
can be seen especially within Murasaki’s heated description of Sei herself towards the end of the 
nikki:

Sei Shōnagon, for instance, was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever and 
littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left 
a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone 
else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have 
become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most 
unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are 
bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them?64

While it is unknown if Sei and Murasaki ever met each other face-to-face65, Murasaki was very 
aware of who Sei was and her legacy, likely from the publication of Makura no sōshi and from 
stories within the court. Murasaki felt confident enough to make her opinion of the woman 
known however, despite the fact that the two of them were not close. Murasaki believed Sei to 
be far too full of herself, with the Chinese characters within her writings full of mistakes.

Through the example of Sei, Murasaki is able to show her disapproval of a certain type of person, 
and not just Sei alone. While Sei certainly felt herself above other members of the court, 
Murasaki believed that she did so to far too great an extent, and thus led to a bad end. While we 
do not know how Sei ended her days, we can ascertain from this description that she certainly 
was not enjoying the fame she once possessed as a member of Empress Sadako’s court.

Murasaki was quick to condemn how Sei acted in the court, and within her own text 
Murasaki did not try to place herself above others to that same extent. While she lived away 
from the court for a time, Murasaki wrote of her loneliness, blaming the situation in which she 
finds herself due to her own actions. “Those with whom I had discussed things of mutual 
interest – how vain and frivolous they must consider me now, I thought; and then, ashamed that I

64 Murasaki, The Diary, 54.
65 There is no mention of Murasaki within Sei’s text. Murasaki’s description of Sei was written when Sei, if she was 
still alive, would have been forty-five. Whether she was alive or dead by the time this was written is unknown. See 
could even contemplate such a remark, I found it difficult to write to them." Murasaki did not even allow herself to think bad thoughts of her peers who must have changed their feelings about her, instead punishing herself for having such a thought in the first place. Sei’s time away from the court was due to slander, and readers of her book knew that fact very well. The reasons behind Murasaki’s separation are not clearly explained by the writer, but Murasaki refuses to place the blame for such a situation on anyone but herself. In this aspect, Sei and Murasaki are nothing alike.

Another major difference between Sei and Murasaki is their acceptance of an audience. Although Sei claims at the end of her work that she never expected anyone to read it, Murasaki is very aware of her audience, and even invites her audience to communicate with her. “Write to me with your own thoughts – no matter if you have less to say than all my useless prattle, I would love to hear from you.” This section of the text seems to be a separate letter, different from how she sets up the other parts of her text, yet is still included in the actual body of the diary. With it, Murasaki invites opinions from her readers, asking them to tell her their own thoughts and ideas, even though her own work may prattle on at times. It is not surprising that Murasaki knew there would be an audience; with the popularity of *Genji monogatari* (which is mentioned being read by prominent court members throughout the text), Murasaki was well known within Akiko’s court. Considering that the *nikki* itself may have been commissioned, Murasaki was well enough known and respected that people would seek out her writings, and due to her popularity, her words may have held special sway.

66 Murasaki, *The Diary*, 34.
67 Ibid., 59.
While not the central theme of Murasaki's work, the Empress Akiko is often mentioned and described, and in the same sense as Sei, is presented as a kind woman who deserves praise.

In the initial pages of the *nikki*, Murasaki's patroness is introduced with great prominence:

> Her Majesty listens to her ladies-in-waiting engaged in idle gossip. She must be in some distress, but manages to hide her feelings as if nothing were amiss; perhaps this calls for no comment, and yet it is quite extraordinary how she can cause a change of heart in someone so disenchanted with life as myself and make me quite forget my own troubles — if only I had sought solace for my unhappiness by taking service with her much earlier.\(^{68}\)

Much like Sei, Murasaki sees her patroness as the light in her life, a woman who has provided her with guidance and a will to live. In this instance, Akiko is seen as a strong woman; something is bothering her, yet she manages to keep the mood light around her ladies. Murasaki admits that such a moment is rather unimportant, but she brings importance to it by inserting herself into the situation, putting the happiness she now feels entirely in the actions of the empress. Sei never thinks that the moments of beauty of her patroness are unnecessary and is very direct with her feelings about the empress. Murasaki in this instance is much more passive than Sei, presenting her empress in a positive light, yet bringing it out via herself rather than just the presence of Akiko.

This passiveness permeates the majority of descriptions of Akiko throughout the text, yet Murasaki at times follows Sei's examples and is very upfront with her love of the empress. In an early scene, Murasaki finds Akiko asleep and describes the loveliness of the woman at rest:

> She lay with her head pillowed on a writing box, her face all but hidden by a series of robes — dark lined with green, purple lined with dark red — over which she had thrown a deep crimson gown of unusually glossy silk. [...] She looked just like one of those princesses you find depicted in illustrations. [...] So it is that someone normally very beautiful can look even more beautiful than ever on occasions.\(^{69}\)

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\(^{68}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 6-7.
This scene is very reminiscent of Sei’s descriptions, with the empress not doing anything of importance, but still being presented as someone who should be loved and admired. The beauty of the empress is embellished by her clothing, but it is the simple act of her sleeping that draws the attention of Murasaki, who is amazed that such a beautiful person can glow even more.

In describing her relationship with the empress, Murasaki is a bit like Sei, but again, is much more passive than the older woman. Like Sei, Murasaki left the side of her patroness for a time, and in a letter is asked to return.

“You obviously did not mean it when you said you would only be away for a short while,” [Akiko] wrote. “I presume you are not prolonging it on purpose since I tried to stop you.” She may not have been serious, but I had promised and she had given me leave to go, so I felt obliged to return.  

