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Sei Shônagon and the Politics of Form

PENNY WEISS
Political Science, Purdue University

> To write well, a man must, then, possess his subject fully; he must reflect upon it sufficiently to see clearly the order of his thoughts, and to make of them a sequence, a continuous chain, of which each point represents an idea; and when he has taken up his pen, he must guide it with due sequence along this chain, without letting it wander, or bear too heavily anywhere, or make any movement save that which will be determined by the ground it has to cover. It is in this that severity of style consists, and it is this also that will make unity of style, and regulate its flow; and this alone also will suffice to make the style precise and simple, even and clear, lively and consecutive (Comte de Buffon 1753).

I. ACCORDING TO BUFFON

ACCORDING to Buffon (1707–1788), renowned author of a landmark thirty-six volume work on natural history, good writing requires knowledge of and reflection upon the author's subject. The writing, exactly like the thinking that produces it, is:

- sequential
- unified
- precise
- linear
- parsimonious and
- orderly.

Above all, it seems, the pen must not wander. One could hardly hope for (or dread finding, as the case may be) a starker contrast to use to introduce Sei Shônagon (ca. 965–1010), Empress Sadako's lady-in-waiting from about 993–1000. *The Pillow Book*, Sei Shônagon's masterpiece, is described as a "lengthy collection of notes, stories, comments, and descriptions of everyday life."[1] Her pen roams, her style varies, the order is not apparent. "The datable sections are not in chronological order, and the lists have been placed with little attempt at logical sequence."[2] Yet without Buffon's "severity of style," I will show, she produces a work worthy of notice by political thinkers.

[1] Morris 1991, p. 317.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 12. See further Morris (1980) and Stone-Mediatore (2000).

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II. THE LIST OF "THINGS THAT HAVE LOST THEIR POWER"

Sei Shônagon's list of "Things That Have Lost Their Power" includes a stranded boat, a toppled tree, a defeated wrestler, a woman waiting in vain, and a balding man. What an unusual entry into the notion of power. It encompasses defeat and retreat, lost rank and lost love, every example easy to visualize, simple to feel. The useless boat stranded in a dry creek has not permanently lost its ability to move and carry, but is at the mercy of elements over which it has no control. Even after the water rises and the boat sails again, it will remain eternally vulnerable, a message perhaps about the fleeting nature of abilities and sometimes even of incapacities. The tree felled by winds, lying "on its side with its roots in the air," on the other hand, is a permanent loss, and a slow death.[3] The roots have nothing to grab onto, their defeat is obvious, like the bug on its back that is helpless to right itself. Even the great go down, and that which causes the fall may be sudden, natural, overwhelming. Does Sei Shônagon imagine the life to which the dead tree contributes, from soil for other growth to homes and food for many species? Or is giving, even giving life, at the expense of one's own life, something akin to but distinct from power? More public yet is the losing sumo wrestler, walking off, undoubtedly aware of eyes on his back. Even almost unimaginable physical power is insecure, like personal and political power. We set up contests that guarantee losers. We do not immediately disappear without victory. Our losses can touch others.

The boat and the tree were "defeated" by nature, one permanently and one temporarily. Both are obviously helpless, unable to cover up their losses. In contrast, the woman combing her "short hair that remains" after removing a wig (PB 145) had "hidden" her loss in public, but in her isolation and privacy still has to confront an unpleasant reality. Power has public and private dimensions in more than the sense of different realms; losses successfully covered up must eventually be faced. Though it seems similar, in the example of the "old man who removes his hat, uncovering his scanty topknot" (PB 145), the emphasis is on how others view him, while in the woman's case it is on her confrontation with herself. Power encompasses both. Similarly, in the case of the woman who realizes she waits in vain for her husband to "rush about looking for her" (PB 145), her confrontation with the fact that she has lost her sway over him, or is less dear to him, is the moment of loss, the feature Sei Shônagon captures, perhaps more than the actual decrease of influence or how she appears in his eyes.

The examples capture sadness and resignation more than fighting back. Every item in this category contains its opposite, a stage before the loss. The category itself emphasizes change. Overall, power includes flourishing, health, holding on against and moving with opposing forces, being useful, sustaining oneself, public recognition, being heard and heeded, victory, being loved. On the last point,

[3]Sei Shônagon, *The Pillow Book*, in Sei Shonagon (1991, p. 145); all subsequent parenthetical page references in the text will be to this work (abbreviated PB).

however, the examples of “People Who Seem to Suffer” include a “woman passionately loved by a man” who is “absurdly jealous” (PB 171). The answer for the woman whose husband is now indifferent to her is not simple, for love can also oppress the beloved. There is just so much to think about here.

Sei Shônagon’s thoughts on power are interesting to compare with more common images of power in political theory. Aristotle’s *Politics* opens with discussion of numerous household hierarchies, delineating who has what form of power over whom and why, from parent and child to sovereign and subjects. Plato’s *Republic* is framed by the situation of a perfectly just man punished for injustice, used to discuss the worthiness of justice regardless of its costs. Mill’s *On Liberty* begins with a history of clashes between rulers and the governed. Publius’s solution to government abuse of power imagines mutually suspicious branches of divided government resisting each other’s expected encroachment. From brutish states of nature to the nature of brutes, these examples are more extreme than everyday, more abstract than real, more institutional than interpersonal. Lost power is rarely so poignant as in Sei Shônagon, for the focus is usually on such matters as the causes of decline or varieties of corrupt states. Emotion is muted, even when Plato’s aging Cephalus leaves the conversation, or when Rousseau’s autobiographical young self learns of his parents’ fallibility. Though perhaps it comes closest, Socrates’ condemnation to death is more moving in his companions’ responses than in his own, which turn to reflections on political obligation.

