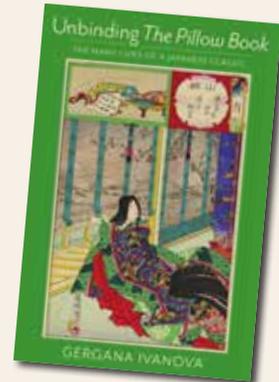


BOOK REVIEW

Unbinding The Pillow Book: The Many Lives of a Japanese Classic

By Gergana Ivanova

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xi + 226 pages.



Reviewed by Gouranga Charan PRADHAN

Gergana Ivanova's *Unbinding The Pillow Book: The Many Lives of a Japanese Classic* is a welcome addition to a small but growing body of scholarship focusing on the Benjaminian “afterlives” of Japanese literary classics. “Afterlives” remains nevertheless a bad translation of the German terms *Überleben/fortleben* that Walter Benjamin uses in his essay. In my understanding, Ivanova's is only the second book-length study on *The Pillow Book* in English-language scholarship, and it follows Valerie Henitiuk's *Worlding Sei Shônagon: The Pillow Book in Translation* (2012). However, the comparison between these two books ends there. For Henitiuk's book focuses on the complexities involved in the global circulation of literature through translation by directing her investigation toward a single passage from *The Pillow Book*. Her examination of almost fifty translated versions in as many as sixteen European languages shows the extent of the “worlding” of the work. In contrast, Ivanova pays closer attention to the classic's reception history in Japan starting from the latter half of the Edo period through to the present day.

Ivanova's narrative approach is similar to Joshua S. Mostow's *Courtly Visions: The Ise Stories and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation* (2014) and Michael Emmerich's *The Tale of Genji: Translation, Canonization, and World Literature* (2013), which she duly acknowledges in the introductory chapter. As with Mostow and Emmerich's seminal works, Ivanova does a great service to the scholarship of *The Pillow Book*. This study is noteworthy not simply because it explores hitherto unknown areas about the work's reception history. It is equally crucial for adding critical perspectives to gender and sexuality in premodern Japan, and to studies on Japanese literary genres, canonization, and translation. By covering around four centuries of the work's textual reception and its shifting social functions over centuries, Ivanova deals with one of the most perplexing questions that have caught literary scholars' attention for decades: What exactly constitutes the so-called untainted “original” classical literary work? What, after all, is *The Pillow Book*?

Ivanova sets out to answer this question in her book. The volume consists of six thematically arranged chapters. The first chapter outlines the frameworks and objectives of the study: that is, to “deconstruct the constructed nature of Japanese women's literary works with the stubbornly unchanging image of their authors” (p. 15), the ultimate objective being to “release the work and its author from the fetters into which they have been forced,

specifically *The Pillow Book* as a *zuihitsu* (miscellany) and the image of Sei as the boastful female writer” (p. 14). Instead of engaging in a futile attempt to pursue an unknowable unmediated original, she focuses rather on the work’s derivatives as they open a window to the reader’s “imagined” literary past, and offer clues about the work’s social functions. The introductory chapter thus serves as a platform upon which the remaining chapters are developed. The second chapter studies three complete commentaries of *The Pillow Book* produced during the Edo era, and exposes the arbitrary manner in which the authors selected multiple manuscripts and categorized the contents to facilitate reading. This chance categorization resulted in the work being labeled a *zuihitsu*, thus disregarding the work’s reception plurality.

One of the work’s multiple imageries is its eroticization; this is explored extensively in the following two chapters. The Edo era appropriation of the work as a guidebook to the pleasure quarters may appear as mere parody, but Ivanova convincingly shows its social function: a strategy to subvert the established notions of class and social identity imposed by the state. The popular opinion of Sei Shōnagon, combined with the work’s perceived didactic contents, facilitated *The Pillow Book*’s usage by Edo era women as a tool for potential social upward mobility not only in familial settings but also in the pleasure quarters. The work’s adaptations in the form of picture books, sex manuals, and letter-writing textbooks were all directed towards the female audience which shows its gendered interpretations mediated by the author’s constructed historical images. Popular as well as scholarly attention to Sei Shōnagon’s femininity continues to reverberate to the present day, as Ivanova discusses in the last two chapters. Ivanova contends, through the examination of the recent comical adaptations and translations into girlish slang, that while premodern adoption of the work for imbuing feminine ideals is no longer persuasive, its association with femininity persists. In fact, this image of Sei Shōnagon as amorous and sexually unrestrained has now been proliferated beyond Japan as evidenced by the recent cinematic and novel adaptations of the work in foreign languages. Ivanova deserves commendations for presenting this new perspective on gender and sexuality in premodern Japan through the work’s literary analysis.

The vast scope of this study is both its strength and weakness. Ivanova’s treatment of the work’s reception history starting from the early Edo era through to the present day makes it clear that labeling the work a *zuihitsu* was facilitated by the absence of an authoritative manuscript which resulted in further textual hybridity by Edo-era male interpreters. It is precisely this generic fluidity of *zuihitsu* which allowed the clubbing together of *The Pillow Book*, *Tsurezuregusa*, and *Hōjōki* into this category despite the striking differences in their contents. There is no doubt that this study, as the blurb on the back cover claims, successfully “elucidates the complex reception of the text as an ongoing dialogue between the irretrievable past and the dynamic present.” Concurrently, the cosmic scope of the study precludes a detailed treatment of the work’s presence in contemporary society. In fact, Ivanova’s eagerness to convince us of the work’s continuing association with a female readership since the eighteenth century perhaps led her to add the last chapter of the book, the content of which is not only marginal but also insufficient. Even chapter 5, where she examines the work’s Meiji-era reception, is mostly restricted to academia with little discussion of the work’s social functions. Rather than relying on academic readings, an analysis of a broader range of resources like magazines, newspapers, and other nonacademic

works would surely have provided fresh perspectives on the work's social roles. In any case, we look forward to more studies from Ivanova on the work's modern reception patterns, especially Sei Shōnagon's visual representations in contemporary popular culture.

As usual with studies of this nature, Ivanova greatly relies on secondary sources for her explications. However, its broad scope is indeed what helps in clarifying the constructed nature of *The Pillow Book's* femininity, for which Ivanova merits the highest praise. The book, which is extensively noted and comprises a comprehensive bibliography—constituting a quarter of the book—will surely be of immense help to both graduate students and scholars interested in literary reception across disciplines.

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