

Teaching Materials

Teaching Strategies

The classical Heian-period primary sources excerpted here constitute the earliest full-length forms of women's writing known in the globe. This fact is so striking that modern readers must endeavor to discover why and how women wrote, what sociopolitical circumstances enabled their literary production. Clearly women authors like Sei Shônagon and Murasaki Shikibu were highly educated, which leads us to reflect upon the important role of education in women's lives and achievements. We must ask why, considering that it has not always been a priority in premodern world history, it was considered important for Japanese women in the Heian period. Since these women authors were members of the court aristocracy (albeit the middle or lower-middle rungs of it), should we conclude that social class was a dominant enabling factor for their writing? Literacy, the ability to read and write, has ever been a prerequisite for respectable membership in the upper classes in East Asia.

The situation for Heian women's education was also influenced by gender difference and segregation. Women of the aristocracy were kept away from the public gaze after puberty and even after marriage; the only males allowed to see them directly were their fathers, husbands, and children. Lovers in illicit relationships could only come at night, which did not guarantee a visual knowledge of each other. This is not to say that women had no social life, only that male visitors were required to converse with them through a portable wood-framed barrier of curtain panels.

Did the fact of gender segregation encourage the apparent promiscuity of letters and poems exchanged between the sexes and the plot of the Heian love story, which inevitably begins with the stolen glimpse of a lady as the inciting force? Again, it is striking to note that there are no very explicit descriptions of a woman's face and body in Heian writing. Not even from the women writers themselves, who resided in close quarters with other women at court. On the contrary, it is the breeding, education, cultural training, sensitivity, and character revealed by a woman's speech, writing, poetry, music, behavior, and so on that are used to describe her.

In this segregated milieu, a woman's identity was a construct, an affect or effect inscribed by her culture as filtered through her correspondence and other people's impressions of her. Thus writing was a woman's vital link to others outside her immediate circle. Where she was not seen, she could be heard or read.

Much has been made of the Heian gender difference in education. (See Introduction.) Males were formally schooled in the Academy (Daigaku) with a curriculum consisting of the Chinese classics in the fields of philosophy, ethics, ritual, and letters or literature, including poetry and history. Females did not need such schooling but they had to be proficient in Japanese (as distinct from Chinese) writing and reading, poetry, and music. Were women deprived of opportunities due to their confinement to the sphere of the Japanese language? Would their minds and their writing have gained in scale and profundity had they been trained in the Chinese classics?

Here we must consider that intellectually curious women like Murasaki Shikibu did not

allow social and gender conventions to keep them from reading Chinese. This is clear from her writing. Yet, we must ask how even richer Heian writing would have been had women been schooled, as a matter of course, in the philosophical and ethical issues raised in the Chinese classics. And more to the point, how their social position would have been legitimized by such schooling. The ambivalence with which learning (i.e., Chinese learning) in a woman was viewed is evident in Murasaki's comic depiction of it in one of the excerpts here.

And finally, is it not one of the ironic effects of history that it was the women, deprived of a formal Chinese education, who pioneered what would later be recognized as the distinctly Japanese literary tradition? And women who, in their concern for the private and personal—family and kinship ties, love relationships, the details of a lived life, self-introspection—produced such revealing portraits of an age so far removed from ours yet so close in their similar concerns.

Discussion Questions:

- In what way do questions raised by Sei Shônagon in her *Pillowbook* indicate a proto-feminist attitude? For example, analyze her defense of service at court as lady-in-waiting, which may be considered a career for the upper- and middle-class women of the Heian period. What does she see as its advantages over the ordinary role of housewife? Consider also, in this connection, Sei's admiration for high office and apparent envy of the fact that almost all offices were reserved for males. Note her apparent pride in the praise her poetry receives from some male courtiers, and their inability to top off her lines. Do her attitudes reveal an awareness of the weak position of women in Heian society and a desire for greater gender equality?
- One of the many reasons why the Heian period is important for Japanese cultural history is because its poetry, collected in the court-commissioned anthology *Kokin Wakashu* (compiled c. 905 C.E.), became the model for poetic forms and themes in all the subsequent centuries. The most distinctive characteristic of Heian poetry is that in it, nature becomes a language, at once vast and minute, for the expression of human feeling. And it is this poetic sensibility, assimilated into the prose descriptions and narratives of women's writing, that becomes associated with a distinctively Japanese literature. Sharpen students' understanding of the women writers' attitude to nature by articulating how time is of the essence in this awareness, how it is the temporal perspective that is the basis of evocations of light, color, temperature, tactility, etc., in Sei's nature descriptions—time grasped as the succession of the seasons, or as the hour of the day and its changing atmospheric manifestations in natural phenomena and places. Speculate on how the possession of such an awareness can become, as it did become, a kind of index of one's membership in a certain class, and later of one's belonging to a certain people, the Japanese.
- Is it feasible to discuss female desire on the basis of women's writing? Reflect on whether or not women, in the Heian period or other times and places before our own, are free to explicitly reveal their desires. Might Sei Shônagon be exceptional

