

Noh Kanawa 鉄輪

(“The Iron Crown”)

Based on an account in the Heike Monogatari about a 9th century incident, a woman whose husband has left her for another wife prays nightly at the Kibune Shrine for revenge. A shrine attendant tells her that he has received an oracle that the gods have agreed to honor her wish to be turned into a demoness and she is told to dress in red, put an iron crown on her head surmounted with burning tapers, and let her fury take her over. Meanwhile, her former husband visits a diviner and finds out his life is in danger due to his former wife’s jealousy. The diviner makes dolls to which the woman’s fury can be transferred and prays vigorously. The woman appears as a demoness and after exhausting her hatred on the dolls loses her power and disappears.

Author: Unknown. Though sometimes attributed to Zeami (1363?-1443?), a later author is more likely.

Scene: Autumn, the Kibune Shrine in Yamashiro Province, in the present Sakyō Ward, Kyoto; then the home of Seimei of Kamigyō in the capital, the present Kamigyō ward in Kyoto.

Category: Fourth category miscellaneous (demoness) play, present-time (genzai) noh in two acts, with taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Current in all five shite schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Ai/Ai-kyōgen (interlude actor) : a shrine attendant.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): a woman of the capital. Wears a female spirit (deigan) mask.
- Wakizure (accompanying waki actors): the woman’s former husband.
- Waki (secondary actor): Abe no Seimei, a diviner.
- Nochijite (second half shite) : the woman turned demoness. Wears a female demoness (hashihime or namanari) mask.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Ai entrance/narration: A shrine attendant enters and tells how he dreamt that a woman would come to the shrine that night to pray, that the gods have told him to tell her that they would grant her prayer, and that he is to inform her of what she must do.
2. Shite entrance: A woman enters to shidai music and sings of the many days and ties which bind her into her robe of love, the fickleness of a man drawn in two ways, the anguish suffered from a false pledge of love, and her visit to Kibune Shrine to pray for revenge. She sings a travel song of her night journey referring to having often traveled this road, her troubled and joyless mind, the darkness along the Kurama river, and her arrival at Kibune Shrine.
3. Ai/Shite exchange: The shrine attendant tells the woman that he has received an oracle about her nightly prayers and that the gods will grant her wish to become a demoness. She is to dress in red, daub her face red, crown her head with an iron tripod and attach burning torches to its

legs, and fill her heart with fury. The woman denies such a wish, but the attendant is certain and describes how the woman is already taking on a sinister mien. He runs off in fear.

4. Shite’s exit: The woman says she will return home to do as the oracle commands. The chorus describes the change in the woman’s appearance as she becomes a demoness, and how black clouds gather in the sky, and wind and thunder roar. The woman exits quickly.
5. Wakizure entrance: The woman’s former husband enters in silence and says that he is on his way to see the diviner Seimei because of repeated nightmares which he hopes the diviner can explain to him.
6. Wakizure/Waki exchange: The man calls out at Seimei’s home and the latter enters. The man tells about his repeated nightmares and the diviner immediately recognizes that the man is the victim of a jealous woman and that his life is in danger that very night. The man tells how he recently divorced his wife and the diviner explains that his former wife has received strength by repeated prayers and is preparing to attack him. His only hope is to transfer her anger to something else. The man begs him to pray, then exits.

Stage assistants place on stage a prayer stand on which is a wig and samurai hat to represent the husband and his new wife, and a Shinto paper wand. A cloth-covered platform is placed in front of the stand.

7. Waki’s action: Seimei describes the preparations he has made. Accompanied by notto prayer ceremony music, he begins to pray saying that men and women should not be interfered with evil spirits. The chorus describes how he prays to all the gods and buddhas, and to the sun, moon, and stars, and how rain pours, winds blow and thunder and lightning fill the air terrifying the diviner.
8. Nochijite entrance: The demoness appears to deha music and sings of change which rules all things, of the cycle of action and retribution, of taking revenge on people by whom she was wronged. She describes herself as a flaming red demoness. The chorus describes how she draws near to her husband’s pillow and greets him.
9. Shite’s lament: The demoness sings of her hatred due to a broken pledge which should have lasted ages. With the chorus, she describes her bitter tears of rejection and torment, how feeling of love well up then again turn hatred, how whether awake or asleep she cannot escape her despair, and how he must learn retribution.
10. Shite’s action: With the chorus, she sings of her grief, her intent to kill the couple, her striking them in retribution, and then the appearance of numerous gods which rebuke her and the loss of her demonic powers. Saying she has lost now but her turn will come again, she disappears. [Richard Emmert].