

Noh Kantan 邯鄲

(“The Pillow of Kantan”)

Rosei, a young man in China, sets out on a long journey seeking enlightenment. At the village of Kantan, he stops at an inn where he is given a miraculous pillow which is said to provide enlightening dreams. He falls asleep, but is soon woken by an imperial envoy saying that he has been chosen to ascend the throne. He is taken to the capital and reigns for fifty glorious years. But he is suddenly awoken again and told by the innkeeper that his meal is ready. Dazed, Rosei realizes that life is but a dream. He decided to return home.

Author: Unknown. Though sometimes attributed to Zeami (1363?-1443?), early sources are unclear. Still it is generally thought to have been written by Zeami or someone close to him.

Scene: The village of Kantan in China, believed to be the present city of Handan in Hebei Province.

Category: Fourth category miscellaneous (Chinese setting) play, present time (genzai) noh in one act, gaku (gagaku court dance) piece with taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Ai/Ai-kyôgen: (secondary interlude actor): A woman, the innkeeper at Kantan.
- Shite (main actor): Rosei, a young man seeking enlightenment. Wears the special kantan otoko (“man of Kantan”) mask..
- Waki (secondary actor): an imperial envoy (within Rosei’s dream).
- Wakizure (accompanying Waki actors): Two palanquin bearers (in dream).
- Wakizure (accompanying Waki actors): Imperial ministers (in dream).
- Kokata (child actor): A dancer (within Rosei’s dream).

Synopsis: scene by scene.

Stage assistants place on stage a platform with roofed framework. These will represent first a bedchamber at the inn and then a palace.

1. Ai opening: The innkeeper enters carrying a pillow. Stating that she is from Kantan, she tells of a sage practicing ancient art who had given her a wondrous pillow on which if a person sleeps, will attain enlightenment. Having named it the “pillow of Kantan”, she will offer it to travelers. She places the pillow on the platform.
2. Shite entrance: Rosei enters to shidai music and sings of wandering through life’s journey not knowing when this dream will end. He tells that he is from the land of Shoku and has up to now frittered his life away. Having heard of a wise sage who lives on Mt. Yôhi, he is on his way to seek enlightenment from him. He sings a travel song which describes him crossing many mountains, wandering in strange country, and his arrival at the village of Kantan where he decides to stop, even though it is still midday.
3. Shite/Ai exchange: Rosei tells the innkeeper where he is from and where he is going, and asks

for lodging. She tells him about the pillow of Kantan and suggests he uses it while she prepares millet.

4. Shite monologue: Rosei steps on the dais and, gazing at the pillow, sings of testing it. The chorus sings for him of taking refuge from a passing shower at an inn and seeking a dream in a brief sleep.
5. Waki/Shite exchange: An imperial envoy enters with two palanquin bearers during the last chorus song. Waking Rosei up, he announces that the emperor of So wishes to abdicate to Rosei because he is endowed with auspicious signs. They sing of getting into sparkling palanquin. The chorus sings of setting out, unaware that it is but a glorious dream. Envoy and palanquin bearers exit.
6. Kokata/Wakizure entrance, Shite’s exultation: A dancer and several ministers enter to shin-no-raijo music as Rosei sits on the dais. The chorus describes the splendid setting of the radiant palace, gold and silver pebbles strewn in the gardens, and jeweled gates, all recalling Buddha’s paradise. The chorus continues telling of the thousands of treasures and gems borne as gifts, and the tumultuous praise of all in attendance. Together with Rosei, the chorus describes a mountain to the east of pure silver crowned with a golden sun and a mountain to the west of pure gold crowned with a silver moon, symbolic of the endless spring and autumn of eternity.
7. Wakizure/Shite exchange, Kokata’s dance: A minister, saying that since Rosei has sat on the throne for 50 years, he should drink a special elixir so that he can enjoy 1000 years of life. They discuss this elixir of the immortals and the peace and prosperity of the people. As the dancer pours wine for Rosei, the chorus sings of the desire of the realm to be in peace forever. Rosei suggests that the cup be passed among all guests and the dancer dances as the chorus describes his graceful dance, and the silver dew of chrysanthemums which brings the greatest joy.
8. Shite’s dance: Rosei performs a gaku court dance, first on the platform, then on the full stage..
9. Shite’s action dance: With the chorus, Rosei sings of dancing at night, but suddenly it turns to day; thinking it is day, the moon appears; as spring flowers bloom, leaves are tinged in autumn hues; thinking it is summer, it begins to snow. The seasons pass quickly and co-exist as blossoms delightfully bloom all in a single day. As seasons pass, the glory of fifty years vanishes and Rosei awakes.
10. Ai notice: The innkeeper appears and tells Rosei his meal is ready.
11. Shite final action: With the chorus, Rosei sings of waking, dazed that what he thought that 50 glorious years were but the time it took the millet to cook. Seeing that life is but a dream, he bows in thanks the pillow and leaves to return home. [Richard Emmert]