Heather Mallick’s Mom: Of Women, Men, and Mediation

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Things That are Near Though Distant:
Paradise.
The course of a boat.
Relations between a man and a woman.

A Japanese woman wrote this in the late 10th century, in a text that consists of an idiosyncratic assortment of lists and anecdotes, both serious and humorous, all indelibly marked by her emphatically opinionated voice. Hot off the (Canadian) presses today is Pearls in Vinegar, subtitled The Pillow Book of Heather Mallick in direct reference to that Makura no Sōshi or Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon. Mallick happens to be my favourite Globe and Mail columnist (on Saturday mornings, my husband and I fight over who gets to read her first). It is easy to see why she would choose this model: both women are strong and intelligent, never afraid to speak their minds, and both often focus on relations between the sexes. With this book, structured in the Japanese zuihitsu genre (literally “following the brush,” or miscellany), Mallick explores the flotsam and jetsam that affect women’s lives for better or worse, following first one tangent and then another. Entries are given titles such as “Splendid Things,” “Squalid Things,” and “Things That Make One’s Heart Beat Faster,” just as in the original. In the end, all these unconnected bits come together to form an oddly coherent whole.

I wanted to begin my presentation in this way because it might be said that tangent is my middle name. My path to obtaining a PhD in Comparative Literature—I plan to defend this spring—has been circuitous to say the least, although what once seemed utterly, hopelessly disjunctive bits are slowly but gratifyingly being incorporated
into a larger, more interconnected picture of what it is that I do. In other words, what was once distant is now revealed as nearer than I (or anyone else) could have thought. Starting out as a Classics or Latin major, I switched to French because an MA in Translation sounded like fun, and that degree happened to be available only in French. I then became a translator, but not—despite my training—a literary translator. Rather, I spent some 10 years in technical fields, dealing with texts ranging from angry letters to the Premier (I can’t help wondering if there are any other kind…), Alberta Agriculture studies of tomato crop failures and the most revolting bovine udder diseases, countless knee and back injury records for Workers’ Compensation, an astoundingly lengthy report on hospital mattresses (who knew there was that much to say?), animal and clinical trials for a glaucoma medication conducted by a medical research group in Japan that goes by the unfortunate (at least in English) acronym of BOZO, and so on.

While all this was enjoyable and fulfilling in its own way, I felt myself drifting ever further from the paradise that a life of the mind can offer, and so began a part-time MA in Classical Japanese Literature (having been studying Japanese in my leisure hours). That second MA led to a PhD programme, in a discipline where my varied background could be an asset rather than a liability. Comparative Literature allows a merging of the near and the distant, a juxtaposition of the like and unlike, in order to find “pattern and gestalt where there had been discrete entities” (Bernheimer 79). Such an approach is of particular interest for feminist scholarship because artificial disciplinary divisions have in the past “obstructed a complete view of women’s situations and the social structures that perpetuated gender inequalities” (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, and Lydenberg 1). While careful to avoid a naïve universalism, comparatists urge that we look beyond national
boundaries and “start thinking in terms of … people grouped according to their experiences of illness, inspiration, love, creativity, suffering, loss, and other states that transcend identity. For more unites us than divides us. One must simply commit to finding co-experience interesting” (Emerson 7),

Accordingly, my doctoral dissertation draws on my background in French and Japanese, language and literature, to analyse one sort of co-experience represented by authors as disparate as Murasaki Shikibu (a contemporary of Sei Shônagon, and author of the Japanese Tale of Genji), Marie de France (who wrote in French in the 12th century), Elizabeth Inchbald (a late 18th-century novelist, playwright, and the first Englishwoman to earn a living as a drama critic), and Edith Wharton (an early 20th-century American novelist). I argue that, despite obvious differences, these women writers all employ similar liminality motifs in order to comment on and protest against culturally prescribed gender limitations.

To come back to Classical Japanese again…. Given that its foundational texts were authored by women, this literature is, despite the foreignness of culture and language, much nearer us as (women) readers than might at first appear. Sei Shônagon, Murasaki Shikibu, and their predecessors and contemporaries wrote of male-female relationships in an insightful way that speaks to many modern readers in both West and East. Their descriptions of the hopeful beginnings of love affairs or their painful ending, the struggles of being a professional woman in a man’s world, the day-to-day quarrels and intimacies of relationships, the difficulty of raising a child in the midst of a failing marriage, and the overwhelming need to write about these and other experiences, to
express one’s self and one’s life in textual form do not seem so very distant from our
concerns as early 21st-century Canadians.

Heather Mallick comes into play again here. Without the text that was her
inspiration, she is unlikely to have happened upon this particular format to express her
ideas, and without Sei Shônagon she may not have known that a woman could write like
this at all. Across geographical and chronological distances, as Mallick writes, “the most
wonderful books … appear… at just the right moment,” and we respond to them.
Virginia Woolf famously said, “For we think back through our mothers, if we are
women.” She was referring to direct lines of inheritance, but I am more interested in a
more indirect female tradition, whether mediated in some way or simply a connection we
can draw between otherwise unrelated women writers on the basis of theme, concerns,
context, tone, method, or style. My own work takes a broad view of this concept,
rejecting any notion that this “thinking back” must mean a line of straightforward
reception and influence, as it tends to do when we speak of the “Western” tradition in
literature. I believe there exist clear and meaningful links in women’s writing, insofar as
these writers are profoundly aware of their condition as women and as women authors
under various patriarchal systems, and that the similarities and dissimilarities of
responses to that condition are worthy of attention in a more holistic way.

