

Japanese Nō Dramas

Edited and translated by ROYALL TYLER

Semimaru

pp. 237-250

PENGUIN BOOKS

1992

Semimaru

Although consistent in every detail with the rest of nō, *Semimaru* resembles no other play. It is astonishingly abstract, since nothing about it can be explained in terms of the ordinary world, but that does not mean it is cold. On the contrary, *Semimaru* conveys at once the warmth of love and the deep sorrow of ineluctable loss. So strange, yet familiar, are Semimaru and Sakagami, his sister, that the drama seems to take place outside space or time. *Semimaru* resembles a pure theatre of the mind.

Zeami probably wrote the play, since the *Sakagami* he mentioned in his *Sorugaden dangi* ('Conversations on nō') can hardly be any other. His words show that he had performed it himself. In addition, *Semimaru* is partly based on *Ōsaka monogurui* ('The Ōsaka Madman'), a work that has not been performed since Zeami's time but is known to be by him. None the less, a few authorities still have trouble believing that *Semimaru* is by Zeami, and one recent writer (Miyake Akiko) attributed it to his eldest son, Motomasa. Like *The Falling Block*, *Semimaru* seems not to have been staged between the late fifteenth and late seventeenth centuries, but to have survived instead as a text for amateur students of nō singing.

According to the play, Sakagami and Semimaru are the third and fourth children of 'His Engi Majesty'. This is Emperor Daigo (r. 897-930), whose reign was seen in Zeami's time as a sort of golden age. However, Daigo had no such children. Instead, a story in *Konjaku monogatari shū* ('Tales of Times Now Past', c. 1100) describes how a grandson of Emperor Daigo went to learn a rare piece of lute (*biwa*) music from one Semimaru, a blind musician who lived near the Ōsaka Barrier. This grandson is the Hakuga no Sammi who appears in the interlude of *Semimaru*, although this role in the play has little to do with the *Konjaku* story.

The Ōsaka Barrier, the setting of *Semimaru*, was a checkpoint or toll station on Ōsaka Pass, between Kyoto and Lake Biwa. Since all travellers to and from the eastern provinces had to pass that way, the spot was famous in poetry and in ordinary life. Beggar-entertainers

clearly frequented the place, and Semimaru (whether or not he actually existed) was eventually claimed as a founder and patron by one line of blind strolling musicians. It was probably they who made him a prince. At the same time, he came to be honoured in a shrine near the Ōsaka Barrier. His cult was added to the shrine's established cult, that of the deity of the pass.

Sakagami first appears in *Semimaru* itself, but Zeami (if it was he) probably did not invent her out of thin air. Her name, as written in the play, means 'upside-down hair', but since the same syllables mean 'deity of the slope', she too alludes to the cult of Ōsaka Pass. A mountain deity often had both male and female manifestations. In addition, the divinities of roads and travel (*sae-no-kami*, *chigasaki-no-kami*) were commonly conceived as male-female couples, sometimes explicitly erotic. It is true, however, that in *Semimaru*, Semimaru and Sakagami are brother and sister, not lovers. The analogy between them and the divinities of Ōsaka Pass cannot be pursued too far.

Although Sakagami is, in name, a 'deity of the slope', her 'upside-down hair' is more than a play on words. In general, hair like hers was accepted as a sign of intense, active energy. The most likely cause of this state, for a woman, was jealous rage, but spirit-possession could produce the same effect in a medium of either sex. Zaō Gongen, a mountain deity iconographically related to the wrathful divinities of Esoteric Buddhism, has similarly bristling hair. Yet even though hair bristling with jealousy or divine frenzy can actually be found elsewhere in *nô*, it is not easy to define a particular reason for Sakagami's startling looks or for her state of mind.

As a character-type in *nô*, Sakagami is a *monogurui* ('madwoman' or 'madman'). Many *monogurui* are entertainers, and because of the lore associated with Semimaru and the Ōsaka Barrier, Sakagami, too, may be connected with wandering entertainers. Several writers have associated her with a class of wandering female entertainers known as *aruki-miko* (literally, 'peripatetic mediums'). None the less, she is unlike any other *monogurui* in *nô*. While others rave only temporarily, when suitably provoked, Sakagami is mad in her normal state. From her madness, she visits sanity – for with her brother she is clearly sane – as others lapse into madness from ordinary life. Her mind, like her hair, is upside down.

ever: this is the pair in *Semimaru*. One weeps in silence, the other scolds passing children and vaticinates about what is the right way up or topsy-turvy. Music draws them briefly into each other's arms, then the winds of change inexorably part them again. Their nature and predicament seem to evoke experience far beyond the reach of any ordinary words.

