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“My Son for the Daughter and my Daughter for the Son”: Clothing, Gender, and Power in the *Torikaebavamonogatari*

Ruth Avalon Caswell

Within his heart, of course, Sadaijin was sad. “If only I could exchange them,” he mused, “my son for the daughter and my daughter for the son.”

The Changelings pg 16, Rosette Willig, trans.

Sadaijin is the father of two exceedingly beautiful and accomplished children, the hero and heroine of the late-Heian period (794-1184) court tale, *The Changelings*. And yet he is sad, as his daughter is active and scholarly and excels in archery and composing poetry, men’s arts, and his son is shy and retiring, preferring to play with dolls behind a woman’s screens. When the siblings are young, Sadaijin sits by, hoping that their unusual proclivities are simply a phase. Soon, though, it becomes clear that the siblings’ actions are not phases. The daughter has been accepted as a boy by her peers, and the son is known as a girl of great beauty. Urged on by the Emperor, who is unaware of the biological sex of the children, Sadaijin has the coming-of-age ceremonies for both children, with his daughter undergoing a man’s coming-of-age ceremony and the son a woman’s. The biological daughter is known as Chūnagon, the biological son as Naishi no Kami.

Thus opens *The Changelings*, translated from the Japanese by Rosette Willig. Because the story revolves

around the two siblings living as the gender opposite their biological sex, it must create convincingly gendered persona for each. Clothing plays an integral part in gendering these characters. From their childhood, the genders of the main characters are expressed through their clothing. When they enter the Imperial court, their genders determine which positions they fill, and therefore what responsibilities they have. Thus what clothing they wear determines how the siblings interact with power. This paper examines how clothing defined gender in Heian Japan, independent of biological sex, and how gender and biological sex regulate access to power, using the story of *The Changelings* as a lens into Heian court culture.

The Heian period lasted, roughly, from 794-1185CE. There are two known versions of *The Changelings*, or the *Torikaebaya monogatari*. The original, published between 1080 and 1105, is now lost to us. A later version, the *Ima torikaebaya*, was published sometime between 1100 and 1170, and appears to be mostly identical to the modern copies.¹ Nothing concrete is known about the author, or authors, of the *Torikaebaya monogatari*. There is debate over whether the author was a man or woman, a debate complicated by that fact the *Ima torikaebaya* was a rewritten version of the original. Some believe that it was written by a man copying the style of women writers of the period, and then perhaps rewritten by a woman.² Willig raises the possibility that the story is somewhat autobiographical, written by a woman who had lived as

¹ Rosette Willig, trans. *The Changelings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983) 4

² Willig, 5

a man, which could account for the mix of masculine and feminine styles in the writing. Though perhaps unusual, this idea does inject a serious note into what could otherwise be a rather humorous story.

Willig notes that even modern scholars feel compelled to downplay those elements of the work they feel are “decadent,”³ an attitude which seems to have carried over from the moralistic Meiji era (1868-1912,) when the *Torikaebaya monogatari* emerged from centuries of obscurity. This is unfortunate, as I believe that this need to justify the story, to prove that it is worthy to be read despite its characters’ sexuality and/or violation of gender norms, obscures some of the most important historic themes of the *Torikaebaya monogatari*. It is a story about gender, specifically the disjoint between the genders and sexes of the two siblings. The historian cannot ignore the gender bending without missing key elements of the story.

The *Torikaebaya monogatari* is literature, a work of fiction, but it still has merit as an historical document, both on its own and for what reactions to the story can tell us about the attitudes of contemporary readers. The authors of the *Mumyō Zōshi*, a collection of Heian-era literary criticism, state that in the improved *Ima torikaebaya*, “one does not feel it to be an offensive and absurd plot that such a sex reversal occurs.”⁴ The statement that the plot of the *Torikaebaya monogatari* was not an “absurd” one is extremely important. Though the *Torikaebaya monogatari* is meant to be an entertaining story, it is apparently not so far fetched as to be useless as a source of information about Heian

³ Willig, 3

⁴ Pflugfelder, 360

attitudes. By analyzing how sex and gender are handled in the *Torikaebaya monogatari*, particularly through the lens of clothing, the historian can gain a greater understanding of sex and gender in the Heian period, specifically how people thought about these issues.

