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著者	WALLACE John R.
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Strategies of seduction in *Izumi Shikibu nikki*

John R. WALLACE

University of Wisconsin

Today I would like to suggest a list of strategies of seduction that can be found in the literary diary *Izumi Shikibu nikki*. I wavered between narrowing the discussion to one or two of these strategies and detailing them with textual examples or, as I eventually chose, to sacrifice depth for breadth. I chose to do so because the *range* of strategy is as interesting a phenomenon of the text as the specifics of each. A truly impressive array of strategies are deployed simultaneously in the text; I made my priority the outlining of this textual structure.

Izumi Shikibu nikki narrates a “struggle” between one man and one woman. To call it a “struggle” is to choose already to regard Heian romance in a certain way. (This point of view will not be discussed or defended today, except to identify it now as the starting point of my thoughts.) I call the diary a display of strategies of seduction in order to offer a specific interpretation of this struggle, one that foregrounds the careful choice of the words and actions made by both the woman and the man. In this essay, I frame the nature of those strategies by asserting that their efficacy relies on the powers of seduction. Today’s comments, though, focus on the acts and words of the woman, since the narrative voice is meant to be taken as hers.¹

By seduction I wish to place first today the original Latin meaning of the word *seducere*, namely, “to lead aside or away,”² for both Onna and Sochi no Miya — the man and woman of the diary — wish to lead their partner in love *away* from one place of action to another of their own conception. This Latin definition, however, speaks neither to the question of *why* one would seduce or *how* one would seduce. Seduction is usually carried out for what one perceives to be one’s own benefit or pleasure with less regard for the one who is the target of the seduction. But today I will concentrate not on why one seduces but how one seduces. To study the process of seduction is to investigate the outlines of desire. Seduction requires a weakness in the one to be seduced, a weakness linked to a desire of one type or another. Thus the seducer offers, or appears to offer, something of enough value to “lead aside” the target of seduction away from their original intention as they fall under the spell (even if only temporarily) of the seducer. The erotic and sexual facets of the term “seduction” are meant to be included in today’s discussion, but *also* included are strategic movements that rely on other needs or desires within human relationship. Finally, “to seduce” is usually taken to mean away from something right into something wrong. That way of thinking about the psychological structure of seduction is retained in this essay, but what is right and wrong in

the case of today's study is based on Heian cultural values as best we understand them, not Greek or Judeo-Christian values that have accrued to the concept "to seduce" over the centuries.

I have used as the basis for today's comments the annotated texts of Komatsu Tomi in her three volume work published by Kōdansha, Nomura Seiichi in Volume 42 of *Shinchō Nihon Koten Shūsei*, Enchi Fumiko and Suzuki Kazuo in *Zenkō Izumi Shikibu nikki* published by Shibundō, Fujioka Tadaharu et al. in Volume 18 of *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū*, published by Shōgakukan, and Edwin A. Cranston's English translation. Theoretical basis is drawn mostly from Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille and René Girard.

There are several textual traditions of *Izumi Shikibu nikki*. Since I am surveying seductive strategies rather than trying to define a state of mind of a historical writer at a certain moment of writing, I have felt free, indeed obligated, to work among these textual traditions rather than privilege a single version. In making conclusions, I have attended to differences that I consider relevant to the directions of this essay, though these will not be explicitly indicated today.

In reading *Izumi Shikibu nikki*, I have at the outset taken certain positions and retained certain reading hypotheses.

The first and most important hypothesis is that the diary's central figure and narrator, "Onna," is possessed with dynamic intent not immediately evident due to the *intended* obscuring effect of the diary's explicit messages and descriptions.

The writer/narrator *would like* us to believe that Onna is *swept into* a passionate situation by an ardent and persistent prince, Sochi no Miya, a man of higher status and greater power than Onna. Readers should conclude that it is Sochi no Miya, not Onna, who bears responsibility for the course of events described in the diary. The writer sets up most of her strategic, rhetorical possibilities by strongly inviting us to conflate and/or confuse with Izumi Shikibu three figures: the historical writer of the work, the narrative voice of the work, and the central figure of the narrative, "Onna."

