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“Easyfree translation?” How the modern West knows Sei Shônagon’s *Pillow Book*

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In the West, frequent references to thousand-year-old masterpieces such as the *Tale of Genji* and the *Pillow Book* suggest that although born in a particular national context, such works now possess a new life as international cultural artefacts. All too often, however, the globalization of Japanese literature reveals a quite astonishing persistence of Orientalist and otherwise reductive readings. This article examines Sei Shônagon’s *Pillow Book* as an Eastern text that, from a Western perspective, acquires meaning only when articulated by the West, albeit in forms that would prove unrecognizable to its author or her contemporaries. Focusing on how they underpin or resist Orientalizing themes and attitudes, I consider the multiple and rapidly multiplying translations that it has inspired. The term “translation” is used in its broadest possible meaning to encapsulate a vast range of linguistic and cultural transfers along a continuum from literal to free, involving various forms of manipulation in the process of transforming this work into world literature.

Keywords: translation; adaptation; imitation; Orientalism; Japanese literature; women’s writing

In eighteenth-century France, a vogue arose for so-called *contes japonaises*, despite or, more to the point, because of the fact that Europeans at the time knew nothing at all about the literature of that mysterious Eastern nation. This hyper-Orientalist genre, which has been termed “brazenly frivolous” (Dobie 2001, 83), in fact betrays a far greater fascination with the then newly translated *Thousand and One Nights* and its fabulous storylines than with anything proper to Japan. An illustrative example is *L’Écumoire, histoire japonaise*, written by Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon fils in 1734. The work opens with a convoluted explanation of how the tale about to be told is so esteemed in China that it is ascribed to Confucius, but that it is actually a translation from the “ancient Japanese language”, dating from a millennium before Confucius. To add even greater distance from verifiable reality, the author judiciously explains that the story is based on a “Chechinian” original and that by the time the Japanese author began work on the text, that people had long been extinct. This fictitious foreign pedigree once established, Crébillon goes on to tell the story of a prince who is given a large skimmer – some sort of utensil with a three-foot-long wooden handle – which, in order to fulfil his destiny, he must have licked by certain important personages. Because the personages in question prove (understandably) less than completely co-operative, the prince fails in this task. As punishment, a genie casts a spell on him: upon waking up, the prince finds that his genitals have been magically transformed into the skimmer, and he is still obligated to wander around and convince people to lick it . . .

At the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first, we are experiencing yet another odd vogue for Japanese literature, albeit one that has or at least should have a surer foothold in reality. This is manifested not only in the “Haruki phenomenon” (the huge fan base achieved by the modern novelist Murakami Haruki¹ both in Japan and abroad) or the intense popularity of *haiku* and *manga*, for example, but more surprisingly in increasingly common allusions within modern Western literature, and both the visual and performing arts, to works of Classical Japanese prose. These frequent references to thousand-year-old masterpieces such as the *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語 (the *Tale of Genji*), by Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部, and the *Makura [no] Sōshi* 枕草子 (the *Pillow Book*), by Sei Shōnagon 清少納言, suggest that although born in a particular national context, such works now possess a new life as international cultural artefacts. All too often, however, the globalization of Japanese literature reveals a quite astonishing persistence of Orientalist and otherwise reductive readings. Accordingly, this article takes the *Pillow Book* as a case study of the Eastern text that seems to acquire meaning only when articulated by the West, albeit in forms that would almost certainly prove unrecognizable to its author or her contemporaries. Focusing on how they underpin or, occasionally, resist Orientalizing themes and attitudes, I will consider some of the multiple and rapidly multiplying Western translations that have been inspired by the *Pillow Book*, particularly in English and French. The term “translation” is here used in its broadest possible meaning to encapsulate a vast range of linguistic and cultural transfers along a continuum from literal to free, involving various forms of manipulation in the process of transforming this work of Japan’s classical literature into a work of world literature.

The *Pillow Book* is the earliest (ca. 996) and most famous specimen of what was to become arguably the most Japanese of all Japanese literary genres, the *zuihitsu* 随筆, defined as “a loose or miscellaneous prose kind of various guises to set down observations, reflections, or feelings in an apparently casual way” (Miner, Odagiri, and Morrell 1985, 305). Sei Shōnagon’s work describes her life as lady-in-waiting to an empress, through an entertaining juxtaposition of three different types of passages: approximately 60 diary-like entries, 80–90 anecdotes or descriptions of striking scenes, and some 170 lists – “Depressing Things”, “Splendid Things”, “Things That Make the Heart Beat Faster”, and so on. The episodic or even aphoristic nature of Sei Shōnagon’s text has encouraged many translators to make it their own, selecting those passages that appeal to them or further their particular aims, and disregarding the rest.

