

RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI
NUOVA SERIE

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SAPIENZA UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA
ISTITUTO ITALIANO DI STUDI ORIENTALI

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REFERENCE MANUALS
FOR YOUNG LADIES-IN-WAITING:
A COMPARISON OF THE *MURASAKI SHIKIBU DIARY*
AND THE *LETTER OF ABUTSU*

CAROLINA NEGRI

The nature of the epistolary genre was revealed to me: a form of writing devoted to another person. Novels, poems, and so on, were texts into which others were free to enter, or not. Letters, on the other hand, did not exist without the other person, and their very mission, their significance, was the epiphany of the recipient.

AMÉLIE NOTHOMB, *Une forme de vie*

The paper focuses on the comparison between two works written for women's education in ancient Japan: The *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* (the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary*, early 11th century) and the *Abutsu no fumi* (the *Letter of Abutsu*, 1263). Like many literary documents produced in the Heian (794-1185) and in the Kamakura (1185-1333) periods they describe the hard life in the service of aristocratic figures and the difficulty of managing relationships with other people. Both are intended to show women what positive effects might arise from sharing certain examples of good conduct and at the same time, the inevitable negative consequences on those who rejected them.

KEYWORDS: *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, *Abutsu no fumi*, ladies-in-waiting, letters, women's education

1. "THE EPISTOLARY PART" OF THE *MURASAKI SHIKIBU DIARY*

SCHOLARS are in agreement on the division of the contents of *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* (the *Murasaki Shikibu Diary*, early 11th century) into four distinct parts. The first, in the style of a diary (or an official record), presents events from autumn 1008 to the following New Year, focusing on the birth of the future heir to the throne, Prince Atsuhira (1008-1036). The second, starting from the words *kono tsuideni* ("after that"), called *shōsokobumi no bubun* ("the epistolary part"), is a kind of long epistle addressed to an anonymous recipient, or perhaps more than one (a hypothesis not to be discarded given the ambiguity of the classical Japanese language), providing a wealth of information about the ladies of Fujiwara no Shōshi's (988-1074), the daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1028). The third, called *dankanteki kiji* ("fragmentary passages"), starts with the opening words *jūichinichi no akatsuki* ("at the dawn of the eleventh day"). It is written in a more uneven style and consists of pas-

sages (with no precise time reference) describing a religious ceremony followed by an evening's entertainment at the residence of Tsuchimikado, and several exchanges of poetry among court figures. The fourth and last part takes up once more the chronicle-like style of the first, speaking of events that occurred around 1010. It closes unexpectedly in the midst of a description of a ceremony to celebrate the birth of Prince Atsunaga (1009-1045), Shōshi's second son (Harada 1991: 182-183).

Over the years, the literature has offered a variety of interpretations regarding the second part of the diary that we discuss here as a section specifically devoted to young ladies-in-waiting. These interpretations not only regard the content, but also its apparently intrusion in Murasaki Shikibu's work. Given that the surviving manuscripts, all dating from the Edo period (1603-1867), are the result of the work of several copyists who contributed over time to a sort of "textual stratification", altering the original content through their personal and creative contribution, it would not be altogether imprudent to consider the "epistolary part" a *zannyū*, i.e., an entry made in error (or deliberately) by one of them. In this interpretative vein, a number of studies have emerged since the Meiji era (1868-1912) presenting evidence to support the theory that the letter represents an intrusion, as its content and style are quite different from the other sections of the work (Tabuchi 2011: 486-487). Only in recent years – partly because it is now customary to insert the "epistolary part" in all published critical editions – have scholars seemed more inclined to consider it an integral part of the diary; some even suggest that the author herself included it as a way of discussing the criticism of the ladies of the Shōshi circle (Miyazaki 2002, vol. II: 85) in greater depth by addressing more openly a number of issues that had no place in a court chronicle (Kato 2011: 147).