III. SEI SHÔNAGON IS DESCRIBED

Sei Shônagon is described as “the precursor of a typically Japanese genre known as zuihitsu.”[4] *Zuihitsu*, a still existing form of writing, is variously defined as:

- “a term of Chinese origin that literally means ‘following the brush’”[5]; or
- “ ‘the brush moving with the mind.’ ”[6]

The author’s mind either follows or moves with the brush. In either case, mind does not lead or fly alone. It is a collaborator, and emphasis is strongly on the process of writing/thinking rather than on writing as the product of thinking.

IV. ZUIHITSU PUTS BUFFON TO THE TEST

Zuihitsu puts Buffon to the test, for we might be stretching to call it a “form” of writing at all. In what might be ascending Buffonian order, its product—Sei Shônagon’s *The Pillow Book*—has been said to be

[4]Morris 1991, p. 11. She has also been called its “earliest example” (Miyake 2002, p. 1) and elsewhere yet its “inventor” (Daugherty 1999, p. 1).

[5]Fukumori 2003, p. 1.

[6]Greer 2000, p. 5.

- "hardly coherent as a continuous narrative,"[7]
- "unsystematic and disordered,"[8] and
- "structured in but the loosest fashion."[9]

But some portrayals continue up the continuum, describing it as

- "intuitively, as opposed to systematically, structured"[10]
- structured in the ren "order of themes linked . . . semantically."[11]

David Greer connects it to Joseph Campell's myths, writing that is unsymmetrical and purposely unfinished, leaving room for the reader's imagination.[12] Also hinting at its depth and coherence, Carroll writes that Sei Shônagon's "varied forms are not easily recognized today as 'political theory.' [But o]ne must ask whether this doubt arises because *The Pillow Book* does not meet essential criteria for what constitutes political theory, or rather because our assumptions and notions (stated or unstated) of political theory's forms are too limited."[13] That is, indeed, what we must ask, and will begin to answer here.

This essay pursues some possibilities inherent in these later more positive comments. As Tanaka indicates, the absence of one easily recognizable kind of order is not simply the equivalent of incoherence but may hold the possibility of another kind of order, which may even be conceptually deeper and especially useful for rethinking the customary. Arguably, pursuing Greer's point, works that "leav[e] room for the reader's imagination" surpass those that convey and convince regarding the theoretical. Being more interactive, they encourage the reader to talk back in a philosophical conversation. And finally, along the lines Carroll suggests, narrow ideas of forms appropriate to political theorizing deprive us of the insights of quite profound political thinkers who found other forms more useful, more suited to them, or better for raising certain issues, perspectives, possibilities and connections.

V. THREE TYPES OF WRITINGS

It is generally agreed that *The Pillow Book* contains three types of writings: catalogues, essays and diary entries. In the first, Sei Shônagon inventories items of interest to her under a general topic heading, with comments of varying lengths. The subjects of these lists range from "Herbs and Shrubs" to "Things That are

[7]Greenaway 2005, p. 2.
[8]Morris 1991, p. 13.
[9]Dalby 2001, p. 1.
[10]Sullivan 2003, p. 2.
[11]Tanaka 2005, p. 4. Ren "was not only a mechanism in which words were linked creatively . . . but also in which people were linked themselves by provoking and changing each other" (Tanaka 2005, p. 6).
[12]Greer 2000, p. 1.
[13]Smith and Carroll 2000, p. 20.

Unpleasant to See." The second, essays, often contains Sei Shônagon's observations, speculations and explanations of people, events and things around her, from "When a Woman Lives Alone" to "Men Have Really Strange Emotions." Finally, the diary element contains memoirs, primarily about her years at the imperial court, describing, for example, "Gentlemen of the Fifth Rank" and what occurs "On the Tenth Day of Each Month." While these three types of passage are distinguishable, "more than one style of writing can be interwoven into a given passage," as when, for example, an item on a list becomes an essay.[14]

Other commentators have found similar but still divergent ways of classifying the content:

- "reminiscences; opinions and imaginative sketches; and lists, some with comments, others merely lists of words";[15]
- "a collection of lists, gossip, poetry, observations, complaints and anything else she found of interest";[16]
- "stray thoughts and impressions . . . informal collections of notes. . . . Insights, gossip, character sketches, poetic fancies . . . anecdotes and stories";[17]
- Names of things . . . thoughts on places, life, human affairs and nature; diary accounts and narrative sections concerning Sei Shônagon's experiences at the palace.[18]

Clearly, some descriptions of Sei Shônagon's form are negative ("no set of writing could be more miscellaneous," says Washburn),[19] others more positive ("the outstanding quality . . . apart from her incomparable prose, is precisely the freedom with which she offers her opinions on absolutely everything," declares Delacour).[20]

VI. STRAY AND INFORMAL NOTES

"Stray" and "informal" "notes" and "lists" (no less "gossip") is not what Buffon suggested constitutes good writing. On the other hand, "cataloging," "commenting," "recollecting," "speculating," "explaining," "observing," "opining" and "criticizing" seem rightful—some even essential—parts of theoretical work. Fascinatingly, Fukumori writes that Sei Shônagon's book "offers the scholar a wealth of approaches in its myriad subjects, observations,