Though there is much scholarship on women in Heian Japan, significantly less is specifically focused on the construction of gender, especially given the prominent place accorded to descriptions of clothing in sources such as *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, or *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*. The two articles that examine most closely the ties between gender and flesh both use the *Torikaebaya monogatari* as their focal point. The brother and sister live as opposite genders, meaning that clothing plays an integral part in the story, because clothing is that which hides their bodies from the outside world. Takeda Sachiko shows how traditional Japanese clothing made crossdressing more feasible, and also examines Heian standards of beauty. Pflugfelder expands on how clothing defined gender. The unique situation of the characters in *Torikaebaya monogatari*, born one sex but living as the opposite gender, makes an analysis of how clothing defined gender particularly effective, because the story must consciously and convincingly show how the female sibling adopts the gender of a male, and vice versa. Stories like *The Tale of Genji* or the diaries of Heian noblewomen Lady Nijō and Lady Murasaki describe clothes, but not in the gender-conscious way that Pflugfelder and Takeda exploit for their analysis. Therefore, although there is considerable scholarship on different aspects of women and gender in Heian Japan, and the role of clothing appears in many

sources, there is little that specifically links clothing and definitions of gender.

Heian attitudes about beauty, both masculine and feminine, make differentiating gender on the basis of secondary sexual characteristics more difficult. Takeda Sachiko asserts that in Heian Japan, “proximity to feminine aesthetic ideals, to be ‘beautiful like a woman,’ was an integral condition for male beauty.”⁵ If the sexes thus appear similar, men striving to be beautiful in the same way as women, many modern conceptions of what defines gender are inapplicable. As Takeda points out, “if the ideal male aesthetic was a ‘macho’ one as in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, a man would not be judged according to feminine categories of beauty... it takes a world ordered by a unisex aesthetic consciousness for such a serious success story to be realized.”⁶ The idea of a “unisex aesthetic consciousness” is key to understanding the importance of clothing in Heian society. Judging the sexes by the same standard of beauty does away with many Western gender markers. Therefore, because the sexes look more physically similar, the clothes people wear become more important in determining, at a glance, which gender they are.

The downplaying of physical differences between the sexes was compounded in the Heian period by the styles of clothing, which tended to be multi-layered and loose, perfect for concealing the figure. Takeda notes the similarity of the clothing worn by Heian men and women, a “lack of division of clothing according to gender,” which is accurate in some aspects, but in

⁵ Takeda, 191

⁶ Takeda, 196

other ways misleading.⁷ She is referring to the fact that both men and women wore *hakama*, loose pleated trousers, and that the undergarments for both sexes were basically the same.⁸ However, the outfits worn by men and women were clearly different.

The male silhouette was basically a rectangle; defined by square shoulders the same width as ankles and very little definition at the waist. The female silhouette was more triangular, with sloping shoulders and long gowns that spread out and trailed on the floor. The waist was hardly defined at all.⁹ “Voluminous” is the perfect word to describe the clothing of the Heian noble, male or female. It concealed everything but the hands and face, rendering differences like hips or breasts invisible. When the body vanished like this, it was the clothing that differentiated the sexes. Thus, though Takeda was right that some elements of Heian clothing were worn by both sexes, it is important to understand that men and women’s clothing were different enough to be immediately recognizable.