The addressee of the letter would appear to be Dai no Sanmi (999-1082), Murasaki Shikibu's daughter, to whom the entire work may have been dedicated, given that as a whole it may be considered a reference manual with a certain coherence and cohesion of its own. Within it, the sections written in diary style appear to represent an official record illustrating the role of ladies-in-waiting on public occasions, while the "epistolary part" is a more intimate and private kind of conversation, giving details of the physical appearance and character of the ladies known to Murasaki. It offers numerous insights that come together to form a collection of educational principles handed down by a mother to her daughter (Hagitani 1973: 524).

In support of the hypothesis that the "epistolary part" is not an intrusion, several scholars (Tabuchi 2011: 491 and Hagitani 1973: 519) point to the use of *kono tsuideni* ("after that") that seems to streamline the first part into the second, confirming continuity with the previous discourse. Furthermore, the frequent use of the auxiliary *haberi*, a mark of respect towards the reader seen by many as a characteristic feature of the second part, as well as a further

demonstration of its intrusion, can actually be found, albeit in smaller numbers in the first part too, where it may serve as a sign of deference to Fujiwara no Michinaga and his family, the privileged recipients of the official chronicle written by Murasaki (Yamamoto 1991: 205). It should also be observed that the frequent occurrence of this auxiliary in the letter, which is probably addressed to Dai no Sanmi, is not in fact unusual, as it was normal practice among noble families to use polite forms of expression between mother and daughter in everyday conversation and even more so in the epistolary style that the author uses to create in the reader the illusion of an exchange between two strangers (Hagitani 1973: 521).

An attentive reading of the second part of *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* immediately strikes the reader due to the absence of a specific recipient or an opening formula typical of the epistolary form. This work is actually shown to be a letter only towards the end, when at one point the author seems to take the trouble to enter a sort of necessary apology (*kotowarigaki*) for the scarce value of her writing.

Write to me everything you think even if you do not have as much nonsense to say as I do. I shall certainly read what you send me. [...] I urge you to return the letter as soon as you have read it. If there are any illegible passages or some characters missing, please pay no heed (Miyazaki 2002, vol. II: 155).

A structure of this kind would seem to support the hypothesis that, while there is a presumed addressee, it is not a real letter that has been sent to someone but a rhetorical device used deliberately by the author, whose formal and humble farewell only confirms the fictitious nature of her writing.

In the critical edition of *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* edited by Miyazaki Sōhei (2002), the “epistolary part” runs from passage forty-six to fifty-five, occupying just over twenty pages of the diary. This section of the text begins with a detailed physical description of the appearance of around ten ladies of Shōshi’s entourage, offering a wealth of information related to the canons of female beauty in the Heian period that favoured petite, plump women with white skin and long hair. This is followed by a comparison with the ladies belonging to the entourage of Princess Senshi (964-1035), consecrated at the temple of Kamo,¹ a reference to Shōshi’s character and the weaknesses that her ladies are accused of, and lastly a number of possible suggestions for correcting them. There follows a so-called “critique” of the three geniuses of women’s literature: Izumi Shikibu (nr. 978), Akazome Emon (956-1041) and Sei Shōnagon (966-1025), from two very select court salons, headed by Fujiwara no Shōshi and Fujiwara no Teishi (977-1001) respectively, both of them wives of Emperor Ichijō (980-1011). In this section, Murasaki highlights the pe-

¹ During the Heian period, upon accession to the throne of a new emperor, it was customary to consecrate a young virgin of noble family at the Kamo sanctuary so that his reign might be propitious.

cularities of each of these writers, also mentioning their defects. Rather than being a sharp criticism in themselves, her words seem to have an evident educational purpose as they serve to draw the attention of a future lady-in-waiting to some important aspects of her education such as poetry writing and, above all, the importance of modest behaviour at all times.

Sei Shōnagon is dreadfully conceited. She gives herself airs and graces and writes using Chinese characters, but upon careful examination, her culture leaves a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as superior to everyone else will sooner or later make fools of themselves and come to a bad end [...] (Miyazaki 2002, vol. 11: 117).