In a passage titled “Different Ways of Speaking,” Sei Shônagon lists “the speech
of men and of women,” which (male) commentators have glossed as referring to the fact
that educated men of her day used the high-status language of Chinese, officially off-
limits to women, who were ostensibly restricted to the native tongue. True enough, but
clearly how and what men and women speak is also a matter of socially constructed
gender difference, of what their culture allows them to say and how it allows them to say it.

As I’ve suggested, one of Mallick’s “mothers” is, in Woolfian terms, Sei Shônagon: “I loved her judgements... harsh, therefore truthful” (Mallick, personal communication). However, because she does not read Japanese, Sei’s judgements, her “truthfulness,” are available to the Canadian writer only through the mediation of translation, in this case the 1967 version by Ivan Morris. Mallick tells me that she “disliked using a male translation,” and I sympathise. Anyone standing between us and our literary foremothers cannot help but act as an obstruction or at least a distortion to communication, and when we as women readers come to a woman author through the reading of a man, should that not be classed under “Things That Give One Pause”? The feelings and relationships described are going to be refracted through a different lens, whether intentionally or not. Far from a transparent process, the transition to another language significantly impacts content, form, and tone, and when the lens through which we read the feminine is masculine, difference is compounded. Most Westerners will discover Sei Shônagon via Ivan Morris, or even via Peter Greenaway, whose 1996 movie is titled *The Pillow Book* although it bears little resemblance to its supposed source. A stunningly beautiful film in many ways—and I’m here referring not just to Ewan MacGregor’s nude scene—but very little if anything to do with the original. Morris is certainly more faithful to his source text than Greenaway is, but like so many other male critics of Heian women’s writing, he does love to emphasize the oft-cited jealousy between Sei and Murasaki Shikibu, for example, and to insert gratuitous footnotes about how everyone knows that women cannot possibly admire one another openly and
honestly. Worse still is a version by Arthur Waley, dating from 1929 and rarely read today, the preface to which reads: “Omissions have been made only where the original was dull, unintelligible, [or] repetitive ….” Unsuspecting readers may not be aware that the “omissions” deemed necessary on their behalf by this particular interpreter constitute a full three quarters of the original. All this to suggest how the mediated interpretation of a woman writer by a male translator or film director fundamentally alters our experience of her text. (Please note that I am not making an essentialist argument here. “Reading as a woman” is something that women also have to learn, since until quite recently most of us were trained to read and respond as men. And many men, such as Japanese novelist Tanizaki Junichirô, who himself translated Classical Japanese women’s writing, show depths of understanding.)

Heather Mallick’s book has its own passage entitled “Different Ways of Speaking,” where she writes: “In job interviews, people bubble-speak absurdities. ‘Where do you see yourself five years from now?’ the interviewer asks. ‘On another continent, moneyed and unwrinkled, loved by all who encounter me and displaying the storied torsal red flush of a recent orgasm,’ is what you wish to say. ‘With my skills honed, I’d like to be ready for the next level,’ is what you should say.”

In this anecdote, the interviewer happens to be male. Although the passage is obviously meant to be humorous, it does have something serious to say about self-censorship. Mallick tells me that although in her book she tried to be as truthful as possible about a woman’s experience, she now finds herself looking at what she’s written in “bewilderment.” For example, “when I talk about menstruation, I don’t think I describe its wonderful smell. It’s metallic. Why didn’t I put that in? I would now, but I think it
didn’t occur to me at the time that I could.” Women have always had to consider the
danger of writing/speaking what they wanted to rather than what they should, and this
often takes the form of censorship—a problem even or perhaps especially when we don’t
even realise that we’re doing this to ourselves. If the nearness of our experiences can be
rendered distant by self-censorship, how much more may be elided by the misreadings,
intentional or not, perpetrated by those who serve as our mediators?

My postdoctoral research project, as I hone my skills for that next academic level,
will continue these deliberations about translation as a privileged vehicle for cultural
exchange and global canon formation with regard to women’s writing. Using the
reception history of *The Tale of Genji* as a case study, I am going to examine how and
why a given text is adapted/appropriated into new cultural contexts. This is all part of the
important process of “mapping the journeys texts undertake” (Bassnett 11) as they move
from national to world literature, and this means taking into account the impact of
ideology, cultural appropriation, textual manipulation, and especially gender
identification.

Sei Shônagon would surely categorise a graduate student talk to the AWA under
her heading “Things That Should Be Short,” and so I will bring my comments to a close,
with the sincere hope that the tangents I have taken here as both reader and researcher
will not be listed under “Presumptuous Things.” Thank you.
Works Cited