in her candid (some would say opinionated) expression of her likes and dislikes? When it comes to love, a theme commonly associated with women's writing, does she seem more interested in the way it is conducted rather than the sincerity of feeling? Or is it precisely the way the lover behaves that indicates his seriousness? Is courtesy, the observation of etiquette and good manners, as important as unadulterated feeling? Why? Is it possible that ritual and etiquette are more advantageous for women than not? Given her sense of gender rivalry, is Sei perhaps more interested in the power balance (or imbalance) in gender relations than in questions of love? Is desire for recognition of one's authority an acceptable female desire?

- The *Tale of Genji* thematizes in great detail what men desire in women early on in the novel, in the section called "rainy night disquisition on the types of women." In discussing this section, it is important to note that the point of view represented is solely male, since there is not a single female participant in the conversation. Except, that is, for the author-narrator, the woman writer representing the male, which one may assume is the orthodox view. Thus, it is useful to adopt a certain irony when reading this passage, to point out in what way this irony, though very subtle, is indicated. If one reads the *Genji* itself, it will be evident that the female characteristics laid out here are foregrounded in the subsequent stories of various heroines, and that there is an implicit protest against the objectification of women by typecasting them in this way. Would it be fair to say that the men reveal their egoism in considering only their own desires and not that of the women also? Articulate the logical relation between male authority, whether verbal or sociopolitical, and female self-denial.
- Use the excerpt from the *Sarashina Diary* to discuss the apparent attraction, even seductiveness, of women-authored fiction and stories evoking the feminine imaginary as against the moral, didactic stories in religious literature like the *Lotus Sutra*. Read the fifth volume of the sutra to discover how the female body is represented in one of the major Buddhist canonical texts. Consider Heian women's writing as "subaltern" literature in relation to the Confucian and Buddhist canons.
- Analyze the reasons for the ambivalence some women apparently felt about Chinese learning based on the excerpts from *The Tale of Genji* and the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary*. Note the existence of a hierarchical gender difference in writing: Chinese writing was considered male and learned and Japanese writing female and graceful. Consider Murasaki Shikibu's discomfort with becoming the subject of gossip due to her interest in the Chinese classics within the context of this ideological gender divide. Relate it to the comic parodic treatment of the learned woman in the *Genji* and Murasaki's anecdote in the *Diary* about her early proficiency in the Chinese classics compared to her brother.
- What are the disadvantages, from a woman's perspective, of the Heian marriage practice of polygamy (*ippu tazai*, one husband to many wives) or polygyny?

Speculate on why jealousy or sexual anger seems to be considered the gravest fault in a woman. In reading the excerpt about Lady Rokujō in the *Genji*, note how the author delves into Rokujō's psychology of mingled pride and shame, the public loss of dignity she suffers as the widow of a crown prince in love with Genji, who is married to another woman, Aoi, and has no apparent intentions of making Rokujō one of his wives.

Lesson Plan: An Intimate Glimpse: Lives of Court Women in Japan

Time Estimate

Two to three 90-minute class periods and DBQ as an independent assignment.

Objectives

After completing this lesson students will be able to:

1. compare how ancient women from China and Japan functioned in a patriarchal society.
2. discuss the insights to court life that Heian woman writers described in their writings.
3. identify some reasons that women of the Heian era used writing to express themselves within a patriarchal framework.
4. read and analyze primary source documents and pictures.
5. work in small groups to discuss different perspectives and points of view.

Materials

- Sufficient copies of Ban Zhao. “Lessons for a Woman”
- Sufficient copies of Writers of the Heian Era Introduction for a homework assignment
- Sufficient copies of the following sources:
 - Source 2: Diary, Sei Shônagon 2
 - Source 3: Diary, Sei Shônagon 3
 - Source 4: Diary, Sei Shônagon 4
 - Source 5: Fiction, The Tale of Genji 1
 - Source 6: Fiction, The Tale of Genji 2
 - Source 7: Diary, Lady Sarashina
- Sufficient copies of Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Texts
- Color transparencies of Source 8: Painting, Tale of Genji Scroll 1 and Source 9: Painting, Tale of Genji Scroll 2. (Or, use a projector to show it from the website, if available).