Onna is a sympathetic figure. She is a beautiful, but aging woman who has come upon hard times. She has lost the support of her father and husband probably as the result of her affair with a prince who suddenly died. At the beginning of the diary, Onna is associated with no man of significance who could restore her to the social level from which she has fallen. While Sochi no Miya, the younger brother of her dead lover, eventually brings her into his mansion, the diary presents Onna as one who alternates between desperate loneliness that forces her to look to Sochi no Miya for her survival and passive submission to his decisions.

Reading against the grain of meaning offered by this explicit level of the narrative, we can postulate an Onna who is at minimum a highly skilled tactician in matters of romance. Perhaps she is even an *exuberant actor* enjoying on some level the transgressive moments of challenging (successfully) both social norms of the time and Sochi no Miya's romantic commitment to his wife and political commitment to his reputation. I regard Onna *and* the writer of the diary as highly intelligent and devious. If we read in this way, I believe we can

identify consistent, sophisticated strategies of seduction that by their presence question the diary's overt claim of a forced situation for which Onna need not be held accountable. The diary hopes to assign to circumstances beyond Onna's control responsibility for Onna's romantic recovery and some of the socially criticized effects of that recovery such as displacing Sochi no Miya's primary wife, Kita no Kata. I hope to preserve within the essay the sympathetic facet of Onna which I do consider a real and important part of the text. But I also wish to *cast doubt* on the general and convincing suggestion of helplessness in order to draw attention to the fuller creative being operating within and around the narrative.

My comments today mean to counter-balance a relatively common reading disposition to regard the Heian court woman as passive and retrenched in the face of a polygamous society controlled by romantically irresponsible men. I do not wish to suggest that the Heian *zuryō* women who wrote the literature that has come down to us were not confronted with painful realities that included victimization. I do want to suggest that the most sympathetic reading — one that attributes full intelligence and volition to the narrative figures (and their writers) — will admit to them a sophisticated capacity to make *strategic* response to their plights. For me, this generates a much more interesting reading, and one that also accords well with Izumi's widely recognized rhetorical virtuosity.

Another assumption essential to the present essay is that *Izumi Shikibu nikki* was written to be read by others. I also assume that the writer estimated (accurately) that her potential readers held mixed feelings about her. This is the type of readership that both makes necessary and makes possible rhetorical effect.

Also, throughout this essay the writer of *Izumi Shikibu nikki* is treated at least as a writerly figure who *behaves* as an Izumi we can imagine based on biographical and historical narratives we associate with the authorial figure "Izumi Shikibu." Usually I simply set aside the problem and speak as if Izumi Shikibu were the writer.³ Today's arguments do not require that Izumi was the author of the text; they only require that someone wrote *as if* he or she was Izumi.

There are two broad sets of strategy of *Izumi Shikibu nikki*.

The first strategic set is a voice engineered by Onna meant for Sochi no Miya. This is an event that occurs entirely within the bounds of the narrative.

The second strategic set is a voice engineered by a narrator (under the writer's control) meant for the diary's *readers*. This strategy extends *beyond* the explicit narrative to engage the reasoning and judgment of the reader with regard to the diary's writer.

The *agendas* of the first set of strategies, that by Onna for Sochi no Miya, can be posited in several ways.

If we take the narrative at its face value, Onna is drawn into the relationship with Sochi no Miya by her desire to relieve her boredom (*tuzure*), and her longing for Ko-Miya, his brother whom Sochi no Miya resembles. However, if we consider Onna's position and assume that she is concerned for her future, her agenda may very reasonably be concluded as the intention to secure that future. In this case her more immediate goal is to push Sochi no Miya

into a substantial commitment to her own well-being. Indeed, her specific goal may well be to gain a place in his household, even though the explicit thrust of the narrative would deny this.

Finally, if we push our reading further, we can consider whether Onna is the type of person who enjoys challenging social norms, or competing with Sochi no Miya's wife for Sochi no Miya's affection, or even wishes to bring damage to Sochi no Miya's reputation. These are more extreme positions to take when reading the diary, but not unimaginable when considering the course of Izumi's life, especially the complicated feelings that would arise when loving the brother so soon after the tragic death of a man whom it seems she passionately did love. Also, the considerable muscle of her rhetoric would suggest a very strong person who acts on her own judgment and, in my opinion, does not always conceal entirely a certain ruthlessness or capacity to channel energy in a very focused way.

For this essay, however, I take the middle set of these agendas, those regarding securing Onna's future, as the starting point for speculation.