[14]Fukumori 1997, p. 2.
[15]Disse 2005, p. 1.
[16]Wikipedia 2005, p. 1.
[17]Dalby 2001, p. 1.
[18]globaled 2000, p. 1.
[19]Washburn 2001, p. 1.
[20]Delacour 2002, p. 3.

and writing styles. Indeed, what seems to be the primary difficulty in scholarship of *Makura no soshi* is the formulation of a method for encompassing this very diversity."[21]

What Fukumori describes is an intellectual difficulty for scholars, not a problem with Sei Shônagon's writing, Buffon notwithstanding. Ivan Morris, in contrast, locates the problem squarely in Shonagon's brush. He considers the "structural confusion" of the book "its main stylistic weakness," though he also finds "part of its charm . . . precisely in its rather bizarre, haphazard arrangement."[22] Fukumori sees in *The Pillow Book* especially challenging material for the scholar, while Morris, marking the text as "charming" (not to mention "weak," "bizarre" and "confused"), almost undermines its scholarly worth—and both verdicts are largely in reference to its form.

VII. SEVERAL QUESTIONS PRESENT THEMSELVES

Several questions present themselves. If Buffon is correct, why would Sei Shônagon choose to write in any other way than that which he prescribes? If Buffon is correct, can Sei Shônagon be of value? Can she, in particular, be considered a political thinker? If Buffon is incorrect, why did he mistake a particular form for the whole of theory? If he is incorrect, can Sei Shônagon serve as a corrective? Either way, what connection has any form to the substance of political theorizing? Are there any restrictions on form in what we will call theory? How do issues of gender intersect with questions of form?

VIII. THERE ARE THREE MAIN ISSUES

I see three main issues, or risks, for political theorists in what I am calling the politics of form: first, being irrational—arbitrarily associating only certain forms of writing with philosophical investigation; second, being unjust—exercising political bias in silencing voices that write in certain forms; and third, being unwise, due to the "loss to our philosophical endeavors that would accompany such an exclusion."[23] The problem with the politics of form to date, I will argue, is not the idea that *how* one writes is linked to *what* one writes; instead, what is troubling is that the associations it makes between style and substance are incomplete at best, erroneous at worst. Further, the gaps and errors have a pattern to them: what the politics of form is most likely to comprehend and appreciate is theorizing within Buffon's comfort zone, while the majority of political writings by women and many by non-western men are likely to reside

[21]Fukumori 1997, p. 1.
[22]Morris 1991, p. 13.
[23]Gardner 2000, p. 17.

outside of it. Sei Shônagon, for instance, who has virtually never been studied as a political thinker, uses language and forms that simultaneously mark her work as feminine and non-philosophical.

IX. SEI SHÔNAGON'S STYLISTIC CHOICES

Was there a politics to Sei Shônagon's stylistic choices? "Japanese men considered the writing of prose in their native language to be beneath them, and so they concentrated their literary efforts on poetry and Chinese prose."[24] While men wrote "in Chinese, in kanji. . . . [m]en discouraged women from learning Chinese characters," though Morris states that Sei Shônagon simply "*prefers* to avoid Chinese characters, the so-called 'men's writing.'"[25] As "Logic 101" informs us, if all philosophy is written in form Y, and no women write in form Y, then women do not write philosophy. The exclusion of women from Chinese letters involved assumptions about what the sexes *should* do, questions of appropriateness and propriety, as well as about what they *could* do, issues of ability and nature. "Chinese literature, even the poetry of such a popular writer as Po-Chu-I, was supposed to be beyond women's ken."[26] Sei Shônagon wrote *The Pillow Book* "in the same characters lovers wrote their tanka in, *hiragana*. . . . Heian noblemen sniffed at hiragana, though. They called it *onnade*, the women's hand. Good for poetry and love letters, maybe; but for the Heian man to write 'something serious' in hiragana was . . . unseemly."[27] The fact that Sei Shônagon wrote in a style both reserved for women and associated with the non-philosophical makes her an extraordinarily useful test case of the politics of form.

In Sei Shônagon's own time, style was inseparable from substance. They even "regarded handwriting as the mirror of a person's soul," holding to "the belief that a person's handling of his brush was a better guide to his breeding, sensitivity, and character than what he actually said or wrote."[28] In the rest of this chapter I focus exclusively on Sei Shônagon's lists, or catalogues, a form indisputably even less studied and more suspect than the essay and diary. I not only write about Sei Shônagon but also employ her method in my argument, as is hopefully already evident. Using some of her style allows me to advocate for it both by argument and by example.

In the end, I believe, the politics of form has been used as an exclusionary strategy—it has certainly functioned that way in practice. Most of what follows discusses how it has excluded women from treatment as serious political thinkers. I think much of the argument also applies to the exclusion of many non-western

[24]globaled 2000, p. 1.
[25]Greer 2000, p. 3; Morris 1991, p. 306, fn. 190 (emphasis added).
[26]Morris 1991, p. 306, fn. 190.
[27]Greer 2000, p. 3.
[28]Morris 1991, pp. 183–4.

men, for overlapping though not identical reasons. I leave it to others, however, to more systematically develop that angle.

X. NORMS OF FORMS

Tuana writes that "to the extent that we have elevated the rational, objective, universal style of much of contemporary philosophy, the personal, situated, individual style of [nontreatise] writings renders their philosophical status questionable."[29] A correlation exists between our elevation of certain forms, like that of Buffon, and the diminution of other forms, like that of Sei Shônagon. Because we equate philosophy with certain forms, anything that departs from them risks being labeled unphilosophical; moreover, we may mistake "good" form for good content. The operating assumption is that philosophical investigation requires certain styles and is incompatible with others.