Upon examination of the whole of Murasaki's text, it emerges that descriptions of the ladies already appear here and there in the first part of the diary, pointing out, for instance, those who distinguish themselves as the most beautiful, elegant and refined during the ceremonies following the birth of the heir to the throne. We may therefore say that in the "epistolary part", where the official chronicle gives way to a more private, and in some ways even more outspoken conversation, what had been only hinted at before becomes the central topic of the narrative. This part seems to have a specific purpose, namely to "prepare" her daughter, Dai no Sanmi, who would go on to become Shōshi's lady-in-waiting, handing on to her the hard-won experience she had gained in the field and, most of all, an in-depth knowledge of the personalities of her future colleagues.

2. WRITING TO A DAUGHTER EMBARKING ON A CAREER:

ABUTSU NO FUMI

If the "epistolary part" of *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* may have been written with an eye to a possible future position for Dai no Sanmi at court, the *Abutsu no fumi* (the Abutsu Letter, 1263) seems to go back to a time when Ki no Naishi (1251-?), the daughter of nun Abutsu, had already been a lady-in-waiting for some time to Higashi Nijō (Saionji Koshi, 1258-1306), wife of Emperor Go-Fukakusa (1243-1304). This would explain some differences in content compared with *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, such as the absence of criticism of her colleagues, who were now naturally different from those with whom the nun Abutsu had worked when she was a lady-in-waiting to Ankamonin (1209-1283). Another difference lay in the more systematic organisation of the educational precepts to be passed on to her daughter. A further difference is that there is a section in *Abutsu no fumi* that is not found in *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, entirely given over to the alternatives to be considered if a lady loses the love and protection of the Emperor. This concern is linked to a very different historical-political context from that of the Heian period, when a lady – even of relatively modest rank – could not only aspire to receive the love of the emperor, but also to become the mother of the future heir to the throne (Tabuchi, 2003: 262).

From a comparison of the two works, what is immediately striking is the device of using the letter as a privileged means of communication to talk about personal matters of paramount importance. This choice most likely comes from the custom, confirmed in numerous *monogatari* and *nikki* written around the time of the transition from the Heian period (794-1185) to the Kamakura (1185-1333), of using letters, and especially poetry, to give more immediate voice to personal feelings that could not be expressed in person, allowing the recipient to read and re-read what s/he has received in solitude even at a later date. Interestingly, the *Mumyōzōshi*, (The Untitled Book, 13th-century) is full of praise for the epistolary form, to the extent that one of the ladies engaged in an interesting literary discussion considers it one of the most beautiful things in the world:

If I had to choose something whose beauty is such as to make one wonder why it exists in this world, I would not hesitate to say it is the letter [...]. Even if someone lives far away and you have not seen them for several years, you feel as though you are with them by simply looking at what he wrote. A letter can voice the most intimate feelings that cannot be expressed face to face. It is an unusual and pleasant experience to see that someone has described to you in detail what he would have liked to say to you, and it makes no difference that you do not actually meet him [...]. When we have nothing particular to do, if we read the letters of someone who is no longer with us, we have the pleasant sensation that everything is just as it once was (Kuboki 1989: 213-214).

Considering the great value and efficacy attributed to the letter form in a work contemporary with *Abutsu no fumi*, it comes as no surprise that this medium was deemed the most appropriate means of voicing the concerns and innermost feelings of a mother, at the same time able to pass on useful lessons² that her daughter could read over and over again, even when the writer was no longer of this world. It may be said that the letter almost becomes a spiritual testament, with echoes of the words uttered on their deathbeds by other parents to their children. We recall the last will and testament of Himegimi's mother in *Sumiyoshi monogatari* (the Tale of Sumiyoshi, 10th century), or the fears of Prince Hachinomiya for his daughters in the closing chapters of *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, 11th century), or, again, the advice imparted to his daughter by the father of Lady Nijō before his death in *Tōwazugatari* (the Tale of Lady Nijō, 14th century). These are all situations that remind us of the constant concern felt by parents for their daughters, and the need to be sure of finding a good person to protect them when they will be no more.