All of the *Pillow Book*’s rewritings, including adaptations, imitations, and other forms of *hommage*, merit close attention for not only their astonishing prevalence, but also the ways they claim to know the Japanese work. The exoticization and eroticization to which the *Pillow Book* has been subjected largely accounts for its compelling appeal to many foreign readers and to those who would adapt or imitate Sei Shōnagon’s work. The versions presented here allow for a concrete examination of the West’s encounter with radical Eastern alterity, so often bound up with what Edward Said has called that “remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes”, namely the “almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” (1979, 188). The association of the *Pillow Book* with uncontrolled sexuality is apparent throughout its reception history in the West, as contradictions of reality and image concern few, if any. Since its “discovery” by the West, this Oriental woman’s text has

been viewed as inherently Other in terms of gender, race, language, culture, and genre, and its classification as such continues to be used to legitimize often quite glaring strategies of appropriation.

For anyone interested in the images of Japan that have currency abroad, “translations of ostensibly the ‘same’ text – serial translations – offer a comparative framework which can help us not only assess ideological, but also map out crucial historical, shifts in practices and strategies of reading” (Littau 2004, 48). These often weird mutations also serve to tell us which features their creators do and do not consider important and/or appropriate for adoption and, furthermore, are the means whereby many Westerners, the vast majority of whom will never read the original, gain their understanding of what the work is supposedly all about. The examples discussed below support Edwin Gentzler’s contention, made in his analysis of a deconstructionist approach, that “[i]nstead of being defined merely as a crossing over in order to grasp something, translation can also provide a place or forum for the practice of a crossing over which disseminates and escapes” (1993, 162).

From national to transnational

While this article is inspired by recent debate about the concept of World Literature, addressed in seminal books by David Damrosch (2003), Pascale Casanova (1999), and Christopher Prendergast (2004), it is specifically interested in how that concept intersects with translation and its political implications, a theme taken up by Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko, among others. As works of literature move from a given national context to take their place within what Goethe first termed *Weltliteratur*, they undergo shifts far more fundamental than simply the replacing of one set of linguistic signs with another. To borrow Damrosch’s tripartite definition of the phenomenon, literary globalization gives rise to “refractions” of Japan’s national literature, on some level offers “gains in translation”, and now demands a new “mode of reading” (cf. Damrosch 2003, 281–303). Translation is *de facto* metamorphosis, an inherently transformational means of negotiating between the familiar and the strange, the domestic and the foreign, the like and the unlike, the past and the present. Any notion of reproducing the “same” text is naïve, since the processes involved in linguistic, cultural, and historical transfer cannot help but profoundly shape its identity. Said defined Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1979, 3), and a similar instinct is behind the manipulation of this Japanese text. Unequal power relationships between East and West, male and female, source and target language, and so on allow or even encourage an assertion of authority on the part of the translator/adapter, leading to inevitable, and not infrequently humorous, distortions.

Especially in the case of Classical Japanese, what is known abroad is necessarily a construct of the literature not “as written by its writers, but as rewritten by its rewriters”, to quote André Lefevere’s *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992, 4). These rewritings, which may include scholarly studies, anthologies, book reviews, even plot summaries, in addition to translations and adaptations, create

images of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, sometimes even a whole literature. These images exist [...] side by side with the realities they compete [...] with, but the images [have] always tended to reach more people than the corresponding realities. (Ibid., 5)

The modern Western images of the *Pillow Book* certainly do reach a new and more diverse audience than the co-existing Japanese text. Granted, some authors have loosely adopted Sei Shônagon's style and format simply for permission to write the self, sometimes borrowing little but a title, attached to anything from saccharine poetry to another extreme: Googling "pillow book" can take you, for instance, to pornographic sites where Sei Shônagon is linked to anachronistic winking geishas and worse. Still others hopelessly confuse elements of Japanese culture: mixing *ukiyo*e prints, *kabuki* theatrics, or samurai swordplay with eleventh-century court life, or failing to distinguish between Sei Shônagon and Murasaki Shikibu.²

The omnipresence of popular references to the *Pillow Book* can suggest how the dissemination of world literature bridges cultural gaps, dismantling the rigid dichotomous structure of Western versus non-Western. Zhang Longxi has pointed out that "[l]inguistic and cultural differences between [East and] West are obvious, that is, in the etymological sense of 'standing in the way' (*ob viam*) like obstacles", before arguing forcefully that "it is the task of translation to clear the way for understanding and communication" (Zhang 2005, 18). Through the reading of Heian literature in translation, we have indeed learned to appreciate such elements as the non-linear narrative, permeable subjects, different aesthetic viewpoints, and a distinctive woman's voice. Westerners coming to these age-old Japanese works for the first time often report being stunned by a sense that they are so modern, even postmodern, because our art of storytelling in the West has lately inched closer to that of pre-modern Japan, or at least makes an appearance of having done so.