The role of clothing in defining the gender of Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami is not always initially obvious. When the siblings have their coming-of-age ceremonies, clothing is hardly mentioned, and yet it is a very important part of the ceremonies for both girls and boys. The omission of extensive reference to clothing is probably due to an assumption on the part of the author of *The Changelings* that the reader would already be intimately aware of the important roles of clothing in the coming-of-age ceremonies. Thus a

⁷ Takeda, 205

⁸ Takeda, 205-07

⁹ The Costume Museum, “court lady” costumes.

deeper knowledge of the ceremonies is essential to fully understanding their significance. Sadaijin puts off the coming-of-age ceremonies for his children because he is worried about their unusual situation, and when the ceremonies are finally held, Chūnagon, Sadaijin’s biological daughter, is presented to the world as a young man, just as Naishi no Kami, biologically male, is presented to the world as a young woman.¹⁰ By holding the coming-of-age ceremonies for his children, Sadaijin is publicly gendering them, and this gendering is accomplished through clothing. The coming-of-age ceremonies mentioned in *The Change-lings* are the *mogi* and *genpuku*, gendered ceremonies that occurred around age twelve, though the age seems to have been fairly flexible, and besides marking the young people as adults, indicated that they were of marriageable age.¹¹

The *mogi* and the *genpuku* ceremonies both mark puberty, and thus are different for the two sexes. The *mogi*, or the Putting On of the Train, was the ceremony for girls, in which an older female relative or respected member of court tied on the young woman’s *mo*, or train. This would be the first time the young woman had worn a *mo*, as it was the final element of a woman’s formal court clothing.¹² Heian noblewomen essentially lived behind screens, with only their close family members or serving women allowed behind the screens with them. The *mogi* ceremony was no exception, as the older woman who tied the *mo* onto the young woman would go behind the young woman’s

¹⁰ Willig, 21-22

¹¹ McCullough and McCullough, 373, 413

¹² McCullough and McCullough, 412-13, n. 56

screens to do so.¹³

The *genpuku* was the coming-of-age ceremony for young men, in which, similar to the *mogi*, a respected older man placed the *eboshi*, the tall hat worn by all men, on the young man's head. The young man, who had previously worn children's clothing and hairstyles, now had his hair cut, and put on the clothes of an adult man. The cutting of the hair and donning of the *eboshi* might be done in front of assembled guests, but when the young man changed into adult's clothes, he would go into another room to do so.¹⁴

In order for the siblings to go through the *mogi* and *genpuku* ceremonies, they must be assigned a gender, because the two ceremonies are different. Thus the coming-of-age ceremonies for Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami publicly cement their gender, regardless of their sex, and this gendering is accomplished through clothing. In both ceremonies, the transition to adulthood is marked by the young person donning, for the first time, an item of clothing. In addition, it is clothing, not biological sex, that marks the young people as man or woman. Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami are able to switch places and undergo the coming-of-age ceremony appropriate to the other sex because neither ceremony requires proof of biological sex. Unlike coming-of-age ceremonies that include body alteration, such as male or female circumcision, the Heian coming-of-age ceremonies take place with the young people fully clothed, and in the case of the young

¹³ Felice Fischer, "Murasaki Shikibu: The Court Lady," *Heroic with Grace: Legendary Women of Japan*, ed. Chieko Irie Mulhern (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1991) 104

¹⁴ McCullough and McCullough, 372-73, n. 13

women, further concealed behind her screens. The actual body of the young man or woman is never seen, save by those with whom they are already intimate: family members or servants. Society is only made aware of the young person’s gender by their clothing, hence why it is so easy for Sadaijin to switch his children’s coming-of-age ceremonies. Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami are gendered by the clothing they put on when they enter adulthood, not by their biological sex.