Unlike *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, where the diary and epistolary styles alternate, *Abutsu no fumi*, as the title itself intimates, is one long letter written by a

² Literary works written in the Heian and Kamakura period illustrates the importance of letters also to transmit the author's literary expertise and the understanding of important aspects of poetic practice between women in aristocratic service. For a study about this topic see, (RATCLIFF 2009).

mother who, in order to follow her husband, was regretfully forced to leave the capital and her only daughter, during a very delicate phase in the girl's life. The textual history of this work, appearing in different forms and with different names over a long period of time, is rather complex. Also known as *Menoto no fumi* (The Nursemaid's Letter) and *Niwa no oshie* (Household Teachings), it circulated in two major formats: a longer letter, supposedly written by the nun Abutsu to her daughter, and an abridged version perhaps by another person, which became the reference manual for ladies-in-waiting, and then for all other women.³ It has not yet been established with absolute certainty whether the original text is the "expanded version" (*kōhon*) or the "reduced" version (*ryakuhon*). Scholars hold diverse opinions on the matter: some consider both to be the work of the same writer, but many attribute neither of them to her.⁴

Regarding the contents, the first part of the letter focuses on concerns relating to the appropriate conduct for ladies-in-waiting and provides useful advice on the subject. It goes on to discuss interpersonal relationships with the other ladies, and the dangers they pose, explaining how to avoid problems arising from living with women in constant competition with each other. There is no shortage of references to the tasks customarily entrusted to a lady-in-waiting, and the way in which they should be carried out. Then there is a special section devoted to essential information on the cultural accomplishments to be perfected. The second part of the letter, however, brings to light the most intimate and poignant memories of a difficult past, describing the time when, all alone, nun Abutsu had to raise her new-born daughter, for whom she had always nursed the greatest aspirations. Indeed the very sacrifices necessary to bring her up seem to be the justification for the request to be able to realise her dreams, or to become at all costs a very important person: essentially this meant seeking to be the one who would give birth to the future heir to the throne. The inability to achieve this goal is presented as a serious failure that leaves her no option but to take her vows, forever turning her back on this world. It is a gesture that would guarantee her peace and dignity, at the same time representing the ultimate, extreme act of loyalty to her lord.⁵

If things do not go as you hope because life is not eternal, distance yourself from this chain of death and rebirth, and with the noble intention of following the way of the bodhisattva, quench your passions, change your appearance and take the path of truth (Yanase 1984: 126).

3. A LIFE JUDGED BY OTHERS

Both *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* and *Abutsu no fumi*, like many works written by ladies-in-waiting during the Heian and Kamakura periods, describe work in

³ For a study about the differences between the two versions, see (MILLER 2006).

⁴ For a more complete textual history of *Abutsu no fumi*, see (NEGRI 2017).

⁵ On the significance of nunhood in the Kamakura period, see (MEEKS 2010) and (LAFFIN 2013).

the service of aristocratic figures, but also the difficulty of managing relationships with other people. Both texts reflect a way of life where the private dimension is totally lacking or is at best compromised by the fact that courtiers are constantly subjected to the scrutiny and judgement of others, even on unofficial occasions. Hence the constant need to carefully hide one's most innermost thoughts and feelings, striving on all occasions to comply with some stereotyped pattern of behaviour in order to be accepted by others (Kato 2011: 141).

In a passage in *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book, early 11th century), called *miyazukae ron* ("about ladies-in-waiting"), Sei Shōnagon explains that "attracting attention", and thus exposing oneself to the judgement of others, is one of the main characteristics of a lady-in-waiting.