The *elements* of this first set are:

- 1) Onna sharpening Sochi no Miya's passion by setting up rivals to him;
- 2) Onna withholding "rights" of Sochi no Miya over her by controlling access to her body;
- 3) Onna skillfully retaining rhetorical control of the romantic discourse;
- 4) Onna making appeals of sympathy as well as offers of comfort and security; and,
- 5) Onna frequently challenging the depth of Sochi no Miya's emotions, challenges that goad him towards ever more substantive enunciation's of love and commitment.

I would like to discuss only two of these today, namely, the first, that is, the setting up of rivals, and the second, that is, control of access to Onna's body.

The third strategy, rhetorical control of the romantic discourse, is a much more complicated topic that is best laid out in print where one can read over exact wording several times. Basically though, Onna's primary strategy is to maintain control over the direction of discourse, constantly bringing the focus back to Sochi no Miya's hesitations and away from her own. This neutralizes the bases for his excuses regarding his inattention. Throughout the diary, Onna exhibits remarkable clear-headedness in keeping exactly to her subject and not allowing Sochi no Miya to excuse himself with tangential comments or smoke screens. On the other hand, Onna also *intentionally* misappropriates a wrong or different meaning of something Sochi no Miya said so that she can advance their discourse into deeper waters involving more powerful emotions and more substantial commitments.

The fourth and fifth on this list of strategies — namely, appeals to sympathy or offers of comfort and security on the one hand and on the other challenges to Sochi no Miya's declarations of love — are more straightforward and don't require special elaboration today.

To back up now: The first of these strategies — the setting up of rivals — appears in two distinct forms in the diary. One the one hand, Onna is slow to allay Sochi no Miya's concerns that other men are visiting Onna and courting her for marriage or other more or less permanent liaisons. On the other hand, Onna holds out before Sochi no Miya the

disconcerting possibility that Onna will find Buddhism more compelling to her than Sochi no Miya's reluctant promises.

René Girard theorizes that one desires not what one on one's own identifies as desirable but rather follows in the footsteps of another's desire; thus what is truly desirable is that which others desire first. He calls this "mimetic desire."⁴ I have found that this way of describing the mental state of desire is appropriate for understanding how romantic discourse proceeds in Heian period texts, and especially so for *Izumi Shikibu nikki*. I regard the manipulation of desire along these lines as Onna's single most effect strategy in sharpening Sochi no Miya's passion and resolve.

These other suitors, aptly called *kage no otokotachi* by Enchi Fumiko, are a primary stimulus for Sochi no Miya's decision to bring Onna into his mansion. He often complains that he feels reluctant to visit her because he doesn't know if there may be another man preceding him; he ultimately concludes that the only carefree way to visit Onna will be if she is securely within the walls of his mansion.

Onna also frequently reminds Sochi no Miya of the potential that she may take Buddhist tonsure. Sochi no Miya is always more considerate to her in the wake of such threats, or so the narrative claims. (Kaneie was a little less susceptible to similar pressure in *Kagerō nikki*.)

The second strategy, that is, control of access to Onna's body, is a closely related movement. Here the power of the strategy comes not from withholding the pleasure of a night or nights, but the much more troubling thought that Sochi no Miya may lose altogether "rights" over Onna's body. The issue is "rights" not sexual satisfaction. By traveling when she wants and by not denying other visitors, she articulates the limitations of Sochi no Miya's claim on her. Here the rivals of other suitors and Buddhism are exactly the language in which Onna interdicts Sochi no Miya's movement towards full possession of Onna; the threat of Onna's limitation push him, in the case of the *kage no otokotachi*, towards extreme measures for securing the right to censure romantic access; in the case of Buddhism he struggles to be final authority to Onna, to make their relationship preeminent to others.

Onna, for her part, *seeks* to be possessed by Sochi no Miya — as long as his commitment is reliable. The nervousness of Onna's indecision in committing herself to Sochi no Miya is exactly the issue of his reliability — it can be read throughout the diary. Sochi no Miya, articulated *in the light of Onna's tremendous anxiety*, appears a novice to love, one who is hesitant, rather youthful, and buffeted by the force of others rather than someone in control of his own romantic destiny. This is Onna's anxiety reflected in the face of he who may become her future sponsor and shield to society's caustic attitude.