Nevertheless, there always remains a surplus meaning that the target culture cannot or will not absorb, or perhaps a surplus meaning quite foreign to the source text that gets tacked on to the target text. Any translation is an interpretive rewriting, with its practitioners projecting specific images and foreclosing others, consciously or unconsciously alluding to other texts and contexts, and so on. Questions not only of tone and style, but also of content are relevant here, with the particular structure of this work prompting the taking of liberties. Further, as its circulation history reveals, current readings of the *Pillow Book* remain indelibly marked by racist and sexist stereotypes left over from earlier generations. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western construct of the "Oriental woman" has tremendous staying power, even today still "triggering a series of associations involving harems and veils, polygamy, eunuchs and political despotism" (Dobie 2001, 1). Although Madeleine Dobie is here referring to representations of the Middle East and North Africa, such associations have been readily transferred to Japan as well, as vast socio-cultural and historical differences are blithely elided in the interests of constructing a monolithic Orient.

Translation history

Western translation of Japanese literature does not begin until shortly before the forced opening of the country in 1853 by Commodore Perry and his black ships.³ The *Pillow Book*, widely deemed "that which is best and at the same time most

quotable in Japanese literature” (Aston 1899, 116), figures among the very first literary texts taken up and disseminated by Europeans. My research has uncovered 46 complete or partial versions of the *Pillow Book* over the past 130 years, rendered into languages as diverse as Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian and Spanish. The process had its start with August Pfizmaier’s German translation of certain passages in 1875, and continues apace – a brand-new English translation, by Australian Meredith McKinney, has just been released by Penguin Classics (2006) and another Dutch version is forthcoming in Jos Vos’s anthology of Classical Japanese literature. The variety of interpreters that this text has attracted is remarkably broad: from Victorian scholar-diplomats such as W.G. Aston, to Zhou Zuoren – the younger brother of the major Chinese writer Lu Xun – to world-renowned literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges.

Translations are routinely judged in terms of faithfulness to the original, but in the case of pre-modern literature, what is “original” is far from self-evident. Any notion of a sacralized, authoritative source text is obviously problematic when the only extant manuscripts date from centuries after composition and reveal variant textual traditions. A late twelfth-century picture scroll, the *Makura no Sôshi Emaki*, can be found in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum, but the earliest copy of our text dates from the thirteenth century. Further, classical Japanese literature now circulates in translation even within its country of origin. The language written by Sei Shônagon is so distant from that of today that she has long been read in modernized versions, sometimes clumsy cribs intended merely as study aids, but also literary re-creations by such well-known authors as Ôba Minako (1991), Tanabe Seiko (1986), and even Hashimoto Osamu (1987).⁴ Re-workings are therefore neither new nor exclusively Western: constellations of *Pillow Book* interpretations have been built up within Japan as well as without, each one providing a very different reading of the putative original.

Gustave Flaubert once famously asserted that because the Oriental woman, with the exception of those working as prostitutes, could not be visited, she could never be known – and how much truer is this statement in terms of a woman-authored pre-modern text that is rarely read in other than mediated form. The classical language is notoriously difficult; the variant lineages defy any straightforward reading of the text, which in any case resists neat categorization into Western genres such as diary or memoir; and biographical facts about the author remain stubbornly elusive. The translators, adapters, and imitators discussed herein can and do exploit the unknowability of both source text and author in order to recreate according to little more than fantasy and whim, drawing their authority from what Billie Melman calls a perceived “inarticulateness of the Orient” (1995, 4). While Sei Shônagon is nothing if not superbly articulate, because what she has to say remains couched in an apparently mysterious language and culture requiring the services of translators, Flaubert’s remark provides a most fitting metaphor for the process.

Literary translation from the Japanese into Western languages can best be understood as occurring over four generations. The first, when Japan still constituted a novel and highly exotic destination, begins in the mid-nineteenth century and continues through to the first part of the twentieth century. Linguistic difficulties are repeatedly underscored in these early years, as deliberate exoticism of language as well as culture is practiced by both Westerners and the Japanese themselves. Ishikawa Takéshi, in his 1909 Sorbonne thesis on the *zuihitsu*, echoes the common

wisdom when he explains that “it is almost impossible to translate Japanese texts faithfully into a European language” (Ishikawa 1909, 10). Selections from the *Pillow Book* nonetheless begin to appear in papers delivered before scholarly associations as well as in journals and anthologies. This period is, we will recall, contemporaneous with the *japonisme* movement that swept through Europe, influencing especially practitioners of the decorative arts, poets, and painters, and Sei Shônagon is, in fact, being referred to as an “impressionist” writer. Reception of her writing plays a not insignificant role in the development of the new aesthetic: “from Whistler and the Japanese, [...] the ‘world’ [...] learned to enjoy ‘arrangements’ of colours and masses” (Pound qtd. in Miner 1958, 110).