From the most important lord and the highborn nobles down to the fourth, fifth and sixth ranks, obviously including all the other women in service at court, there is no one who does not see a lady-in-waiting (Matsuo and Nagai 1974: 92)

In the pages written in diary style, she recalls her embarrassment the first time she went to court, pointing out that "being on show" and serving aristocrats is a difficult job requiring a certain degree of experience and adequate training.

The first few times I went to court, so many situations would embarrass me. As I often had tears in my eyes, when I went to serve Her Majesty in the evening, I would stand hidden behind a three-*shaku* screen, and if she showed me some illustration, I would be so embarrassed that I could not even stretch out my hands. (*Ibid.*: 328)

Yet in spite of the suffering she endured during her apprenticeship, she concludes that it is much better to be a lady-in-waiting than to marry, because being in service in court is the only way for a woman to meet other people and really get to know the world.

Women who spend their lives sitting quietly, with no particular ambitions for the future, considering what is not real happiness to be so, are, in my opinion, boring and unbearable. It would be advisable for girls of suitable social status to spend a period of time in the role of "director of the ladies-in-waiting"⁶ in order to spend time with others and learn about the world outside. (*Ibid.*: 91)

The conventional "ideal woman" who sits confined to the house, her face always hidden and her body buried under multiple layers of clothing is presented as an ignorant woman who neither sees nor is seen. On the other hand, women who serve in court, observed and judged by others, can in turn observe and express opinions on the many people they encounter, thus enrich-

⁶ The reference here is to the so-called *naishi*, the highest-ranking lady-in-waiting at the service of the emperor. She would pass his orders on to the other ladies and had to direct and control them.

ing their experience. Looking gives ladies-in-waiting the power to understand, if not the power to possess (Sarra 1999: 225-226). In any event, serving at court therefore represents an important opportunity to become stronger, having been trained to consciously relate to the opposite sex and withstand the adversities of life more successfully.

The notion of “exposing themselves to the gaze of others” brings to mind another fundamental role of the lady-in-waiting, namely to entertain the gentlemen of the court, seeking, if possible, to win the heart of a very high-ranking personage. This meant having to comply with certain aesthetic and cultural models, as well as being young and therefore sexually appealing in a context where the passage of time and inevitable physical decline naturally led to rejection (Negri 2014: 74-75). The ladies, usually unmarried or widowed, could offer sexual services as an integral part of the artistic entertainment⁷ they provided, and for this reason, were in some ways comparable to *asobi* (literally: “amusement”), or artists that represented “a diversion” for unaccompanied travellers at sea – or river ports. They were also similar to *kugutsu*, fortune tellers/itinerant puppeteers or *shirabyōshi*, dancers who performed wearing men’s clothing. The first two categories are documented as early as the tenth century, while no mention is made of the third until the end of the Heian period (Goodwin 2000: 329). This type of activity was considered quite normal and it was not unusual for a woman to have a sexual relationship with a higher-ranking man in order to ensure profitable opportunities for her parents’ family. Towards the end of the Heian period there were many instances of *asobi* and *kugutsu* becoming the wives or secondary wives of a sovereign, and surviving Kamakura period documents show that the administrators of landholdings often married professional entertainers (*Ibid.*: 332).

Numerous literary and historical sources show that from the Heian period, with the spread of the marriage policy supported by the Fujiwaras, the choice of beautiful and sophisticated daughters of provincial governors as ladies-in-waiting became crucial to promoting the reputation of a young woman wishing to win the emperor’s favour. Among the various tasks of the ladies-in-waiting, especial importance was apparently given to the ability to welcome courtiers, who had to find their company pleasant and report favourably to the sovereign, the supreme judge of his future consort and her *entourage*.

Literary documents sometimes describe this task as boring or even dangerous. In *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, cases abound where ladies-in-waiting, including Murasaki herself, regain their tranquillity when they finally hear the footsteps of an approaching nocturnal visitor to their apartments fade away, or else they scurry into hiding to escape undesired male companionship on the occasion of court festivities.