Strategies

DAY 1:

- **Hook (15 minutes):** Students generate a list of characteristics that they think were expected of ancient Asian women (both Chinese and Japanese). Students share responses and generated list on the board.
 - How does this compare with the expectations of women in society today?
 - What were some of the institutional structures that may have been placed on women that limited their roles in society?

- **In-Class Reading (45 minutes):** Pass out copies of Ban Zhao's "Lesson for a Woman." Compare the characteristics expected of women with those that students generated on the board. Ask students:
 - Are there characteristics that should be added/taken away?
 - Were there any characteristics you were surprised about after reading Ban Zhao?
 - What do you know about Ban Zhao that may influence what she is writing?
 - Emphasize that the issue of authorship (especially the fact that Zhao was a woman) is important when examining this document, and also that texts of this era were largely prescriptive and not necessarily descriptive of people's actual behaviors at the time.
 - Use questions five, six, and eight on the bottom of the primary source document website for other discussion points for the handout.
- **Lecture (20-30 minutes):** On Confucian system and patriarchy in China: This is to provide a solid basis of understanding for students, especially if they have not yet studied the Confucian system. If students have already studied Confucianism, the lecture may serve to provide an application of Confucianism as a system of patriarchy in China and later in Japan. The introduction of Confucianism and Chinese government bureaucracy to Japan by the 8th century put into place a new patriarchal structure that kept women from active political involvement. Even so, Japanese women still had access to education and maintained some of their rights from the pre-Heian period. Some of this information may be taken from the sources listed in the Additional Resources below.
- **Homework:** Assign background reading from the Writers of the Heian Era Introduction and have students research additional details about the pre-Heian era to bring to class in order for them to understand the change of women's roles and power.

DAY 2:

- **Share (5 minutes):** Have students share their findings about pre-Heian era women. What have they uncovered about how women held power prior to the Heian period? Raise the question and have students brainstorm: What caused Japanese women to lose their power?
- **Discussion (10 minutes):** Questions to generate discussion:
 - Why was there such a major shift in women's role in Japanese society

from pre-Heian to Heian Era?

- What is the role Confucianism played?
- Is the writing by Heian court women a vestige of the pre-Heian power or can it be viewed as an outlet for the new limitations placed upon women?

This could be set up in a Socratic seminar format to allow students to delve more deeply into the shift of power for Japanese women. Bring in the issues surrounding the integration of Confucianism into Japanese society, and make direct references to Ban Zhao's excerpt discussed in the previous day's class.

- **Small Group Work (40 - 45 minutes):** Break up the class into small groups of three to four students. Each group can be assigned to take a closer look at a set of documents, such as Source 2: Diary, Sei Shônagon 2 and Source 3: Diary, Sei Shônagon 3, and Source 4: Diary, Sei Shônagon 4 and Source 7: Diary, Lady Sarashina, and Source 5: Fiction, The Tale of Genji 1 and Source 6: Fiction, The Tale of Genji 2. Each group should fill out the Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Texts for each source. Then, jigsaw the student groups for them to share their findings with each other. After the jigsaw, what conclusions can they draw about Heian court life? What is the role of women and what limitations were placed on them?

Alternative: Hand out Source 2 through Source 7. Have students read individually through all the documents and fill out only one Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Texts for each source in small groups of two to three students.

- **Optional: Visual Supplement (10 minutes):** Use the paintings from Source 8: Painting, Tale of Genji Scroll 1 and Source 9: Painting, Tale of Genji Scroll 2 on an overhead or projector that depicts scenes from *The Tale of Genji* for students to get a sense of the gender segregation and strictures of court life. Use prompts from Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Images verbally to help students break down the different parts of the visual and to discuss the overall meaning of the paintings. Highlight the specific unique aspects of these Japanese scroll paintings, such as the multi-colored silk robes, what activities the women are engaged in, and the separation of gender through the use of screens and what that may reveal about court life.

- Other questions could include:

- What other aspects of court life (in reference to the primary sources they have just read) do you see reflected in these paintings?
- Do the paintings show a Japanese concept of patriarchy, or do they

show something different?

- **Debriefing (20 - 25 minutes):** Go over the responses that students came up with on the Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Text as a class. Have students from different jigsaw groups respond to the various questions. What was their response to the earlier discussion question and has it changed now that they have read and processed the primary sources? (Is women's writing a vestige of the pre-Heian power of women or can it be viewed as an outlet for their new oppression?)

Compare these sources with Ban Zhao's source. What differences do they see in how Japanese women are portrayed? What were the different audiences of Ban Zhao and the Heian novelists, and how does that change what is being portrayed?