In addition to this emphasis on her idiosyncratic style, with its apparently random juxtapositions, virtually no one misses the chance to highlight her reputation as a supposedly loose woman. Basil Hall Chamberlain writes ruefully in 1877 that much of Japanese literature is “stamped by peculiarities that render it unfit for discussion in our more prudish tongue” (1877, 107), and even Aston, a tireless defender of Heian writing, is at pains to state that “the laxity of morals which [the *Genji* and the *Pillow Book*] depict is deplorable” (1899, 97–98). The Oriental woman and her unbridled sensuality have rightly been termed “the creature of a male power-fantasy” (Said 1979, 207), which fact offers insight into why Sei Shônagon tends to be misleadingly described even today as an imperial courtesan, rather than lady-in-waiting, and why sexual adventures have so often been cited as the salient part of her writing, in reality so much more nuanced. To be sure, the question of the immorality of female authors is one with a long history in Japanese criticism as well: a commentator in 1670 writes that “Ono no Komachi [...], Sei Shônagon, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu [...] were all accomplished writers and skilled in waka composition, and it was probably for that reason that they were all strumpets” (qtd. in Kornicki 2005, 159).

The second generation arrives with the somewhat fuller translations that begin to appear as separate, stand-alone volumes in the late 1920s. Although the first of these is a French version jointly produced in 1928 by Matsuo Kuni and Émile Steinilber-Oberlin, by far the most influential was Waley’s *The Pillow-Book of Sei Shônagon*, published later that same year (see Waley 1929). Neither of these contain more than a quarter of the text, although Matsuo and Steinilber-Oberlin claim that theirs is a “*traduction intégrale*” and Waley that omissions “have been made only where the original was dull, unintelligible, repetitive, or so packed with allusion that it required an impracticable amount of commentary” (1929, 5). Robinson’s definition of synecdochic translation as one that “isolates a single part of the SL text, treats it as representative of the whole, and renders *that* in the TL” is useful here, with these translators who “treat the part *as* the whole” (1991, 153). The third generation can be dated from the 1960s, when Japan is becoming more familiar, with the first full translation of Sei Shônagon into English by Ivan Morris and UNESCO’s re-issue of André Beaujard’s complete French translation from 1934 (1966), which had hitherto enjoyed only limited circulation. These versions are still widely read today and, especially in the case of Morris’s, have even been reified as a source text that is itself then retranslated. Just before the last century mark, we entered a fourth generation of response to the *Pillow Book*, with translations spreading into many new languages. For example, there are now six Spanish-language versions, all but one of which (Sakai 1969) date from around the turn of the millennium.

Refractions

What is even more striking, however, is the great number of Western poets, essayists, short-story writers, novelists, performers, filmmakers, musicians, and others who have begun explicitly appropriating this writer for their own purposes. As early as 1958, we find a chamber orchestra piece by a Belgian composer, entitled “Stèle pour Sei Shônagon”, against which background a soprano sings French translations of Japanese poetry, although oddly enough none by “the famous poetess” herself. The record cover promises “a highly sensitive synthesis of [...] Webern, [...] French Impressionism, and Strawinskyan Expressionism” (Froidebise 1958). This western practice, presumably born of the belief that an Oriental text can be made to mean whatever we choose, of placing Sei Shônagon in rather strange company has only intensified in recent years. A collection of visionary insights compiled by the father of the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi is being marketed by an English publisher as “reminiscent” of Sei Shônagon (Barks and Moyne 2004),⁵ and an American dance performance set to voice-over readings pairs the *Pillow Book* with a most unlikely combination of other texts: cantos by Dante, testimonials from Hiroshima survivors, and reports of murder and mayhem filed by a Sarajevo journalist.⁶ Moreover, our author is taken as the inspiration for a scholarly anthology of lesbian writing in English, Alison Hennegan’s *The Lesbian Pillow Book* (2000), whose editor does not seem unduly disconcerted by the fact that we have no evidence whatsoever that Sei Shônagon was homosexual, and ample evidence to the contrary. She also has her own entry in a slew of recent books, scholarly and otherwise, on topics as diverse as travel writing, garden writing, social and political theory, and rhetoric.

The golden age of adaptation took place in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, the days of the *belles infidèles*, extensive re-draftings of foreign stories to suit the tastes of a contemporary target culture. The rationale was that any author who had not had the good sense to be born French was by definition in need of editorial assistance and improvement.⁷ The “infidelity” here is conscious and deliberate, and extends to all sorts of liberties with the source text, understood to have had no intention of offending the reader with its barbarisms. What we see with the *Pillow Book* today are many *infidèles*, *belles* or otherwise – more or less creative rewrites that make use of this foreign material and now have significant influence on how the text is received internationally. If even quite literal translations, which can claim at least a putative connection to the “real” source text, foist on their unsuspecting audiences less than reliable readings, how much more so do so-called “free” translations? While the work remains arguably Japanese in origin, such “traces are increasingly diffuse and become even more sharply refracted as [it] travels farther from home” (Damrosch 2003, 283).