The *agenda* of the second set of strategies, that by a narrator meant for the diary's readers is to secure in the reader's mind in the least a sympathetic and forgiving attitude towards the writer/Onna, if not perhaps a romantic interest itself.

The *elements* of the second set include:

- 1) the writer indirectly advancing claims of innocence regarding rumors and conclusions about her romantic activity,

- 2) the writer displacing responsibility for the affair from Izumi/Onna to Sochi no Miya and his wetnurse Menoto, and,
- 3) the writer skillfully controlling narrative discourse in order to portray Onna as warm, deserving, reasonable, and in dire straits.

One overall characteristic of this set of strategies is its covert nature — all operate under the cover of a narrative that distracts the reader away from pondering these items at length. They are meant to slip into the reader's consciousness reading conclusions that seem reasonable and generated by the *reader*, not the *writer*. If one faithfully follows the intended readerly conclusions of the narrative, Onna is not someone who was sexually promiscuous; on the contrary, most of the time she is alone in her quarters. Further, it is not Onna but Sochi no Miya and his ally Menoto who conceive the idea of placing Onna in Sochi no Miya's mansion. By Onna's (critical) judgment, this should have been done more discretely; Onna appears in the text as deeply distressed that Kita no Kata leaves in anger.

The reason this set of strategies possess this covert characteristic while the first set does not is simply because the writer has no special motive to conceal from us the various stages in Onna's romance with Sochi no Miya. If one looks at her words and actions through the eyes of Sochi no Miya, however, one can see that from his vantage point much of what she does is less clear. Now, *as targets of strategy*, we are in a similar position. In trying to win us to her way of seeing herself, Izumi as writer *does* have reason to be more devious in her methods.

The primary technique of this set of seductions is the writer's attempt to capture control over a discourse that is damaging to her by first neutralizing opposing, competing voices and then offering in an appealing package a reasonable substitute for those voices. In seduction it is necessary for the seductive voice to override that of others since one can only be "led astray" when the voice of one's original intention pales in the presence of that of the seducer's. One will make this switch *only if* the seducer's voice is either sufficiently attractive, or reasonable, or both. In *Izumi Shikibu nikki* I would say it is both.

The voices that the writer wishes to neutralize belong to individuals of her time who were passing around rumors and criticisms regarding Izumi's sexual promiscuity (specifically indiscreet adultery), inappropriate sexual behavior, (that is, establishing romantic liaisons with imperial figures who ought to be regarded as beyond her reach), and the affronts caused to Sochi no Miya's officially recognized wife, Kita no Kata. It is impossible to judge from the text itself whether these voices were few or many in number. Perhaps at the time only Kita no Kata's family was genuinely displeased. Murasaki does refer to Izumi's "unsavory" character when mentioning her by name in her diary,⁵ but we do not know exactly what is meant by this nor what was Murasaki's motive for writing in such a way. What we can say with certainty, though, is that Izumi was the object of unkind judgment by society and that this has been handed down to us not only as part of the legend that has accrued to her name; its marks can also be seen all across the text of *Izumi Shikibu nikki* itself. This text, whether written by Izumi or not, evidences an awareness of these criticisms.

The writer attempts to neutralize these voices first by the third person pose of the

narration. In this way, the contents of the *nikki* are garbed in a claim of authority, since the speaker of a story always makes a claim to authority through the very act of narrating. If the product is a *monogatari* this truth claim may be provisional (in other words, a story that is compelling within the terms of the discourse only); in the case of a *nikki* the truth claim is meant to refer back to a historical reality. (*Izumi Shikibu nikki* has been received over time as both; a phenomenon that perhaps indicates that the writer was not entirely convincing in her or his efforts.) By becoming the narrator, the writer moves to place her voice authoritatively first before individuals who are circulating rumors about her. She authenticates this further by being the individual *most proximate* to the events that have become the topic of discussion (thus the shifting point of view of the narrative); indeed, the narrative reminds the reader that there is much that happens in the privacy of bed chambers and lover's minds that outsiders *cannot* access. The narrator offers us this privileged access.