⁷ Not only did they normally have to be skilled conversationalists, but they also had to be proficient musicians and compose poetry suited to the occasion.

As they were all drunk, and foreseeing unpleasant consequences, as soon as the festivities were over, Lady Shōshō and I decided to hide when the sons of His Excellency arrived (Miyazaki 2002, vol. 1: 199).

Because of the way they dressed, moved and behaved, the ladies-in-waiting represented an ideal image of womanhood that exercised considerable charm over men. For Abutsu, every gesture, such as sitting down or seductively allowing a glimpse of hair from behind a screen had to be studied and carefully rehearsed, but, when necessary, it was important to appear shy and unaware of one's power to seduce members of the opposite sex.

Your conduct must be refined even when you meet someone separated by a screen, and if you allow a glimpse of a flowing lock of your beautiful hair, albeit with good reason, try to appear timid and shy with your partner so that it does not seem that you did it on purpose (Yanase 1984: 115-116).

Murasaki Shikibu describes various official events where ladies-in-waiting are exposed to the gaze of others. Particularly important was the *Gosechi* festival,⁸ a formal occasion where putting oneself on show was clearly the aim. It was essential to attract the attention of courtiers, and especially the Emperor, who would choose those who might enter his personal service from the carefully selected young dancers who had arrived at court.

I observed in amazement the ease with which those young girls made their entrance. They were lit by the unbearable brightness of torches arranged side by side in front of the wooden lattice, opposite the apartments of Her Majesty in the eastern wing of the residence. We ladies, unlike them, did not find ourselves face to face with the gentlemen of the court and we could just stay in the dark. Yet even behind the curtains we were more or less exposed, like them, to the gaze of others. If I think about it, I still feel uncomfortable on account of the embarrassment I felt (Miyazaki 2002, vol. 11: 21).

Not only were the ladies-in-waiting judged by the men and women at court, but they also had to compete with ladies in service in other contexts. It is no coincidence that Murasaki Shikibu devotes a substantial section of the “epistolary part” of her diary to the considerations raised by the involuntary (or allegedly so) discovery of a letter written by a certain Lady Chūjō in service with the Princess of the Sanctuary. From the letter it is clear that whoever wrote it considers the Princess's ladies superior because of their ability to compose refined poetry, and especially as they are more skilled at entertaining the men who go to visit them. Murasaki admits that members of Shōshi's entourage are not always flawless, but she takes the trouble to defend them, highlighting their good qualities.

⁸ This was an annual ceremony held at court over four consecutive days in the second half of the eleventh month. The purpose of the dances was to present four girls of medium to high noble rank to the Emperor, in the hope that some of them might attract his attention.

She was right in some respects, but spoke too well of the circle of people to which she belonged, while in reality, much of the verse composed by the Princess's ladies was not particularly exceptional. There is no question that they were women from a magnificent and elegant reality, but I was sure that many of those close to me in the service of Her Majesty would have nothing to fear [...] The Princess is a very refined person, and the sanctuary is a sacred place, far removed from the rest of the world. Nothing comes to trouble them. Of course, they are not busy like us when Her Majesty visits the Emperor, or on occasions when His Excellency decides to spend the night at the palace (Miyazaki 2002, vol. II: 93-94).

This kind of reflection reinforces the idea that “the epistolary part” of *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* was written for didactic purposes and with the clear aim of making Dai no Sanmi, and perhaps other young women entering into service at court, think about certain issues that might affect the reputation of a lady. It is not inconceivable that it was Fujiwara no Michinaga who asked Murasaki Shikibu to write about these matters, but given the content, it seems quite unlikely that the intended recipient of this long letter might have been Michinaga himself, as some have tried to demonstrate.⁹ These are clearly the words of a lady-in-waiting to others, and specifically those of a woman who benefits others from her experience, at a time when, being no longer in the prime of life, she is able to describe with greater detachment and objectivity a world from which she was gradually taking her distance.