So-called “pillow books” seem to be increasing exponentially in the West, most of them synecdochic or highly reductive transformations of our author’s work: focusing exclusively on, for example, her famous lists, her strong woman’s voice, her aestheticized response to the world, or – no surprise here – her sexual exploits. In 1984, French novelist Pascal Quignard published the “*notes de chevet*” of a noblewoman in the Roman Empire who, as indifferent to the calamitous, world-changing events unfolding around her as Sei Shônagon herself appears to be, is content to jot down “Choses qui sont rares” (Quignard 1984, 39), “Choses qui

donnent un sentiment de paix” (51), and “Choses qui sentent bon” (94). In its brief passages, this book also emphasizes frank depictions of sexuality and fetishes – a section entitled “Choses qui font honte” has the narrator describing how she dislikes accidentally witnessing her husband having his anus shaved. In 2004, Canadian journalist and outspoken feminist Heather Mallick released a pillow book that seeks to highlight the opinionated, unapologetic voice of her chosen literary model, although this author comments that, lacking “the good fortune to have been dead for a millennium and out of reach of complaints” (Mallick 2004, 1), she was forced to be more circumspect than she would have liked.

Among the more successful English-language imitations, and one of my own favourites, is that published in 1985 by British actress Eleanor Bron, who faithfully reproduces the original’s three types of passages, but updates the text to reflect a career on stage and screen (she has performed with Monty Python and in the Beatles’ movie *Help*). Her version serves as a welcome corrective to overly Orientalizing approaches. Similarly to how Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was able in the eighteenth century to translate the East and even harems as respectable and domestic, in deliberate contrast to the salacious readings offered by travel writers (especially male travel writers) of the time, Bron refuses to pander to lurid eroticism. Granted, like Sei Shônagon, she glories in her life as a public woman, unabashedly enjoying her sexual freedom, but does so in a matter-of-fact manner, trading on a quick wit and a strong sense of self. Many will recall Sei Shônagon’s famous description of awkward morning-after behaviour:

A lover who is leaving at dawn announces that he has to find his fan and his paper. “I know I put them somewhere last night”, he says. Since it is pitch dark, he gropes about the room, bumping into the furniture and muttering, “Strange! Where on earth can they be?” Finally he discovers the objects. He thrusts the paper into the breast of his robe with a great rustling sound; then he snaps open his fan and busily fans away with it. [. . .] What charmless behaviour! (Morris 1967, 49)

In Bron’s version, this metamorphoses into a scene where she and her lover are awakened by an unexpected early-morning visit by her mother; at the sound of the doorbell, the lover panics:

The half-slumbering soul on the bed leapt as though electrified and began to gibber, clambering into his shirt. “For God’s sake!” he hissed, struggling. “My tie! Find my tie!” I found his tie but could not keep from pointing out to him that although my mother might indeed think it a little off to meet him like this without his tie, she was observant enough to notice, and still more likely to take amiss, the fact he was as yet not wearing any trousers. (Bron 1985, 7)

Like many Western feminists who were introduced to this Japanese foremother in the 1970s, Bron seems to have experienced the discovery as emancipatory, strongly suggestive of a time and place where sexual and other stereotypes were less oppressive, and where a woman could write as she saw fit. As Bron explains in her Preface, “[s]uddenly I saw in its now direct, now oblique form, a possible direction for a further installment of autobiography” (1985, ix). Yet another example of a liberating effect is the way she adapts the aristocratic custom of exchanging poetry, which Sei Shônagon quotes and often accompanies with biting commentary. In a clever form of substitution, Bron, who is Jewish, gleefully reprints ostensibly

complimentary fan letters, including one that closes as follows: “you are the only sign on the programme of good breeding and dignity with all those terrible grammar school boys and Jews. Keep up the good work!” (1985, 34).

Whereas in everyday English imitation implies slavish copying or mimicking, within Translation Studies the term is used to mean the opposite: “wandering too far and too freely from the words and sense” of the original (Robinson 2004b, 111). Forms of imitation can and often do approach what Douglas Robinson calls “total creative anarchy” or “sheer contextual relativism, [. . .] different people saying things to different people and being understood in different ways at different times and in different places and situations” (Robinson 2004a, 88). Imitation is, of course, a subset of adaptation, itself a problematic term used to refer to a wide range of translative operations. If translation proper focuses on the meaning of the source text, adaptation has generally been defined as more concerned with finding new and supposedly more effective ways, as determined on the basis of the presumed knowledge and expectations of the target-language audience, to carry across its intention or purpose. As Robinson writes in *The Translator’s Turn*, an adaptation must be “the ‘same’ story – much reduced and transformed, but still interpretatively recognizable” (1991, 143). If it cannot be construed as “recognizable”, if too free, it can cease to function as a legitimate creative strategy, one among many alternatives to conventional translation, and become viewed as an illicit appropriation or misrepresentation of the source text. As far back as 1680, John Dryden warned of the potential dangers of imitation: “the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and tak[e] only some general hints from the original.[. . .] [I]mitation of an author is [. . .] the greatest wrong which can be done to the memory and reputation of the dead” (qtd. in Robinson 2004b, 111).