The narrator simultaneously offers us an attractive, reasonable alternative voice. First, the prose of this *nikki* differs considerably from that of the other three major literary diaries *Kagerō nikki*, *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* and *Sarashina nikki*. None of these have the same agenda as *Izumi Shikibu nikki*. *Kagerō nikki*, with its prickly, could-care-less-what-you-think style of prose, in particular comes across as seeming to find it unnecessary to capture the reader's heart. The prose in *Izumi Shikibu nikki* is, on the other hand, seamless in its credibility as a narration, while being warm, friendly and disarmingly vulnerable. (This contrasts with the tone of the poems Onna sends off to Sochi no Miya, poems often meant to increase *his* sense of agitation and uncertainty.) Second, Izumi appeals to an ethical code of *amae*, where one's weakness invites the sympathy and support of another, where by taking a position of need one grants to another the appealing feeling of being needed. Onna is a narrative figure marked with the tragedy of two deaths, and the writer has positioned the time frame of the narrative exactly between these two events. Thus we know of Onna that she has lost father, husband and lover in one series of unlucky events and will lose this man of whom she speaks so passionately not long after the period described in the diary. This is a situation to which both men and women can respond, though a male reader may see himself as an agent of rescue or protection while a female reader might identify with Onna's troubles and sympathize in that way. The writer has balanced her emphasize of Onna's sad and vulnerable position in a way that makes it accessible to both sexes.

Nevertheless, the diary would not be a very interesting document if its writer was not also displaying her considerable rhetorical and poetic skill. Onna is not just the woman who is down and out, she is also the poet who can spar with highly placed imperial figures and make their poems look lame in comparison to her own. Sometimes, in more cynical moments of reading, I feel *Izumi Shikibu nikki* is close to an advertisement, if not a lording over, of her remarkable capacity to, as Murasaki puts it, "produce poems at will."⁶ In the terms of her society which placed emphasis on literary skill for its women, Onna is a highly attractive woman worth a man's time and a rival's grudging respect.

But, just in case we might not come to this conclusion, the writer makes sure we are

aware that Onna is the object of many men's desire, and that she already has the endorsement of two imperial princes. Thus the structure of mimetic desire works not only for Sochi no Miya regarding Onna, but *for us* where Onna refers back to Izumi. For male readers, this can be a cause for desire; for female readers this can be a cause for envy, or respect, or both.

Thus if we look back at the movements mentioned today we see a complete array of strategies. Izumi/ Onna exerts control over others by framing discourse in specific ways, framing based on a well-seasoned understanding of the rules of romance, what is permitted and what is frowned upon; in other words, Onna draws on *social norm* to support her requests and complaints. At the same time, Onna, through her display of poetic talent, her appealing style and her suggestion that she is desired by others enhances her desirability in the eyes of Sochi no Miya and readers. She presents herself as a significant and logical focal point of desire. Finally, Onna threatening to take "something" away by prohibiting it or letting it be taken by another. This "something" is not exactly her heart or her body but rather the *sense of possession* of that heart or body. Desire coagulates around representations of things, not the things themselves. It is this that makes strategies of seduction possible, for the manipulation of symbols is the very business of rhetoric, and seduction is essentially a rhetorical process driven forward by the linkage of felt desire to symbols.

Notes

- 1 A similar description could be attempted for the man but one would have to keep in mind that everything is filtered through the narrative voice of the woman, a voice that is far from neutral regarding the content of the narrative.
- 2 "Seduce," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971 ed.
- 3 While who wrote this diary remains undetermined, the general autobiographical predisposition of Japanese literature taken as a whole, the pre-texts (such as *Kagerō nikki*) generally within the *nikki* genre itself, and various elements internal to the text such as the intensely sympathetic focus on Onna, all strongly encourage the reader to imagine Izumi Shikibu herself in the act of writing. Therefore, even if we suppose a different writer (contemporary to Izumi Shikibu or later) I would suggest that this different writer wrote so as to *mimic* a plausible Izumi Shikibu as writer.
- 4 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, translated by Yvonne Freccero, Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.
- 5 NKBZ 18:237, *izumi Fa kesikaranu kata koso are*; "She does have a rather unsavory side to her character," Richard Bowring, *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs: A Translation and Study*, Princeton UP, 1982, 131.
- 6 NKBZ 18:237, *kuti ni makasetaru koto domo ni, kanarazu wokusiki hito Fusi no, me ni tomaru yomiso Fe Faberi*; "she can produce poems at will and always manages to include some clever phrase or other that catches the eye," Bowring, 131.