There are three Semimaru shrines within the city limits of Ōtsu, on the Lake Biwa side of Ōsaka Pass. The largest of them, the Lower Shrine (Shimo-sha), still boasts the famous 'toll-station spring' (*sake no shimizu*) mentioned by Sakagami as she approaches Semimaru's hut. The little Keihan Electric Railway goes right past it, coating fence and torii with rust from the tracks.

Semimaru

Persons in order of appearance

Prince Semimaru (<i>Semimaru</i> mask)	<i>tsure</i>
Kiyotsura, an imperial messenger	<i>waki</i>
Two Palanquin-Bearers	<i>wakejuru</i>
Hakuga no Sammi	<i>ai</i>
Princess Sakagami (<i>Masugami</i> or <i>Zō-onna</i> mask)	<i>shite</i>

Remarks: A fourth-category play (*yonbannet-mono*) current in all five schools of *nô*. A variant performance tradition (*kegake*) in the Kanze school has both Semimaru and Sakagami as *shite*. In this case, Semimaru's hut is placed before drums.

* * *

Stage assistant places Semimaru's hut in witness square.

To shidai music, enter Semimaru, flanked by the two Palanquin-Bearers who hold a canopy over him. They are followed by Kiyotsura.

KIYOTSURA and BEARERS

troubles may yet prove our surest hope.

KIYOTSURA (*nanori*) You see before you Prince Semimaru, the fourth child born to His Engi Majesty.

KIYOTSURA and BEARERS

(*agents*) In truth, all that befalls us (so this sad world turns) only rewards our deeds done in the past.

Into this life he came, this prince of the blood, thanks to virtuous conduct lived out long ago, yet from birth has been (and why?) completely blind. For him no sun, no moon shine in the heavens, nor welcome lamplight in the dark of night. Tears are his lot, falling like endless rain.

KIYOTSURA So the days of the prince went by, until His Majesty, unfathomable in his wishes

KIYOTSURA and BEARERS

issued this decree:

Escort him now, in secret, to yonder Ōsaka Mountain. Shave his head, in sign that he has left the world, and there let him stay:

imperial words that cannot be retracted.

The task inspires immeasurable sorrow,

yet His Majesty has spoken. So it must be.

(*agents*) Unwilling steps, by secret ways,

lead us from the palace, stealthily,

(*agents*) while dawn stains the sky,

to take us from the Miyako we love

to take us from the Miyako we love:

for he is bound this day far, far away, never to return,

this unhappy prince, who, now alone,

his refuge gone, has lost all future hope!

Sorrows enough afflict us in this world:

blind turtles, we, seeking through the years

a bit of floating wood to rest upon,¹

wandering a benighted way

as clouds of delusion fill the skies

1. According to a Buddhist simile, it is as rare to encounter the Buddha's comforting teaching as it is rare for a blind sea turtle, who surfaces only once every hundred years, to come up with his head through the single hole in a bit of floating wood.

upon Ōsaka Mountain² we have arrived
upon Ōsaka Mountain we have arrived.

KIYOTSURA (*tsuketsurifu*) Having come so swiftly, we have already reached the barrier on Ōsaka Mountain. Your Highness, this is where you are to remain.

Bearers slip out through side door. Semimaru sits before chorus, Kiyotsura in base square.

SEMIMARU Kiyotsura!

KIYOTSURA Here I am, Your Highness.

Bows, touching hands to stage.

SEMIMARU Are you then to abandon me upon this mountain?

KIYOTSURA Yes, Your Highness. So His Majesty has decreed. And now that I have accompanied you so far, I fear I do not know just where to leave you. Yet our Sovereign, more than any other since the time of Yao and Shun,³ brings peace to the realm and nurtures his people! What can have made him issue this decree? I find it difficult to comprehend.