Plays and films function as classic examples of adaptation within traditional translation theory, the intersemiotic transfer of a written text to a visual, performative medium. Chris Marker – widely credited with inventing the cinematic essay – makes use of Sei Shônagon to signal the concept of memory in his *Sans Soleil* (1982). Although this pseudo-documentary begs the question of how a male French filmmaker can possibly think back through a Heian court-woman, it remains a fresh and lyrical meditation on not only nostalgia, but also history, travel, and human experience in general. More often than not, when I mention my work on the *Pillow Book*, the conversation immediately turns to Peter Greenaway (1996b). Much of the current flood of interest in Sei Shônagon can be traced to the influence of his critically acclaimed 1996 film, in which scenes from modern-day Hong Kong are interspersed with ones from ancient Japan that incorporate citations from Morris’s English translation. The heroine is a young woman named Nagiko (Sei Shônagon’s presumed given name), who has numerous lovers and displays a fetish for writing on the body. Although this adaptation is not far from being as unreal a fantasy as Crébillon’s, it has indelibly affected the way in which much of the West perceives the *Pillow Book*. Recently, some translations from the Japanese have even been reissued with sexy stills of Vivian Wu or Ewan MacGregor on the cover, implying a very different sort of work than that which readers will find inside. Greenaway has justified his project in the following terms:

It must be said straight away for those who have not read Sei Shonagon, that she certainly would not have recognised the narrative of this film project or its characters, though I had hopes that she might recognise many of the sentiments she had expressed, and much of her own excitement in literature and the physical world. I would also like to think that she would have recognised the quotations we made of her quotations. (Greenaway 1996a, 5)

The phrase “quotations of quotations” is an especially apt description of cultural products loosely inspired by translations of a foreign literature, reminiscent of a game of Telephone or Chinese Whispers where the original message gradually becomes hopelessly garbled.

One example of a refraction based on a refraction is the 2005 English-language *homage* by British author Aidan Chambers, *This is All. The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kern*. This lengthy young-adult novel (over 800 pages) is concerned primarily with adolescent sexual awakening and exploration. References to the Japanese work are implicit in sections titled “Idle activities that give me pleasure” (2005, 26) or lists of “Things it helps me to remember” (48), “Boring things” (236), and even (in a direct quotation from Morris’s translation) “Things that make my heart beat faster” (264). A major stumbling block here is the translation of gender: although the male author insists on the pains he has taken to create a believable female narrative voice, his heroine’s three main preoccupations prove to be flatulence, penis size, and lesbian “experimentation”. A clear indication of the influence that Greenaway’s film has had on this re-writing of Sei Shônagon is Cordelia’s practice of writing on the body – not Asian calligraphy painstakingly brushed onto naked skin in this case, but individual English words that she scribbles down in ballpoint on bits of tape and then sticks into parts of her clothing (cf. Chambers 2005, 132). (Interestingly, most of the words that she selects are from Shakespeare, which gives us a Western father to parallel the Eastern mother, strongly underscoring the creative admixture fostered by free translation.) Access to Classical Japanese literature at one or even two removes is clearly problematic, however, in that channelling Sei Shônagon through Morris is one thing, through Greenaway quite another.

Adaptations and imitations of the classics inevitably function as metaleptic solutions to the temporal paradoxes inherent to the act of translation. As Robinson explains:

Homer should not sound like a contemporary poet; that would be absurd. He was an ancient Greek. But if he was an ancient Greek, he could not speak in English, either, which makes the whole idea of reading “Homer” in English – of translating him in the first place – absurd. [...] So why not recognize the absurdity, affirm it, play with it, instead of skulking about in the shadows with one or another idealizing “solution” to the problem? (1991, 184)

The modern Western uses of Sei Shônagon do tend toward contemporizing rather than archaizing strategies, playfully negotiating, successfully or not, between a distant time and culture and a more familiar world. For instance, McKinney’s stated goal for her *Pillow Book* translation is to attain the voice of “a contemporary woman diarist [and therefore] if at times she descends to the downright colloquial, so be it” (2005, 57–58). And Jan Blensdorf, an Australian journalist and novelist, is one adapter who plays explicitly with temporal shifts: *My Name is Sei Shônagon* (2003)

leaps back and forth among three different periods, none of which happen to be eleventh-century Japan. The story concerns a would-be psychotherapist, a young woman who counsels troubled men by playacting the role of a Heian courtesan in a little room above an incense shop called “The Bridge of Dreams” (here we have an unacknowledged *Genji* reference). In what appears to be a deliberately anti-exoticizing stance, Blensdorf makes use of Sei Shônagon to critique present-day Tokyo’s consumerist atmosphere, similarly to how Ruth Ozeki, in *My Year of Meats*, uses her to critique beef production and the television industry (1998). At the farthest extreme of this approach, both Sei Shônagon and Murasaki Shikibu are even being referred to in cyber communities as “protobloggers”.⁸