Clothing again genders Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami when the siblings switch places. Saishō, Chūnagon’s closest friend, is in love with both Yon no Kimi, Chūnagon’s wife, and Naishi no Kami. About a third of the way through *The Changelings*, Saishō is overcome with passion for Naishi no Kami and seeks out Chūnagon as a sort of substitute for the unattainable Naishi no Kami. As he embraces Chūnagon, Saishō realizes his friend is a woman.¹⁵ The two subsequently become lovers, though Chūnagon is

¹⁵ Willig, 82-4

The dynamics of this first encounter could occupy an entire paper. For more on the subject Takeda and Pflugfelder. Whether or not the first encounter is rape (Takeda claims that it is) is intriguing, but outside the scope of this paper. For more on rape or sexual coercion in the Heian period, see Hitomi Tonomura, “Coercive Sex in the Medieval Japanese Court: Lady Nijō’s Memoir,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 61.3 (Autumn 2006) p. 283-338, as well as Margaret H. Childs, “The Value of Vulnerability: Sexual Coercion and the Nature of Love in Japanese Court Literature,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 58.4 (November 1999) p. 1062, and Anthony J. Bryant, “Forced Affection: Rape as he First Act of Romance in Heian Japan,” http://www.sengokudaimyo.com/Forced_Affection.html (accessed December 2008)

initially reluctant, and Chūnagon eventually becomes pregnant.¹⁶ After Chūnagon becomes pregnant by Saishō, she continues to live as a man for as long as possible, until the fourth month of her pregnancy when she secretly flees the court with Saishō, to a house owned by Saishō's father.¹⁷ Since Chūnagon did not tell anyone, not even Naishi no Kami or their parents, about the reason behind this disappearance, people soon become very worried, and Sadaijin even sends out messengers to search for his missing child.¹⁸ Finally, in the second month after Chūnagon's disappearance, Naishi no Kami decides that it is his duty to go and search for his missing sibling, for Chūnagon's own sake and for the sake of their father, who has become ill with worry.¹⁹ Naishi no Kami then has a trusted servant cut his hair, and proceeds to change into men's clothing. Though Naishi no Kami has lived all his life as a woman "[i]n a man's headdress, hunting cloak and trousers, Naishi no Kami betrayed none of the awkwardness one might expect of a person wearing something new and unaccustomed."²⁰ Naishi no Kami is described as "very frail" and having "never stepped outside the innermost section of [his] room," and yet he is able to put on a man's clothes and immediately go into the outside world, with none the wiser.²¹ Indeed, some ladies-in-waiting see Naishi no Kami, and what they see is "[a]n indescribably handsome and elegant man, a most refined man... He was

¹⁶ Chūnagon realizes she is pregnant on page 95-6

¹⁷ Willig, 109, 116-17

¹⁸ Willig, 126

¹⁹ Willig, 127-28

²⁰ Willig, 129

²¹ Willig, 130

someone who had been in society, someone very splendid.”²² There is no doubt in their minds that this person is a man, and not just any man: he is a cultured man, a man of refinement who has lived in the world. In other words, not a man who has been living in seclusion, as Naishi no Kami has until recently done. Naishi no Kami, who had lived all his life as a woman, who had never been out from behind a lady’s screens, is able to successfully assume a male persona just by changing his clothes. This persona is convincing enough to make those who see Naishi no Kami believe him “someone who had been in society.” Chūnagon, meanwhile, is now living as a woman, and though neither sibling realizes it at the time, her ladies-in-waiting are the ones who see and marvel at Naishi no Kami.²³ However, Chūnagon’s transformation is less striking in the context of this paper than that of Naishi no Kami, as it is effected in large part by the physical changes accompanying pregnancy, rather than a change of clothes. Chūnagon is forced to change her gender due to the biological reality of pregnancy. Naishi no Kami chooses to change his gender, and does so by changing his clothes, and so taking advantage of how his society defines gender.