4. A PORTRAIT OF THE PERFECT LADY-IN-WAITING IN THE HEIAN AND KAMAKURA PERIODS

Tabuchi Kumiko identifies several points of contact between “the epistolary part” of *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* and *Abutsu no fumi* (Tabuchi, 2011: 481-485). Following her remarks, it may be noted that, with regard to the conduct of a lady-in-waiting, both texts refer to four fundamental qualities: 1) balance, 2) humility, 3) reserve, and 4) hospitality.

The concept of “balance” encompasses different prerogatives concerning the social sphere, including both the way they present themselves to others and the way they interact with them. Everything has to be studied in the greatest detail, and nothing can be left to chance. It is not surprising that *Abutsu* gives very precise instructions regarding the appearance and even the facial expression to be assumed when receiving someone.

In all circumstances, when you meet a person, take care that you position yourself with the necessary calm in front of them, always assuming a serene and relaxed expression. Your appearance when you are seated must be harmonious like that of a bird rising gently from the surface of the water. And you must not forget to adjust the sleeves of your garments correctly (Yanase 1984: 115).

⁹ On Michinaga being the possible recipient, see for example (TANAKA and TANAKA 2015: 110-111).

Movement also follows certain rules: every gesture must be well calibrated and nothing must be done in haste.

Impatience and agitation are unbearable above all else and are to be avoided. When you do anything it is advisable to relax, thinking that everything may last a long time. [...] What I mean is that the conduct of a lady-in-waiting should never be unbearable due to the lack of proper balance nor must it be too ceremonious. It is sufficient to be attentive to what is appropriate or inappropriate, doing everything quietly and with polished manners. (Yanase 1984: 111).

Murasaki Shikibu, on the other hand, argues that even a lady-in-waiting of easy virtue, if she is familiar with the code of conduct expected and knows how to put it into practice, will never face criticism from others.

All ladies-in-waiting should be pretty, docile, gentle and patient in order to be pleasing to others. If any of them is seen to be very attracted to men, and of easy virtue, provided her character is without flaw and she knows how to behave towards others, no one will mind. If, on the other hand, she has no sense of proportion and, believing herself superior to the others, routinely disregards the rules, even if she is careful to behave as she should, others will have something to say about her (Miyazaki 2002, vol. II: 136).

Humility is presented as a fundamental prerogative in a lady-in-waiting worthy of respect. *Abutsu no fumi* is littered with statements to this effect and stresses the need to avoid showing off one's skills and knowledge even in relation to apparently more superficial issues.

[...] you will not make a good impression if you behave in a thoughtless and eccentric manner, perhaps coming across as too knowledgeable in matters of colour coordination or the scent of incense. The first time you will be excused on the assumption that perhaps you had some reason to behave in this way, but the second time you will certainly cut a poor figure! (Yanase 1984: 114)

Murasaki Shikibu also repeatedly comes back to the subject of humility, pointing out that a lady-in-waiting should never make too much show of her education. From her own experience, she explains how she had to hide her knowledge of Chinese, a subject ill-suited to a woman, on several occasions in order to avoid the annoying gossip of the other ladies.

For fear that people might speak ill of me, I pretend to be incapable of even reading the characters written on a screen. But one day Her Majesty asked me to read a few passages from the *Collection of works by Bai Juyi* with her, and as she expressed the desire to further her knowledge of his poems, I have been giving her some very sketchy lessons on two volumes of verse in moments when none of the ladies can see us since two summers ago (Miyazaki 2002, vol. II: 143).

Another quality worthy of the ideal lady-in-waiting is undoubtedly that of reserve. *Abutsu* argues that one must never reveal one's pain or happiness to

any but the most trustworthy, maintaining an air of unruffled calm at all times.