Another recent work, Morag MacInnes’s short story “The Scotswoman’s Pillow Book”, riffs knowingly on the dangers of allowing others to believe they understand you, a useful metaphor for how Western writers have felt free to appropriate our author and her work to suit their own interests, prurient or otherwise. If we recall that the Oriental has historically been linked not only to the feminine and the sexually profligate, but also the mentally infirm, we can better appreciate how amusingly MacInnes engages with the exploitive tendencies of this tradition. The protagonist, Thelma, a mental hospital inmate, regrets following the advice of her “new lady doctor” to write lists, which have merely exposed her to increased intrusiveness from the staff: “You don’t give out stuff. Especially about death and love, people will only get their scratchy wet pens on your file” (MacInnes 2004, 39). Further, a fellow patient challenges Thelma, and indirectly all those who feel that merely by jotting down random thoughts they are wittily imitating Sei Shônagon: “What’s so clever, anybody could do it, make lists . . . I could do it” (ibid., 41).⁹

One commentator from 1904 writes in reference to much-loved nineteenth-century popularizers of Japan’s literary heritage that “les histoires japonaises ne nous charment absolument que dans les livres des Mitford et des Lafcadio, c’est-à-dire émondées, purifiées et surtout recomposées par des artistes européens” (Bellesort 1904/1926, 270).¹⁰ This claim for the right and indeed the obligation to decontextualize and re-invent the Other underscores the degree to which interpreters move far beyond the slavishly literal as they provide readers with what are intended to be more readily accessible or digestible versions. The authors of the transcreations discussed herein do carry across something of the *Pillow Book*, but one cannot help wondering whether Sei Shônagon would in fact have recognized any of these adaptations and imitations as expressions, *mutatis mutandis*, of her sentiments and interests. On the other hand, given her well-known disdain for anything too old-fashioned, she might have appreciated the instinct behind at least some of these updating, which fact hints at the potential gains that translation makes possible.

Although all of these rewriters claim the creative license to do as they wish with the original, they do so by first paradoxically insisting on membership within a tradition (even if a mostly invented tradition) by the explicit use they make of it, which they take care to reference in the title, a foreword, or within the text itself. Not unlike with Crébillon, we see here a sense that one is obliged to establish a literary pedigree, to base the validity of one’s work on one’s knowledge of a famous or otherwise important source text, even where the connection is tenuous at best. A superbly ironic case is that of Tawada Yoko, the Japanese novelist, poet, and essayist resident in Germany since 1982, who has her own “Kopfkissenbuch” (2000). Despite a subtitle that ostensibly places her novel within the current pillow-book trend of the

West, these stories of 22 women draw from a classical tradition grounded instead in the *Metamorphoses*. Tawada has strenuously argued elsewhere against any notion of creative writing being limited by national or ethnic boundaries:

Since tradition is fictive, there is no reason to feel genetically allied to a tradition. Everyone can freely choose the fictive tradition they wish to work with. [...] Whether an artist can produce something new and exciting from that depends on not the origin of the artist but the artist's ability. (Tawada 2005)

Refusing to accept occidental literary history as in any way out of bounds for herself as a Japanese-born writer, she underscores the inequities inherent to Orientalist discourse.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to explore the degree to which artists of varying abilities and aims have drawn on Orientalizing traditions as they have engaged with the literary production of Japan (fictive or not) since it has become available to the West. While some readers may object that the term "translation" has been used too broadly, I join Tymoczko in arguing that

Although the openness of translation as a category may be a problem for some scholars who like precision and controlled or closed definitions, it is th[is] openended nature and its lack of precise boundaries that have allowed it to adapt to diverse cultural conditions, to diverse social functions, and to changing technologies as well. (2005, 1088)

And it is this open-ended nature that also allows for the range of permutations that translation and the evolving phenomenon of World Literature make possible. It is clear that many have felt free to take up Sei Shônagon's *Makura [no] Sôshi* in idiosyncratic ways, and thus it is read and re-read, read and re-written, again and again across boundaries of time, culture, language, and genre. Something called the *Pillow Book*, or the *Notes de chevet*, or the *Libro de la Almohada* now circulates widely, recognized as a global masterpiece, and has subsequently been given new life and been brought to the attention of new audiences via transcreations of all descriptions. This is textual worlding in a nutshell: the literary manipulation that is inherent to the translative process and behind how and why a given work is, for better or worse, broken down and reconstructed for a global audience.

The modern West's re-writing, both literal and free, of literature from Heian Japan offers a privileged glimpse into the complex process by which "Oriental" texts are received and made known, and the manner in which a foreign literary tradition may be re-imagined. The increasing prevalence of such recreations of the *Pillow Book* provides a material record of a particular mode of cross-cultural reading, as an originally Japanese text is disseminated abroad and escapes national boundaries. Many of the refractions or serial permutations I have discussed must undoubtedly be judged illicit misrepresentations that do great wrong to Sei Shônagon's memory and reputation, yet they also testify, in all the diversity and partiality of their readings, to the extravagantly creative possibilities to which the Orientalist underpinnings of East/West translation give rise.