Through debriefing, have students break down the differences between the use of diaries and the use of fiction to depict the lives of court women, and why either form of writing was acceptable in this new system of patriarchy. How would the Heian women react to Ban Zhao's "Lessons for Women"?

- **Homework:** DBQ essay assignment. If there is time left over allow students to work on an outline/tentative thesis.

Differentiation

Advanced Students: Have student research Nu Shu, the women's writing of China and make comparisons with the Heian woman writers (use of *hiragana* vs. *kanji*, etc.). Using the Heian women writers as the comparative anchor, have students research other societies to see if there are instances of special women's literature or literary styles throughout history and do comparison charts and presentations in class of their findings.

Less Advanced Students: Help students understand what they are reading by creating a vocabulary list, and/or using even shorter excerpts of the primary source articles rather than entire excerpts. Preparation for the DBQ should be done in class—both tentative thesis and outline, done in small groups with direction from the teacher. These alternatives would require an additional day of instruction.

Additional Resources:

Bingham, Marjorie Wall and Susan Hill Gross. *Women in Japan*. St. Louis Park, MN: Glenhurst Publications, 1987.

The relevant chapters used were "Women ad Confucian Principles – Triple Obedience and Filial Piety" and "Women Writers of the Heian Age – A 'Blazing Fire.'" Bingham and Gross give a historical background on Confucian principles and the Heian era through their use of excerpts of primary sources related to those topics.

Hooker, Richard. "Ancient Japan." 1996. Washington State University.

<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/CONTENTS.HTM>

This website provides a solid background on imperial Japan, both in the pre-Heian era and during the Heian period. Hooker also gives summaries about Japanese female communities and about Japanese literature, which include the Heian women writers.

Hughes, Sarah S. and Brady Hughes, eds. “China and Japan: The Patriarchal Ideal” in *Women in World History: Readings in Prehistory to 1500 (Vol. 1)*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997.

The two volumes of this series are a great primary source resource for teachers who want to focus more on women’s roles in different time periods of world history. This chapter provide a little background about how Confucian concept of patriarchy was applied in the China and Japan and gives several primary sources about women from both societies.

CNN’s Millennium, Episode 1, Segment 2: “The Century of the Sword.” Website overview of the video series: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/millennium/>

There is approximately 10 minutes from Sei Shonagon’s Pillow Book, that dramatically shows a Japanese court woman putting on her layers of silk garments and highlights some of the restrictions of court life.

Document Based Question (Suggested writing time: 40 minutes)

Directions: The following question is based on the documents included in this module. This question is designed to test your ability to work with and understand historical documents. Write an essay that:

- Has a relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents.
- Uses all or all but one of the documents.
- Analyzes the documents by grouping them in as many appropriate ways as possible. Does not simply summarize the documents individually.
- Takes into account both the sources of the documents and the authors' points of view.
- You may refer to relevant historical information not mentioned in the documents.

Question: What do the sources in this module reveal about Japanese court life and the limitations placed upon women? How did Japanese women from the Heian period overcome these limitations?

Be sure to analyze point of view in at least three documents.

What additional sources, types of documents, or information would you need to have a more complete view of this topic?

Bibliography

Bowring, Richard. *Murasaki Shikibu: The Tale of Genji*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

A more up-to-date and concise introduction to the *Genji* than Morris. It concentrates on the work itself, including thematic summaries of the chapters, commentaries on its language and style, and the work's impact, influence, and reception. Particularly interesting is the account of the medieval stories of Murasaki's falling to hell and of the dedication of sutras to save her soul.

Kamens, Edward, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Murasaki Shikibu's The Tale of Genji*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993.

Part One, Materials, written by Kamens, is a highly useful account of the *Genji* texts and translations, visual illustrations, sources on the author Murasaki Shikibu, and the available secondary literature on the work. Part Two, Approaches, are articles by Japanese literature scholars describing how they teach the *Genji* from various angles. This is a good resource also for the non-specialist wishing to teach Heian women's writing in high school or college.

McCullough, William H. "Marriage Institutions in the Heian Period." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. (27:1967), 103-167.

The most scholarly account of actual marriage practices in the Heian period, based on historical evidence; the discussion of the distinctive marriage arrangement in which the wife and her children remain with her natal family while the husband visits regularly is particularly illuminating.

Morris, Ivan. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964; Oxford University Press.

As the title indicates, this is a highly informative book on the Heian cultural practices and beliefs which constitute the context for the *Tale of Genji*, *The Pillowbook of Sei Shônagon*, and other women's writing of the period.