When Chūnagon initially entered the Imperial Court as a man, she did very well, and attained high rank. The Emperor, impressed with this apparent young man, eventually appointed Chūnagon to the rank of Major Captain of the Right, that is, the head of one of the two divisions of Imperial bodyguards.²⁴ This

²² Willig, 132

²³ Willig, 132

²⁴ Willig, 104

happens after Saishō has found out that Chūnagon is biologically female, and furthermore, after Chūnagon becomes pregnant by Saishō. However, neither Saishō nor the anonymous author expresses any worry about Chūnagon not being able to carry out the duties associated with the post of Major Captain of the Right. Nor does Sadaijin, the father, ever express any worry about his biological daughter being able to fulfill the duties that are bestowed on her in the belief that she is male. In short, no one who knows of the disparity between Chūnagon's sex and gender doubts her abilities based on her sex. It seems probable that this lack of concern stems, in part, from the early arrangement of the Heian Imperial Court, in which women held many positions.

“Ladies-in-Waiting in the Heian Period,” by Yoshikawa Shinji, examines not only the roles of the women in the court, but reasons for their eventual decline.²⁵ Before the eighth century, it appears that those who served in the Inner Palace, the living quarters of the Emperor, were all women, but by the tenth and eleventh centuries, there existed dual systems of ladies-in-waiting and male officials who served the Emperor.²⁶ By the eleventh century, then, when the *Torikaebaya* was written, there would still have been women serving in the Imperial court. The ladies-in-waiting were responsible not only for day-to-day tasks in the running of the Inner Palace, but for caring for the emperor himself. Therefore, the idea of a woman

²⁵ Yoshikawa Shinji, “Ladies-in-Waiting in the Heian Period,” *Gender and Japanese History*, Wakita Haruko, Anne Bouchy, and Ueno Chizuko, eds. (Osaka: Osaka University Press, 1999) vol. 2, 283-311

²⁶ Yoshikawa, 284-285

holding a position in the Imperial household would not have been foreign to a nobleman such as Saishō or Sadaijin. Both men and women occupied important positions in the Imperial court, and thus power was not limited to one biological sex. Power was gendered, not sexed. Had Chūnagon taken on a woman's role instead of switching genders, it would be likely that, as a noblewoman, she would have gone to court and become a lady-in-waiting. Since Chūnagon instead chose to wear men's clothing and gender herself as male, it is logical that she hold a man's post. The converse holds true for Naishi no Kami, the biological brother.

There is only one area in which Sadaijin worries about his children being able to fulfill their duties: he worries about them being able to carry out the sexual duties associated with their gender. Unlike political power, these biological duties are intrinsically sexed. Early in the story, Udaijin, Sadaijin's older brother, decides that his daughter, Yon no Kimi, should be Chūnagon's bride. When Udaijin first proposes this idea, the text says, “Sadaijin thought it ludicrous. But he despaired of getting across to Udaijin how unlikely it was that such a marriage could succeed, and so he consented.”²⁷ Sadaijin worries about the success of the marriage, because Chūnagon is unable, as a biological woman, to impregnate Yon no Kimi, “his” wife. The marriage cannot be consummated, and there will be no children, and so cannot succeed. Heian marriage was a vague and hard to define institution, but William McCullough, in his article “Japanese Marriage Institutions in the Heian Period” – probably the seminal work

²⁷ Willig, 26

in English on the varied and vague institutions of marriage in Heian Japan - identifies three “minimum and necessary conditions” for marriage in Heian Japan, the first of which is “the physical relationship between a man and a woman, continuing normally over an extended period of time and resulting in children.”²⁸ In her role as Yon no Kimi’s husband, Chūnagon is obviously unable to satisfy the second part of this requirement, because the two cannot have children together. This is the only aspect of Chūnagon’s abilities about which Sadaijin entertains doubts. The other two requirements for marriage are that society must recognize the relationship as acceptable and both parties must shoulder their responsibilities in the relationship.²⁹ Society certainly accepts the marriage of Yon no Kimi and Chūnagon, since it appears to be a marriage between an upstanding young nobleman and a beautiful young noblewoman. In addition, besides Chūnagon’s inability to father children, he seems to be a very kind and attentive husband. Thus, the only part of McCullough’s conditions for marriage that Chūnagon does not meet is the caveat about children.

