

Noh Genji Kuyô 源氏供養

(“A Memorial Service for Prince Genji”)

Several priests on their way to Ishiyama Temple are stopped by a woman who asks them to conduct a memorial service for Prince Genji, the main character in the 11th century novel the Tale of Genji by Lady Murasaki Shikibu. Although ashamed to reveal her name, the priests realize that she is Murasaki herself. Later at Ishiyama Temple, she appears to the priests in her true form, gives them a scroll on which she has inscribed a prayer for Genji, and then dances as an offering. As she disappears, the priests conclude that Murasaki must have been manifestation of Ishiyama Kannon.

Author: Unknown, though some sources attribute it to either Zeami (1363? – 1443?) or Komparu Zenkuchi (1405 – 1470), recent Scholarship suggests there is no firm evidence to support either claim. .

Scene: Spring, Near and then at Ishiyama-dera Temple close to Lake Biwa in Ômi Province, in the present Ôtsu City, Shiga Prefecture.

Category: Third category woman (true wig) play, phantasm (mugen) noh in two acts, iroe (color dance) piece, without taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all schools. In most current performances, the ai-kyôgen part is omitted. Some variants use a chu-no-mai “middle dance” (scene 7) instead of iroe.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): the head priest of Agui (agoi) Temple.
- Wakizure (accompanying waki actor): 2-3 companion courtiers.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): a village woman. Wears a middle-aged woman (fukai) or young woman (ko-omote, waka-onna) mask.
- Ai/Ai-kyôgen (interlude actors): a local man (usually omitted).
- Nochijite (second half shite): the ghost of Murasaki Shikibu. Wears a middle-aged woman (fukai) or young woman (ko-omote, waka-onna) mask..

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki/Wakizure entrance: Several priests enter to shidai music and sing of their humble clothes and their journey to Ishiyama Temple. The main priest introduces himself as the head priest of Agui Temple in Kyoto. They sing a travel song referring to the spring blossoms of the capital, the white waves on the Shirakawa river, the Otowa waterfalls, the lingering moon over Lake Biwa, the lone pine of Shiga’s Cape Kara, and the mist rising from the lake.
2. Shite entrance, Shite/Waki exchange: A woman enters calling out to the head priest and speaking of composing sixty chapters of “Genji” while at Ishiyama Temple she is remembered. But having failed to hold a memorial service for Genji, she cannot attain salvation, so she asks the priest to hold such a service and also conduct prayers for her. The priest agrees but when he asks her name she is ashamed to state it saying only that she will appear at Ishiyama and pray

with him. The priest realizes she must be the lady with the same name as the lavender (murasaki) clouds over Ishiyama Temple. The chorus sings of her embarrassment as she departs.

3. Ai narration: Although usually omitted, in some performances a local man appears and tells about Murasaki Shikibu.
4. Waki’s wait: The priests sing of his coming to Ishiyama and of completing their evening prayers. They wonder if the story about Genji is true but decide to offer prayers for Murasaki Shikibu. They sing a waiting song referring to Murasaki’s brief moment of glory, and how Genji’s story cannot really be believed. .
5. Nochijite entrance: The ghost of Murasaki enters to issei music and with the chorus sings of leaves scattered on the mountain side which reveals the pine wind, and her shame at revealing her own name.
6. Waki/Shite exchange: The priest sings of the deepening stillness of night and the appearance of a beautiful woman dressed in a lavender robe in the torchlight. Using a rich mixture of words connected with flowers, robes, and colors, the ghost sings that even without seeing the color, her name can be guessed, and to the priest’s direct question she admits that she is Lady Murasaki. The chorus sings of staying awake through the night, of the moon and the temple bell, of the wind that chases dreams away, and of the priests, praying for Genji’s soul. .
7. Shite/Waki exchange: Murasaki asks what offering to make and the priest replies that in the world of dream there is no need for such, but she should dance instead. She agrees to do so and they describe her beautiful robe and fan, and her dance of the butterfly. The chorus sings of her dancing sleeves within dream turning to reality. She dances a brief iroe color dance.
8. Shite’s narrative dance: With the chorus, the ghost sings of life’s impermanence, of Murasaki writing in seclusion at Ishiyama Temple, and of failing to hold a memorial service. She takes out a scroll on which she has inscribed a prayer and gives it to the priest. As the ghost dances, the chorus sings making poetic references to people, places and incidents from the Tale of Genji naming many chapters’ titles, and at the same time suggesting the importance of encountering the wisdom of Buddha. It ends and she asks for salvation.
9. Shite’s exclamation: The chorus for the priest sings of dream turning to reality and the fleetingness of all things. The ghost sings of having prayed for Genji and in so doing herself being saved.
10. Conclusion: The chorus sings that upon reflection Murasaki Shikibu was in fact a manifestation of the goddess Ishiyama Kannon appearing briefly in this world to write the Tale of Genji as a means tell mankind that all the world is but a dream. [Richard Emmert]