There is a second, more hidden but more revealing correlation between certain forms and philosophizing. Buffon's recommendations lend themselves to a certain set of virtues, or at least characteristics; they work well with writing inclined to universalize, for example, and to follow a particular form of rational argument. But such writing also leaves out, or is less compatible with, a different set of virtues or characteristics that other forms capture better; included here is writing inclined, for instance, to personalize. It would be difficult to find a text that is more "personal, situated [and] individual"[30] than *The Pillow Book*, which lists what Sei Shônagon deems embarrassing, surprising and elegant, and details what happened "One Day When the Emperor Visited Her Majesty's Rooms" and while "Travelling in My Carriage One Day." Is political theorizing compatible with the forms employed by Sei Shônagon, forms that lend themselves to the more "personal, situated [and] individual"?

XI. VIRTUALLY ANYONE CAN WRITE A LIST

Virtually anyone can write a list. We compose them without a moment's hesitation and on a daily basis. We make lists of "pros" and "cons" to help us reach tough decisions, and "to do" lists to organize our projects. We create shopping lists to help us navigate the grocery story, and birthday lists to remind us to send someone a greeting. Writer's block for someone trying to create a list of household chores is almost unimaginable (unlike cleaner's block for one actually trying to accomplish the tasks on that terrible list). A more accessible, less threatening form of writing is difficult to conjure up. What is its possible relevance to political theorizing?

Things ordinary people commonly use lists for:

[29] Tuana 2004, p. 67.
[30] *Ibid.*

- To organize (days, inventory)
- To remember (tasks, events)
- To rank in importance (qualities, goals)
- To weigh (sides of a question, options)
- To facilitate decision-making (give reasons, consider alternatives)
- To be more efficient (with time, resources)
- To clarify one's thinking
- To break the complex into manageable parts
- To brainstorm

Lists are connected with rational processes such as weighing, evaluating, mapping out, sorting and clarifying. They are also linked with philosophical goals such as exploring and "uncover[ing] . . . possibilities" in oneself and in different ways of living with others.[31] They invite us to be more observant and imaginative, sometimes unexpectedly and excitingly so as lists proceed beyond the obvious or superficial. There is no necessary limit on subject matter.

The Pillow Book contains about 164 lists. Some are simply catalogues of names, as of mountains, offered without comment; many of these were omitted in Ivan Morris's popular translation.

Among Sei Shônagon's lists that present items with minimal elaboration:

- Things That Cannot Be Compared (laughter and anger; the little indigo plant and the great philodendron)
- Annoying Things (thinking of something to add to a letter after having sent it; forgetting to knot a thread)
- Depressing Things

Even with such minimal commentary, Sei Shônagon shows herself to be an astute observer of the everyday and the unusual, the natural and the social, the ritualistic and the idiosyncratic. Without question, she appears in her lists as capable of the most precise description in few words, and a wise and fascinating selector of items. Even more critically, the choice of items is a strategy for challenging the reader to see diverse relationships, and to suggest common ground between them that can lead to a reconsideration of both the individual items and the subject of the category itself. The headings of many lists are unique to Sei Shônagon.

Among Sei Shônagon's most unusual and intriguing categories:

- Things That Are Distant Though Near (relations between members of a family who do not love each other; the last day of the twelfth month and the first of the first)
- Things That Are Near Though Distant (paradise)
- Things That Were Good in the Past But Are Useless Now

[31]Segalove and Velick 2000, p. 2.

In these instances the unfamiliar grounds for classification help us to create new analytic categories for seeing and understanding the world, an alternative mental filing system. This seems quite a philosophical accomplishment.

In some lists, it takes a sentence or two to describe an entry. (Hateful Things: "An admirer has come on a clandestine visit, but a dog catches sight of him and starts barking. One feels like killing the beast.") Often such elaborated upon items refer to specific incidents, and frequently they combine description and evaluation.

While lists seem like the most mundane product of writing and a far cry from the political theory treatise, Sei Shônagon's lists are unlimited in content (public and private; natural and human-made; concrete and abstract), and bring together in unexpected and provocative ways ideas and events that seemed disparate. There are reasons an author might prefer to use them over other alternatives.

Why someone chooses lists over other forms:

- adequate for the task: gets the job done
- perfect for the task: captures exactly what one is after
- time constraints on the writer (from inconvenient interruptions to fear of being caught writing)
- time constraints on the readers one desires
- a useful stage of writing that may develop further
- reflects a way of thinking one has mastered
- an easy form in which to include the unexpected, bury the controversial, etc.
- accessible and inviting to the audience one wants to reach
- thought-provoking—invites the reader to participate, add on
- matches the author's strengths
- compatible with certain kinds of thinking
- an efficient means
- to make a point about style
- to personalize the writing

The idea of a fit between author and form is provocative, leading us to consider authors as in possession of knowledge not only of their subjects but also of themselves. "One respect in which Hannah Arendt differs conspicuously from most contemporary schools of political study is her fondness for the essay form as a means of expression. *The freedom of the essay suits admirably her manner of discursive reflection*, exploring the implications of a subject into unlooked-for ramifications."[32] So it may be said with regard to Sei Shônagon: the catalogue is a form that fits well with her "keen powers of observation, a rapier wit, and wicked sarcasm," among other qualities.[33]

[32]Canovan 1974, p. 110 (emphasis added).
[33]Paris 2004, p. 2.

