

Noh Semimaru 蟬丸

(“Prince Semimaru”)

The blind prince Semimaru has been banished from the court by the Emperor and has taken a mountain pass at Osaka-yama with only a lute to comfort himself. Recognizing that his banishment is due to deeds of a former life, Semimaru accepts his lot. Meanwhile, his mad sister Sakagami, wandering aimlessly, comes to Osaka Pass, recognizes Semimaru’s lute playing, and they are reunited. After reliving memories and comforting each other, she must depart again too.

Author: Generally thought to be by Zeami (1363?-1443?)

Scene: Autumn, in the 10th century reign of emperor Daigo; Osaka Pass in Omi Province, a check point between Kyoto and Lake Biwa, in the present Otani-chô in Otsu City, Shiga prefecture.

Category: Fourth category miscellaneous (mad woman) play, present-time (genzai) noh in one act, kakeri anguish dance piece, without taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Tsure (accompanying Shite main actor): Prince Semimaru, blind son of Emperor Daigo. Wears the blindman (semimaru or yoroboshi) mask.
- Wakizure (accompanying waki actors): two palanquin bearers.
- Waki (secondary actor): Kiyotsura, an imperial envoy.
- Ai / Ai-kyogen (interlude actor): Hakuga no Sammi, a servant.
- Shite (main actor): Princess Sakagami, Semimaru’s sister. Wears a young (zô, ko-omote), mature (fukai), or disheveled (masukami) woman mask.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

Stage assistants place on the stage a bamboo framework representing Semimaru’s hut.

1. Tsure/Wakizure/Waki entrance: Semimaru, flanked by two palanquin bearers and Kiyotsura enter to shidai music. The latter sings of the unsettled world and their hope in it, introduces Semimaru as the fourth child of the Emperor, and sings of his blindness from birth due no doubt to deeds of a past life and how the Emperor has ordered that he would be escorted to Osaka mountain, his head shaved as a sign of leaving this world, and there abandoned. They sing a travel song referring to leaving the capital, the sorrows and afflictions of the young prince, and their arrival at Osaka Pass.
2. Tsure/Waki exchange: Semimaru and Kiyotsura speak of the former being abandoned, the latter wondering why such a benevolent emperor has issued this decree and the former explaining that though it may seem cruel, his father intends him to work out his karmic impediments from past lives to obtain future salvation and it is thus a sign of his father’s love. Kiyotsura cuts off Semimaru’s hair symbolizing him taking religious vows. [During monogi costume change music,

- stage assistants change Semimaru’s robes to those of a priest]. Kiyotsura in turn gives Semimaru a straw raincloak so he will look poor and won’t be attacked by robbers, a rain hat, and a staff, each time with Semimaru quoting poems which refer to these objects. The chorus sings of the sad figure that this emperor’s son has become, describes how travelers in tears crowd around to see but then leave him behind, how Kiyotsura hiding his tears turns to leave, and how the Prince now alone with his lute as his only possession sinks to the ground in tears.
3. Ai’s visit: Hakuga no Sammi enters, speaks of building a hut for the Prince, says that it is ready, leads Semimaru into it, and then takes his leave saying that the Prince should ask him for anything that he requires.
 4. Shite’s entrance: Sakagami enters to issei music and sings describing herself as the third child of the Emperor who is now mad with her hair sticking up on end (sakagami = “upside down”). She scolds children who laugh at her, then reflects on seeds which rise to become tips of branches and the moon whose reflection sinks to the sea bottom, asking which of these is right way up and which is upside down, and compares it to herself, a princess now among common folk. She dances a kakeri anguish dance.
 5. Shite’s travel song: With the chorus, she sings a travel song describing her leaving the “flower” capital and referring to the mournful ducks of Kamo (“duck”) river, her pining as she climbs Matsuzaka (“pine hill”), the songs of crickets and grasshoppers of Yamashina, her own pure heart like the rapids of Kiyotani (“pure falls”) river, and her being aghast at seeing her mad reflection in the waters of Hashiri-i (“rushing springs”) near Osaka Pass.
 6. Shite/Tsure meeting: Semimaru sings, playing his lute, of the night chill and the fleetingness of life. Sakagami speaks of hearing a beautiful lute from a poor hut and fond memories as she goes close to listen. Semimaru asks who is there and Sakagami recognizes her brother’s voice and replies that she is his sister. Semimaru opens the door calling out as they reach for each other’s hands.
 7. Shite/Tsure narration: The chorus with Sakagami describes the tears which moisten their sleeves, the memories which the air around them breathes, how both were expelled from the court and in their fallen state now suffer in pitiful circumstances, and how Semimaru plays his lute thinking only of grief and misery.
 8. Shite/Tsure farewell: Together they sing of their sadness at again leaving each other weeping as Sakagami leaves, her taking solace in her travel, him left along like a frightened bird.. [Richard Emmert]