Said explains insightfully that it is only through "the Orient's effective absence" that the Orientalist can step forward as its spokesperson, asserting and imposing

fanciful interpretations.¹¹ With that in mind, I have taken my title from *Finnegans Wake*, where James Joyce writes: “As none of you knows javanese I will give all my easyfree translation” (1939, 152). The justification for the persistently Orientalist and otherwise exoticizing readings of classical Japanese literature revealed by my case study of the *Pillow Book* certainly appears to be through a sense that the translators/adapters are not only speaking to the ignorant, but remain themselves insufficiently knowledgeable. The fictitious literary pedigree provided by Crébillon and detailed in my opening paragraph on one level functions simply to “parody the erudition of scholarly Orientalists”, as Dobie (2001, 115) suggests in her discussion of another of his novels. More broadly and significantly, however, it also “direct[s] the reader’s attention to [an] impenetrable foreignness [. . .], conveying a profound sense that man is trapped in a language that he doesn’t really ‘know’ and can never fully master” (ibid.). These various “easyfree” translations, from a scatological fantasy at a time when no one in the West had mastered Japanese to the often still fantastically free versions appearing today when many have or certainly could do so, highlight the many ways that the ostensibly unknowable literature of classical Japan comes to be presented as known in and by the West.

Notes

1. Japanese names are given throughout as family name first, in accordance with Japanese custom.
2. The back cover of Martine Bellen’s 1999 poetry collection, for example, makes the claim that its poems were inspired by “the Pillow Book of Lady Murasaki”, a non-existent text.
3. August Pfizmaier’s translation of a novel by Ryūtei Tanehiko, which was among the books brought back from Japan by Philipp Franz von Siebold, a German physician who had lived in the Dutch trading enclave of Dejima but was expelled in 1829, was first published in 1847.
4. Ōba is the most “faithful” of the three. Tanabe rewrites the *Makura Sōshi* in the form of a novel, while Hashimoto’s parodic and highly controversial version is another animal entirely. He transforms Sei Shōnagon into a rather breathless teenage girl, the kind you might well meet any day this week hanging out in the trendy Tokyo districts of Shinjuku or Harajuku. For example, the opening line of the famous *haru wa akebono* passage, which is rendered by Ivan Morris as “In Spring, it is the dawn that is most beautiful”, reads in Hashimoto’s rendition something along the lines of “Spring is, like, OMIGOD, dawn!!!”.
5. The blurb on the back cover of this book, translated by Barks and Moyne, reads as follows: “a miscellany that shows Bahauddin jumping from gardening tips to meditations of Qu’ranic verses to quasi-erotic explorations of the Sufi’s efforts to find unity with God.”
6. A description of this piece can be found online at www.charlesmea.org/html/house.html.
7. Neither is this an exclusively French or eighteenth-century strategy. Edward Fitzgerald, the author of the famous 1859 translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, once wrote: “It is an amusement for me to take what Liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them” (qtd. in Lefevere 1992, 1).
8. In an on-line discussion debating the identity of “the godfather of blogging” (http://ambivablog.typepad.com/ambivablog/2005/02/the_blogfather.html, dated February 2005), one participant writes: “There are many ancestors, of course, but the most directly comparable is the Japanese ‘pillow book’ genre, best represented by THE PILLOW BOOK OF SEI SHONAGON (born c. 966).” A Spanish-language blog from the same year (<http://tetsuo.lamatrix.org/category/1/>) states emphatically: “Murasaki Shikibu fue

- una protoblogger.” And Robert Brady, in a recent piece called “Blogology 101” (2007), has written that “now that there are said to be three million blogs in Japan and climbing fast, we must mention from among many others the Japanese protobloggers Murasaki Shikibu (*Genji* blog), Sei Shonagon (*Pillowbook* blog) and of course Basho, grandfather of the travel blog, who wandered wireless around Japan for decades, recording his many experiences in poetic fashion using unlinkable ink, which nevertheless links directly to today, and the magazine you are now holding.”
9. The story incorporates subtle, implicit references to famous passages in the *Pillow Book* as well, such as one parodying Sei Shônagon’s opening lines: “Thelma found herself observing the dawn with some interest. It was the colour of dirty water, but it had a relentlessness” (MacInnes 2004, 42).
 10. “Japanese stories are fully charming only in the books of [A.B.] Mitford and Lafcadio [Hearn], where they have been pruned, cleaned up, and above all reconceived by European artists.”
 11. Said writes as follows: “we must not forget that the Orientalist’s presence is enabled by the Orient’s effective absence. This fact of substitution and displacement, as we must call it, clearly places on the Orientalist himself a certain pressure to reduce the Orient in his work, even after he has devoted a good deal of time to elucidating and exposing it” (1979, 208).

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