The idea of a fit between reader and form is also interesting. As the editors of *Lists to Live By* suggest,

> You can read them one at a time, pondering and reflecting on each point. Or you can read them in bunches. Start at the beginning and work your way through to the treasures at the end, or jump around to your favorites. Read them when you're on the run, or curl up with a steaming cup of hot chocolate.[34]

They suggest that not only might a certain type of reader be drawn to lists, but that the various moods and situations of each reader are compatible with different uses of the book. Further, the flexibility of lists not only accommodates readers, but invites them to put the material to a variety of uses. "Some will cause you to reflect. Some will bring excitement. Some will make you smile. Some will move you to action. Some might even change your life."[35]

XII. POLITICAL THEORIZING

Political theorizing certainly shares such goals, for it is work intended to move people to think and to act, to care and to converse about and in light of "dynamic ideas covering a gamut of topics from contentment to friendship, from family to virtue."[36] Consider one exemplary example of a passage describing a trip on a boat that becomes material for political theorizing: Sei Shônagon's entry, "Times When One Should Be on One's Guard."

The first item on the list warns us about people with bad reputations who give "a more sincere impression than those of good repute" (PB 246), individuals who also fascinate canonical theorists such as Plato and Rousseau. The second item tells us to be wary "When one travels by boat" (PB 246). This item becomes an elaborate story about a "delightful" excursion Sei Shônagon had taken with a light heart on a calm day. Again appearances and assumptions are deceiving and dangerous, for "a violent wind blew up" and the sea transformed. These events lead Sei Shônagon to reflect on some of her own assumptions about people and situations, touching on our tendencies to both underestimate and to overestimate certain people and tasks, and to be oblivious to the very different lives even of those right around us. "When one thinks of it," one sees the bravery and skills of "common people," like those working on the boat in rough seas (PB 246). It is through telling the story of her journey that Sei Shônagon encourages her readers to confront, literally and metaphorically, the fearful waves that overtake smooth waters, to reflect on our own unacknowledged dependence on others, and to really see how different people live.

This last theme leads to a story about a second journey, this time on a boat with a cabin, used by "People of quality" (PB 246). Here again she is led through

[34] Gray et al. 1999, p. 9.
[35] *Ibid*.
[36] Gray et al. 1999, p. 9.

her new vantage point to reevaluate what is safe and what is dangerous. Again, she is "very moved to observe people" (PB 247), and this time considers the different lives people lead in relation to the water, from the pleasure-seeking travelers to the risk-taking, resourceful sailors to the courageous "poor women divers who have to plunge into its depths for their livelihood" (PB 247). Concluding the tale, she writes that the experience she had watching the divers was "enough to make even an outsider feel the brine dripping. I can hardly imagine this is a job that anyone would covet" (PB 248).

In the end, the list has provocatively, seamlessly, moved from the familiar "people who have a bad reputation" who nonetheless misleadingly "give a more sincere impression" (PB 246), to the newly appreciated strengths and hardships of people too easily overlooked. She has offered a thoughtful reconsideration with political overtones and ramifications. She has engaged, and through her vivid recounting invited her readers to engage, in political theorizing.

XIII. WHAT AN AMAZING CONTRAST

What an amazing contrast between this unstudied list and Plato's much-analyzed parable of the ship in *The Republic*, Book VI. In Socrates' parable, the common people are ignorant even of what knowledge is required for sailing, yet they nonetheless struggle for position and power and ridicule the one true sailor. In Sei Shônagon's story "people of quality," including herself, are ignorant of what the "common people" know until they realize in a dangerous situation how skilled the sailors are and how dependent upon them the travelers are. What radically different politics the stories embody. But why is one of these competing visions part of the canon of political thought while the other either goes unnoticed or is declared irrelevant to the discipline? Allan Bloom writes that "The image Socrates presents to Adeimantus has a double function: it tells him a lovely tale which charms him into a more favorable disposition toward philosophy; and it causes him to think about the meaning of the image. . . . Thus he is beginning to think about philosophy, and in a way he is philosophizing."[37] But Sei Shônagon's, too, has a double function: it grabs us with a dangerous adventure and leads us into a more favorable disposition toward the knowledge and abilities of 'commoners.' We reconsider the character and location of wisdom, thereby also engaging in political philosophizing.[38] We become more aware of those whose lives, like those of Sei Shônagon's sailors and pearl divers, intertwine with ours without recognition, likely at their cost. And this list is but one example of the potential contribution to political theory that *The Pillow Book* might make.

[37]Bloom 1968, p. 398.

[38]I do not mean to imply that she is a great democrat, though passages like this one do raise questions about the frequent characterizations of her as unremittingly elitist.

XIV. ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT MUCH NOTICED

Although it is not much noticed, Sei Shônagon is not the only politically relevant writer to employ catalogues.

Other political thinkers who used lists and catalogues, and why:

- Aristotle. Ernest Barker describes three "type[s] of Aristotelian writings," one of which "may be called the compilation or catalogue," such as in the *Constitution of Athens*.[39] Von Fritz and Kapp consider that text "a sketch written mainly for private use." Despite a consistently negative tone to their evaluation, they see that the form is particularly useful for a survey, and for work that is "historical and descriptive." Further, they notice that it not only lends itself to a "detailed account of the constitutional set-up and of the governmental machinery," but allows "two different sketches of the same constitution, one from a more evolutionary, the other from a more stationary, point of view."[40] Von Fritz and Kapp almost grasp its profound potential to alter viewpoints, and look through multiple lenses.
- Hobbes's *Leviathan*, especially the definitions. "Hobbes assumes that definitions are the only principles we need to treat as requiring no argument."[41] His use of lists thus reflects a philosophical position he is arguing for. Also, the definitions are supposed to build compellingly, step by step, what will ultimately be political consensus. The lists contribute to the appearance of irrefutable logical demonstration. Finally, they teach readers "habits of thought and action which were required if his scheme for the organization of political society was to work."[42]
- Susan Griffin, in *Woman and Nature*. In her own explanation for her choice of form, she writes: "In the process of writing I found that I could best discover my insights about the logic of civilized man by going underneath logic, that is by writing associatively, and thus enlisting my intuition, or uncivilized self. Thus my prose in this book is like poetry, and like poetry always begins with feeling. One of the loudest complaints which this book makes about patriarchal thought (or the thought of civilized man) is that it claims to be objective, and separated from emotion, and so it is appropriate that the style of this book does not make that separation."[43]