Similar to Sadaijin’s worry about Chūnagon marrying, when the Emperor and Imperial Prince hear of Naishi no Kami’s beauty and ask that she be presented at court, Sadaijin, “put them off on the pretext that his daughter was hopelessly shy, and dismissed the notion from his mind. But he was terribly upset, hoping against hope that somehow she might actually serve

²⁸ McCullough, 104

²⁹ McCullough, 104

the Emperor and Prince.”³⁰ It seems clear that in this case “serve” means as a concubine. Yoshikawa discusses concubines as well as female officials. Concubines ranked higher than female officials, and most importantly, a concubine might become an official wife of the Emperor.³¹ Sadaijin is torn between his wish that his apparent daughter achieve high rank and the biological impossibility of such an event. Thus Sadaijin's worries about his children's abilities to carry out their duties really center on their inability to have sex as others of their gender do. Sadaijin is not, however, worried about whether the siblings' biological sex will hinder their political duties. Because both sexes held positions of power in the Heian Imperial court, the idea that one sex was innately less able to wield power did not seem to have existed.

As a final point of importance, it must be noted that neither Chūnagon nor Naishi no Kami is penalized for switching gender identities. Naishi no Kami assumes Chūnagon's male identity and is eventually appointed both Minister of the Left and Regent to the young Emperor.³² Chūnagon likewise assumes Naishi no Kami's female identity and becomes pregnant by the Emperor.³³ She gives birth to a boy, the first male child of the Emperor and thus the Crown Prince, and is elevated first to the rank of Imperial concubine and then to Empress.³⁴ Even though the siblings cross gender boundaries, they are not condemned by the narrative. Chūnagon's and Naishi no Kami's actions

³⁰ Willig, 23

³¹ Yoshikawa, 284

³² Willig, 239

³³ Willig, 206

³⁴ Willig, 227, 230

don't mark them out for punishment, nor are they portrayed as wrong. Instead, the siblings are both highly successful, and the text gives no impression that Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami are unable or ill-suited to carry out their responsibilities because they are acting as the opposite gender. Once again, the only instances in which their unusual circumstances cause problems involve sex and procreation, where it is their biological sex, not social gender, which causes problems.

At two key points in the narrative, clothing is used to create, or recreate, gendered identities for Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami. First, their coming-of-age ceremonies use items of clothing to publicly gender the siblings. Because the ceremonies used clothing-centric, instead of body-centric, rituals to confer adulthood, Chūnagon and Naishi no Kami are able to easily assume genders opposite their sex. After Chūnagon's pregnancy forces her to assume a feminine gender identity, Naishi no Kami creates a new gender identity for himself, in large part by putting on male clothing. Thus, in the *Torikaebaya monogatari* gender is constructed largely independently of biological sex. Instead, clothing is the primary marker of gender. Because both men and women held positions in the Heian Imperial court, and both sexes had economic responsibilities as well, neither sex was considered unfit to hold power. Therefore it is gender, not sex, which determines access to power in the Imperial court. Chūnagon's ability to carry out the duties and responsibilities associated with her various positions on court is never doubted on the basis of sex, not by the characters or by the narrator, despite the fact that the positions she holds are men's positions.

“My Son for the Daughter ...”

17

Because Chūnagon is gendered as a man, she holds a man's position in court, and it is how she dresses that creates her male gender identity. Thus when Naishi no Kami assumes a male gender identity, he does so by wearing male clothes, and afterwards occupies a male role in society. In the world of the *Torikaebaya monogatari*, it is how one dresses that determines how a person moves through society, what positions a person holds, and what political role a person fills. Though the *Torikaebaya monogatari* is a work of fiction, this cannot be the basis for completely discounting its historical importance. The authors of the *Mumyō zōshi* did not find the story of the *Torikaebaya monogatari* entirely ridiculous, which gives the story weight. Therefore, understanding gender and power in the *Torikaebaya monogatari* must be important to understanding gender and power in the Heian period in general.

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