When Sei left the court, Sadako sent a message to her describing how “wretched” she was without Sei at her side. It is Sei’s great love for her patroness that makes her want to return to the woman’s side. In this case however, Akiko is also displeased that her lady-in-waiting has left her, yet writes her letter as if it is an obligation of Murasaki to return. Murasaki therefore goes back because she has to, not because she feels heartened by Akiko to remember her and send a letter to her calling for her return. Murasaki sees the relationship with Akiko as more of an obligation than one built out of love and admiration. It may be that Murasaki inserted the descriptions of herself and the empress out of this sense of obligation rather than for personal desires.

Murasaki’s work may not have been written for the express purpose of helping her patroness, the empress, but that does not mean she did not have political reasoning behind her writing. The focus of the text is the birth of Crown Prince Atsuhiro, Michinaga’s first imperial grandson. Michinaga himself may have commissioned the text in order to make sure that his  

70 Ibid., 35.
71 Sarra examines this tendency within Heian diaries. See Sarra, Fictions of Femininity, 223-224.
connection to the future emperor could not be denied. While Sei and other woman’s nikki of
the same period focused more on themselves, over 70% of this nikki is about the birth and
ceremonies surrounding it, with some arguing that the book is more of a history than a nikki.
Its similarities to another history of the period, Eiga monogatari, are minimal, and its readability
suggest a high female audience, so I feel safe defining it as a nikki. As such, the use of the text
for a political purpose is unsurprising, as the same thing happened with Sei’s writings.

The sections dealing with the birth showcase how precise every aspect of ceremony
surrounding the birth was carried out. The first bathing of the prince, for example, is described
in great detail, with special attention to the decoration on the clothes of all who were present.
Other details include those who attended and what ranks they held, specific texts that were read,
and the attitudes of all who attended. From the number of mentions within the text, it is
obvious that Murasaki meant for certain people to be widely known surrounding the events of
this birth. Akiko, as the mother and Murasaki’s patroness, is mentioned within the text twenty-
eight times, the baby mentioned thirteen times, and Michinaga mentioned the most at thirty-
seven times.

If we follow the theory that Murasaki was working to help Michinaga, then the scenes
describing ceremonies would be the most important within her text. To help secure his place in
the government, Michinaga needed the birth of grandson to be unquestioningly legitimate. By
following every aspect of ceremony and recording it in detail, there would be no question of this.
Murasaki’s own interest within these scenes tends to be on the clothing of those involved, but the
most important information she presents is who is at the ceremonies and how they are performed.

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72 Wallace, Objects of Discourse, 5.
73 Ibid., 153.
74 For this scene see Murasaki, The Diary, 13-16.
75 Wallace, Objects of Discourse, 164.
With every aspect of the ceremonies covered, Michinaga could feel safe in knowing that his legacy was secured, especially after the *nikki* was spread around the court, and even those who could not attend the ceremonies would know they were performed as they should be.

Although there are many differences between Sei and Murasaki's texts, their similar use of their work for political purposes is evident. Sei used her text mainly for the good of her patroness, the Empress Sadako, while Murasaki worked for Michinaga, thus making sure that the birth of his grandson would be well-recorded and celebrated. With an intended audience in mind (as much as Sei would like to deny it,) the texts were meant to be read and appreciated by members of the aristocratic court, and reflect upon both the writers themselves and other members of the court in order to procure power.

**Conclusion—*Nikki* as Political Tools**

Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi* has been read in a number of ways by modern scholars. The scenes within the book provide countless information about the time period that Sei lived in, with an inside view of what went on in the minds of those in the court. Sei provides a unique view due to her strong personality and wide opinion about every aspect of the court. Underneath the miscellany of writings within this text, however, lies a deep understanding of how writing can hold power. Sei knew well that she could sway people with her writing, and did just that to help her friend and patroness, the Empress Sadako.

With her patroness falling from power, Sei used the opportunity to write a book by focusing on Sadako. The prose sections of the book, which predominantly feature the empress, are used to highlight the virtues of the failing consort and exemplify her beauty and prestige. As much as Sei denies in the end of her book that she did expect an audience, it seems clear that Sei expected many members of the Heian court to read her work. Those who read it would see the
sections highlighting Sadako, and would thereby want to support the empress more. Sei also used the book as a way to highlight herself and her friends, with sections describing herself, interesting stories with her and others, and using the text to deny rumors and bring out the truth of situations.

Murasaki’s use of her work, *Murasaki shikibu niki*, differed from Sei’s, but also had political reasoning behind its writing. Murasaki highlighted the birth and ceremonies surrounding Michinaga’s grandson, the son of her patroness, Empress Akiko. Murasaki does not highlight herself or her empress to the same degree that Sei does, but at times does use the text for her own advantage. As a popular author, there is no doubt that Murasaki knew the audience who would be reading her work, and thus wrote it in such a way as to support Michinaga, herself, and Akiko.

While this thesis has focused on only two of the *nikki* of the Heian court, I believe that other works from the period can be read in a similar matter. Women within the court were trapped within specific boundaries due to their gender, whether it be behind curtains in the salon of the patrons, or within the *hiragana* writing system which limited what they could read and produce. Sei and Murasaki are only two women who discovered that their writing could hold power within their own circles as well as the wider political and social world of the court.

When reading these texts today, it is necessary to remember the world that these women lived in. Michinaga may have held the most power in the court, but that did not stop Sei from attempting to save her mistress when he decided that she should no longer be in power. Murasaki took advantage of Michinaga’s power to get on his good side with the production of this text, allowing herself further recognition within the court while still carrying out the lord’s
will. *Nikki bungaku* is not only an entertaining genre, but one which holds a myriad of information about life in the Heian court, and the underside of power struggles within it.
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