Griffin's style, like Hobbes's (and perhaps Sei Shônagon's), is itself an argument, a criticism of other styles she is consciously trying to go "underneath" even though they are associated, variously, with "logic," objectivity and civilization itself. Consider her characterization of the alternative she rejects:

[39]Barker 1975, p. xxxvi.
[40]Von Fritz and Kapp 1950, pp. 6–7, 10–11.
[41]Curley 1994, p. ix.
[42]Johnston 1997, p. 366.
[43]Griffin 1978, p. xv.

> Patriarchal thought . . . represent[s] itself as emotionless (objective, detached and bodiless) . . . This voice rarely uses a personal pronoun, never speaks as 'I' or 'we,' and almost always implies that it has found absolute truth, or at least has the authority to do so. . . . The other voice . . . is an embodied voice, and an impassioned one.[44]

In each case, the choice of a list or list-like form is associated with substantive goals. The two men use it differently than the two women: to get the reader to see from a particular perspective, using an analytical style where wholes are broken into definite parts, and descriptions and definitions are made to appear as simple fact. The women, by contrast, use it to complicate rather than simplify, to tax themselves as writers and their readers, to incorporate feeling rather than make it seem to disappear. But all four authors provide evidence that diverse forms are associated with specific philosophical insights and inquiries, with distinct effects on readers, and with certain topics and goals of inquiry.

XV. THERE IS, THEN, A PROBLEM

There is, then, a problem in limiting political theory to certain forms. The problem goes beyond missing theorizing that exists outside those forms, though it certainly does include that. According to political writers and commentators from Aristotle and Sei Shônagon to Hobbes and Griffin, openness to form is *required* if we want a fuller range of political philosophy, for form *is* associated with content, and disregarding certain methods entails eliminating certain philosophical insights and impacts.

We have perhaps always practiced a modest degree of openness to form in political theory. Especially when engaged in by canonical thinkers, but even for those a ring or two outside center stage, we have indulged or at least overlooked their excursions into non-treatise writings. But very few of those formally adventurous works are rated as highly as ones the same authors wrote in more standard genres and formats, though a few were best sellers in their own day.

Examples of mainstream male theorists using non-traditional forms:

- Epistolary Novel: Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters* (1721); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie* (1761).
- Dialogues: Plato; Rousseau, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques—Dialogues* (1780 & 1782).
- Autobiography: St. Augustine, *The Confessions* (401); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (1781); Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1899).

[44] *Ibid.*, pp. xv–xvi.

- Fable: Machiavelli, *Belfagor: The Devil Who Took a Wife* (composed 1515–1520); Bernard de Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1705).
- Novel: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938), *No Exit* (1944); William Godwin, *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794).
- Essays: William Godwin, *The Enquirer* (1797); Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays* (1928) and *Unpopular Essays* (1950).
- Poetry: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Zarathustra* (1891), sections.
- Short Stories: Sartre, *Intimacy and other Stories* (1938).
- Plays: Machiavelli, *The Mandrake Root,* or *Mandragola* (1515).

Virtually across the board, formally diverse works do not get the attention given works that conform to norms of forms in political theory, regardless of the gender or the reputation of the author. Yet we may be working with incomplete understandings when we ignore these men's less traditional (in form) writings. The problem takes on more dramatic dimensions when everything, or nearly everything, in an author's opus is outside the boundaries; we miss the thought of many women entirely. They have two strikes against them. If an author is female, beyond the borders of accepted form, and in addition non-western, like Sei Shônagon, she is likely out.

Disinterest in or disdain for non-traditional forms of political theorizing alone does not explain why we have disregarded women theorists, for many have written in forms that are more traditional.

Among the innumerable historical examples of women using traditional forms of political and philosophical writing:

- Treatise: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); Catherine Macaulay, *Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783); Harriet Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851); Aisha Ismat Al-Taimuriya, *The Mirror of Contemplation on Things* (1892?); Matilda Gage, *Woman, Church and State* (1893); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898).
- Political Pamphlet: Catherine Macaulay, *Loose Remarks on Certain Positions to be Found in Mr. Hobbes's 'Philosophical Rudiments of Government and Society'* (1767) and *Short Sketch of a Democratic Form of Government in a Letter to Signor Paoli* (1769).
- Utopias/Dystopias/Satires: Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World* (1655); Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* (1905); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1925).

But according to the arguments here, we need to do more than look past form—we need to understand what diverse forms are capable of grasping, asking, teaching and expressing (Gardner 2000).