SEMIMARU Oh no, Kiyotsura, you must not talk so foolishly. I was born blind because in a former life I was lax in observing the Precepts.⁴ My father, the Emperor, may seem cruel to abandon me in the wilderness, but he means to have me work through, in this life, all my karmic impediments from the past, and so to secure for me salvation in the life to come. Now *that* truly is a father's love. No, no, I shall not complain of His Majesty's decree.

KIYOTSURA Since His Majesty has ordered me to do so, Your Highness, I will now cut off your hair.

SEMIMARU What does this mean?

KIYOTSURA Your Highness, it means that you are now leaving the world to enter religion. This is a most fortunate step for a man to take.

Semimaru rises. The cutting of the hair is briefly mimed. Stage assistant then removes Semimaru's outer robe and places upon him the boddress of a monk.

SEMIMARU Why yes, she did say she would cut off her fragrant hair and pillow her head on hard sandalwood –

2. These 'clouds of delusion' are at once the physical clouds clinging to the slopes of the mountain and the clouds of misery that will surround Semimaru there. The end of *The Mountain Crane* describes how 'wrongful clinging swells to clouds, and clouds into the Mountain Crane, a fearsome demon bulk'.

3. The proverbial sage emperors of China's distant past.

4. The Precepts are the Buddhist rules of conduct.

Seishi, in the land of Cathay.⁵

I look very like her now!

KIYOTSURA Your Highness, as you look now, there is every reason to fear you may be attacked by robbers. I will take the liberty of removing your silk hunting cloak. Please put on, instead, this rain-cloak of straw. It is called a *mino*.

Stage assistant gives Seminaru the mino.

SEMINARU The *mino*, perhaps, one knows from that poem

about Tamino Isle in the rain?⁶

KIYOTSURA And to shelter you from the rain and dew, allow me also to give you this hat. It is called a *kasa*.

Kiyotsura takes kasa from stage assistant and gives it to Seminaru.

SEMINARU Surely the *kasa* one knows from those lines,

Good man, tell your master:

'Wear your *kasa*!'⁷

Seminaru puts the kasa down.

KIYOTSURA And if you please, Your Highness, carry this staff to help you find your way as you walk.

Kiyotsura takes the staff from stage assistant and gives it to Seminaru.

SEMINARU Yes, yes, the staff of which Henjō once sang:

Leaning on this staff,

soon I shall cross

the summit of a thousand years.⁸

Kiyotsura sits once more in bare square.

KIYOTSURA That was a staff for a thousand long years;

SEMINARU this, the mountain they call Ōsaka,

KIYOTSURA its barrier-hut closed, of straw with bamboo

SEMINARU pillars: his support,

KIYOTSURA the Emperor, his father

SEMINARU has cast him out

5. In his distress, the gently bred Seminaru resorts to understanding his own situation through poetic similes. Seishi was a famous Chinese beauty. These lines seem deliberately to misread a couplet by the Chinese poet Li Ho (791-817).

6. Seminaru has never seen a real *mino*, but he knows the word from a poem by Ki no Tsurayuki in the *Kokinshū*. The island of Tamino was off the coast of what is now Ōsaka.

7. From another, anonymous *Kokinshū* poem. The poem urges a servant to have his master wear a *kasa* because 'the dew drips from the trees on Miyagi Moor more heavily still than rain'.

8. The poet-monk Henjō (818-890) was still a layman when the emperor gave his venerated aged grandmother a silver (or silver-mounted) staff. He composed this poem for her as a reply. The first two lines describe the staff as having been made by the gods.

CHORUS (*agents*) into a world of troubles

upon Ōsaka. O friends and strangers,⁹

look upon him now!

See this Prince, born of our Sovereign.

See what he has come to!

Travellers and their horses crowd by,

to and fro, and with showers of tears

wet their sleeves, filled with distress

that they, too, must leave him behind

that they, too, must leave him behind.

Kiyotsura bows to Seminaru in farewell.

Yet the parting has come. In the light of dawn,

hiding his tears as best he is able,

away he goes, homeward again,

Kiyotsura, weeping, rises and starts towards bridgeway.

while the Prince remains, now wholly alone,

his only possessions the lute clasps to him,

the staff he bears.

Holding hat and staff, Seminaru moves to front and gazes after the retreating

Kiyotsura, who stops at second pine to look back before passing through curtain.