When you want something that is particularly close to the heart, you must to keep it to yourself so that people will not overhear and tell others. You may sometimes obtain precisely what you want, but series of unpleasant events may also present themselves. Because of the embarrassment of revealing one's feelings to others, if something very serious happens it is best to ignore it and say little despite the depth of one's sorrow. Moreover, even when we have obtained what we wanted, we should never say, "How wonderful! How happy I am!" One should keep both good things and bad hidden in the heart, reflecting on them carefully (Yanase 1984: 109-110).

In this regard, it seems that Murasaki Shikibu's position on this is even more radical as she did not even talk with the ladies closest to her.

I usually avoid doing even what I can do in the presence of the other ladies and I keep everything to myself. What is more, even if I would like to discuss something when I am attending Her Majesty, I do not, because I am certain that it would serve no purpose with people who cannot understand me: it would simply cause trouble and I could not bear to hear what those self-important and censorious women would say about me (Miyazaki 2002, vol. II: 125).

Entertaining guests, and especially important people, in an appropriate manner, is another task of ladies-in-waiting, whose presence must always be appreciated by others.

[...]. When an important person arrives, one must not appear unapproachable like a deity, nor evasive and elusive like the snow on the field of a spring morning or like the waves of the river at the Kamo Shrine. [...]. I would like you to behave in an affable way, and you should not keep your distance. You must always bear in mind the rank of the people with whom you have to do (Yanase 1984: 116).

Murasaki Shikibu too has useful advice on the subject, never missing an opportunity to chide Shōshi's ladies for their excessive shyness.

For example, when the major-domo of His Majesty's family comes to the palace to deliver a message, the high-ranking ladies, inept and childish as they are, rarely come out to greet him. And even if they do, they are never capable of saying anything appropriate to the circumstances. This happens not because they are at a loss for words or because they are not sufficiently aware or sensitive, but because, due to their embarrassment, they are afraid of saying something out of place and so they refuse to speak at all, trying to remain out of sight as far as possible. Other ladies certainly do not behave in this way. When they enter service, even women from the most important families have to adapt to the rules of this world. The high-ranking ladies here, however, still behave like precious little princesses (Miyazaki, 2000, vol. II: 106)

Regarding the cultural accomplishments of a lady, both texts agree on what may be considered the three cornerstones of the culture of a young noblewoman: poetry, calligraphy and music, apparently unchanged from the

Heian period to the Kamakura. Compared with *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, *Abutsu no fumi* is organised more systematically, and the advice on cultural training is more detailed: it includes in-depth knowledge of *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, 11th century), a difficult text to interpret which requires the reading of specific commentaries.¹⁰

As for the major *monogatari*, there is nothing more disgraceful than unfamiliarity with *The Tale of Genji*. Read the manuscripts that I have collected for you carefully and consider them my most important memorial. Since you need a detailed knowledge of the commentaries on even the most difficult passages, I have put the commentaries I had in the same small wooden box where I put the manuscripts so you can read them all and understand any unclear passages (Yanase 1984: 120).

It is precisely the importance given to Murasaki Shikibu's masterpiece in the Kamakura period that suggests that this work was considered crucial for the womanly education of ladies-in-waiting, who, identifying with some "unfortunate heroine" like Murasaki or the Lady of Akashi, could imagine that even noblewomen who had fallen on hard times would be able, with a little luck and determination, to secure the protection of an imperial prince. *Abutsu no fumi*, just like *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, is intended to show women what positive effects might arise from sharing certain examples of good conduct, and at the same time, the inevitable negative consequences on those who rejected them. The ruse of the letter addressed to a daughter seems to impart greater power of persuasion on the reader, who will find in the text a nostalgic memory of a glorious past, testimony to the important political, social and cultural role played by ladies-in-waiting, protagonists in a perfect microcosm soon destined to disappear with the introduction of a new social system.

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¹⁰ For a more detailed account of the education of a lady-in-waiting as described in *Abutsu no fumi*, see (NEGRI, 2017).

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