XVI. THE HEGEMONY OF PATRIARCHAL THOUGHT

"The hegemony of patriarchal thought in Western civilization is not due to its superiority over all other thought; it rests upon the systematic silencing of other voices. Women of all classes, men of different races, ethnicities, or religions, and the vast majority of laboring people were kept out of the intellectual discourse." One of the ways of maintaining that hegemony is through the politics of form. "I think we need to be sensitive to the possibility that women's thought, just like women's art, would find different modes of expression than would men's."[45]

The justice claim I am most interested in here is that limiting theory to certain forms systematically silences *particular* voices. Tuana declares that "if we are to accurately understand women's contributions to philosophy, then we must foreground the venues in which women pursued philosophical inquiry."[46] Her claim is that women utilized different "venues," that what took place in those venues constitutes "philosophical inquiry," and that we have not looked in the right places, leading us to erroneous calculations of "women's contributions to philosophy" and, therefore, to a partial history of philosophy.

Reasons women might have for choosing/using different forms from those employed by men:

- Different educations;
- Different publishing opportunities;
- Less focused on the abstract, impersonal, "the impartial, the coolly reasoned . . . the universally applicable";[47]
- "More intimate, more personal, more particular",[48] concrete;
- Attracts different, desired readers. Lists and diaries would seem to be especially accessible, inviting forms;
- Philosophic writing in traditional forms deemed especially inappropriate for women;
- Evokes different, desired responses in hoped-for readers;
- Traditional forms set unwanted boundaries for philosophical investigation; and
- Diaries invite personal opinions that can guide readers to specific conclusions.

Patricia Hill Collins claims that "Reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals."[49] Gerda Lerner supports this approach: "Yes, there have been great women philosophers . . . To find them we have to stop looking for women in the male model. We have to be willing to look at small-scale work, at messages delivered

[45]Lerner 2000, pp. 7, 11.
[46]Tuana 2004, p. 66.
[47]Gardner 2000, p. 1.
[48]*Ibid.*
[49]Collins 1990, p. 14.

'slant,' as Emily Dickinson said. We have to look at partial attempts, at aborted insights, at *women searching for new forms of expression*."[50]

This last idea—of women consciously seeking alternative forms in which to express their ideas—is especially intriguing. Consider, for example, the "formally experimental" writings of Margaret Cavendish. Frequently she "assembles a collection of short prose pieces and poetry . . . signal[ing] her concerted expansion into other prose genres." *Nature's Pictures,* Kate Lilley writes, "is Cavendish's most ambitious and copious generic experiment, including moral fables, romance novella ('Assaulted and Pursued Chastity'), fictionalized treatise ('The She Anchoret'), and the autobiographical memoir, 'A True Relation.'" Substantively, Lilley considers that these experiments with form are linked to the fact that Cavendish's "imagination . . . is most engaged by that which troubles or resists categorization," and are linked, as well, to the resulting fact that she, like Sei Shônagon, "has disturbed commentators."[51]

Forms used by significant numbers of past women political thinkers:

- Poetry: Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude* (1403); Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies* (1653); Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, *First Dream* (1685); Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773); Frances Harper, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854); Warda al-Yaziji, *The Rose Garden* (1867).
- Essays: Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787); Margaret Fuller, *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846); Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (1892); Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (1910).
- Novels: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy* (1892); George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); Germaine de Staël, *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne, or Italy* (1807); Harriet E. Adams Wilson, *Our Nig* (1859).
- Letters: Abigail Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762–1784* (1975); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796); Sarah Grimké, *An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States* (1836) and *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838); Emma Goldman, *Nowhere at Home: Letters from Exile of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman* (1975).
- Biographies: Mary Hays, *Female Biography, or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (6 vols, 1803); Lucy Parsons and Martin Lacher, *The Life of Albert R. Parsons* (1889); Zainab Fawwaz, *Pearls Scattered Throughout the Women's Quarters* (1894/5); Hannah

[50]Lerner 2000, p. 11 (emphasis added).
[51]Lilley 1992, pp. x–xii.

Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* (written in 1933, published in 1957); Jane Addams, *My Friend, Julia Lathrop* (1935).

- Allegory: Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405); Aisha Ismat al-Taimuriya, *The Results of Circumstances in Words and Deeds* (1887/8); Olive Schreiner, *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923).
- Autobiography: Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography: With Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman* (1877); Josephine Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir* (1893); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More* (1898); Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (1914); Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (2 vols, 1931); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935).
- Speeches: Frances Wright, *Course of Popular Lectures* (2 vols 1829–1836); Lucy Parsons, *The Famous Speeches* (1909).
- Travel Books: Nancy Gardener Prince, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850); Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838).
- Plays: Margaret Cavendish, *Plays* (1662); Aphra Behn, *The Amorous Prince* (1671) and *The Rover* (1677); Sor Juana, *The Trials of a Household* (1683) and *The Greater Labyrinth Is Love* (1689); Olympe de Gouges, *Black Slavery, or The Happy Shipwreck* (1789); Judith Sargent Murray, *The Medium, or Virtue Triumphant* (1795) and *The Traveller Returned* (1796); Frances Wright, *Altorf* (1822).
- Newspapers/Journals (as editors or major authors): Emma Goldman, *Mother Earth*; Margaret Fuller, *The Dial*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Forerunner,* Hind Nawfal, *Al-Fatah;* Amelia Bloomer, *The Lily*; Margaret Sanger, *Woman Rebel*; Frances Wright, *Free Enquirer*.
- Children's Literature: Lydia Maria Child, *Evenings in New England* (1824); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories* (1791).
- Dialogue: Margaret Cavendish, *Orations* (1662); Frances Wright, *Athens* (1822).
- Advice Books: Lydia Maria Child, *The Frugal Housewife* (1829) and *The Mother's Book* (1831); Catharine Macaulay, *Letters on Education* (1790).

In addition, Collins suggests looking at "the everyday ideas of Black women" and to "musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists" as well as "political activists."[52]

XVII. THE OPENING LIST

The opening list in *The Pillow Book* is among its most famous. Sei Shônagon describes what it is in each season "that is most beautiful." Her list includes

[52]Collins 1990, p. 15.

the different lights of sun or moon, the colors on specific objects, the precipitation, sounds, acts and animals (fireflies in summer, crows and geese in autumn) at particular times of day in each season, and emotions associated with them ("how beautiful it is," "more charming still," "one's heart is moved"). She teaches here the appreciation of virtues and beauty in differing contexts. She demonstrates openness to surroundings and exquisite powers of observation. She finds in every season, perhaps in everything, distinctiveness and the positive, even in supposed opposites. Her scenes are full of movement, testimony, processes, rather than frozen moments, and her categories retain a certain fluidity, as when she notes variety within as well as between seasons. In the scenes she paints, the beauty of the world is available to every person, not only an intellectual or political elite, for it lives in the shapes of clouds and formations of birds. Everyone can recognize the scenes, everyone can learn from them about beauty, difference, change, the connection between heart and eye.

XVIII. THESE APPROACHES

These approaches are reminiscent of those Sara Ruddick develops in "Maternal Thinking" (1986), in which she discusses "a mothers *thought*—the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms."[53] In particular, one of the interests she claims governs or is elicited by mothering is an interest in fostering growth. Like Sei Shônagon's seasons, "A child is itself an 'open structure' whose acts are irregular, unpredictable, often mysterious." Perhaps the world looks different to one who must "expect change [and] change with change" daily and in evolving personalities. As Ruddick describes it, "Change requires a kind of learning in which what one learns cannot be applied exactly, often not even by analogy, to a new situation. If science agrees to take as real the reliable results of *repeatable* experiments, its learning will be different in kind from maternal learning." Further, "if we attend to maternal practices, we can develop new ways of studying learning that are appropriate to the changing natures of all people and communities, for it is not only children who change, grow, and need help in growing." Ruddick's book can be linked to Sei Shônagon's practices and theorizing, with their open structure, connections and "priz[ing]of the private inner lives of the mind."[53] It may be that both reflect a gendered way of being in the world, that both link one's personal life with intellectual insight, both focus on what moves and changes in their world.

[53]Ruddick 1986, pp. 372–3.

XIX. THERE IS NO ESSENTIAL CONNECTION

"[T]here is no essential connection . . . between form and sex."[54] There *is*, however, an historical connection. "Women's lives differ systematically and structurally from those of men," with "epistemological consequences," among others. Varying over time and across cultures, the sexual division of labor has wide and deep ramifications, touching our relationships with others, with nature, and with material life. Sei Shônagon's lists contain examples from her time—including gendered languages, different employment, and different leisure activities—of the sorts of sexual divisions that turn gender into "a world-view structuring experience."[55]

It is empty, if not disingenuous, to say that there have been no women political thinkers because there have been none that wrote in forms used by men of the canon. Not only have some women done just that, so too have many men experimented with form, using some forms more common to women. But using form as a narrow criterion of whether or not a work constitutes or contributes to theory is a practice that disproportionately discriminates against women, as the long—and still dramatically incomplete—list of women's writings outside the norms of forms shows. Similarly, it discriminates without justification against certain models of and insights from philosophy. The exclusion of certain forms is neither value-neutral nor objective; it "can be traced back to the male bias in . . . the dominant model of moral philosophy."[56]

XX. WHAT LISTS CAN CONTRIBUTE

What lists can contribute, in Sei Shônagon's work as a whole, is as diverse as the subject matter of the lists themselves. A short list, "Different Ways of Speaking" makes visible how language varies by profession, sex and class. It invites readers to consider the political causes and epistemological consequences of these differences. The list of "Depressing Things" does more than point out personal pet peeves; instead, it makes visible poignant moments in life ("a lying-in room when the baby has died"), everyday cruelties ("an ox-driver who hates his oxen"), and contemporary biases ("a scholar whose wife has one girl child after another"). It almost defines disappointment and distress using examples from personal relationships to political appointments that open connections and point to parallels between them. If Hobbes gives definitions without many examples to expand or test them, Sei Shônagon does the opposite, presenting a range of examples that leaves readers to explore what, for example, they have in common.

The list of "Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster" contains much variety of both positive and negative examples, leading to questions about the

[54]Gardner 2000, p. 3.
[55]Hartsock 2003, p. 292.
[56]Gardner 2000, pp. 4, 5.

nature of human emotions and mind/body connections. The list uses examples from the animal world, sensory experiences, and personal relationships. "Unsuitable Things" is about norms specific to people of a certain age or class, and shows both the endless minutia that give voice to such social differences and their presumed importance. Again diverse hierarchies are forefront, allowing inquiry into their sources, functions and consequences. "Pleasing Things" shows pleasure to be intellectual, emotional and social, mischievous, fleeting and egotistical, and related to other emotions from envy to relief.

Repeatedly, in *The Pillow Book,* the boundaries of accepted form seen in the discipline's "great works" are ignored. Again and again, distinctions between public and private are blurred, and each is used to illuminate the other. The politics of the everyday are incorporated, context is emphasized, diversity is recognized, change is assumed, and connections between the apparently disparate are announced. Sei Shônagon's *Pillow Book*, long recognized as a literary masterpiece, should be among the works reconsidered by political theorists precisely because of what its form reveals. We should see what we've been missing.

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