Sinking to the ground, he sobs aloud

sinking to the ground, he sobs aloud.

Seminaru takes several quick steps backwards as though his legs will hardly support him, sits, drops staff and hat, and weeps.

* * *

Enter Hakuga no Sammi. He stands in bare square.

HAKUGA NO SAMMI You see before you Hakuga no Sammi. Prince Seminaru

has been abandoned upon Ōsaka Mountain, at the mercy of dew and rain.

And being distressed for his sake, I want to build him a hut of straw.

[*Opens the door of Seminaru's hut, then goes to stand in bare square.*] At last the

hut is ready. I will tell him so. [*Bows to Seminaru.*] I beg your pardon, Your

Highness, but Hakuga no Sammi is before you. If you remain like this, you

will be at the mercy of dew and rain. I have therefore built you a hut of

straw, and hope you will condescend to accept it. If it please you, you may

9. 'O friends and strangers' draws on Seminaru's most famous poem: 'See O see! Leaving, returning, they go their ways, while friends and strangers meet at Ōsaka Barrier.' The poem is included in the *Caenishū* (c. 911).

enter it now. [*Takes Semimaru's arm and guides him into the hut, then steps back and bows once more.*] I beg you to call upon me, Your Highness, should you need anything at all. For now, however, I must be off to serve my master. Goodbye, Your Highness, for today. [*Exit, after closing the door of the hut.*]

* * *

To issai musur, enter Sakagami. Her robe is off her right shoulder to indicate that she is mad, but nothing about her hair imitates the description of it, below. She stops at first pine.

SAKAGAMI (*yabû*) I am the third child of His Engi Majesty.¹⁰

Sakagami is my name. I was born a princess,
yet acts of mine in some life long ago
now, at every turn, addle my wits.

In this madness of mine I wander far,
my black hair bristling to the sky;

Though I stroke and stroke it, it will not lie down.

Mimes glaring at someone nearby.

Very well, you children, what are you laughing at? You think it funny, do you, the way my hair grows straight up? Yes, I suppose my hair growing up that way is funny. But talk about things being upside down, you little guttersnipes laughing at me are far worse than my hair.

How fascinating! My hair and your laughter
become so well the realm of all we see.

The seeds of flowers, buried in the earth,
rise to tip the branches of a thousand trets;
the moon aloft, radiant in the heavens,
sinks to the bottom of ten thousand waters.

Which of these is the right way up?

Which is really upside down?

Born a princess, I fell among the common folk;

my hair, bristling skyward, is crowned with stars and frost.

Right way up, upside down,

things straight and things backwards:

both are here, plain to see: fascinating!¹¹

(QUASI-DANCE: *kukeri*)

Sakagami comes on stage and performs a kakeri which conveys her agitation.

The wind, combing the willow's green hair,

blow as it will, cannot tease out the tangles;

SAKAGAMI nor can my hand ever smooth this hair.

CHORUS I claw at my hair, sleeves wildly waving:

SAKAGAMI just so the dancer looks in *Tearing Her Hair*,¹²

a distressing spectacle!

Sakagami dances as the text continues.

CHORUS (*agents*) Leaving Miyako, the city of flowers¹³

leaving Miyako, the city of flowers,

across the Kamo River

(so mournfully the ducks seem to call)

and the Shira-kawa River

(does it flow on for ever?)

through Awata-guchi, pining, I go

to labour on up steep Pine Hill,

and see now looming, though once so distant,

Otowa Mountain, that soon drops behind.

How sorely I shall miss Miyako!

Grasshoppers and crickets fill with their song

twilight shadows at Yamashina.

O you of the village, do not rebuke me!

11. Sakagami's speech on 'right way up, upside down' (*yuu* and *gyaku*) appears to develop a passage in *Alutshû muntô* (1339), a work by the great Zen master Musô Soseki (1276-1331). Soseki discussed the non-duality of *yuu* and *gyaku*, terms which sum up a complex of ideas on 'right' and 'wrong', or 'normal' and 'abnormal'.

12. *Butô*, a *bugaku* dance of the kind brought to Japan from the continent in the eighth century. According to *Kyôkenchû* ("Teachings on *bugaku*", 1233): "This dance evokes a Tang empress who, overcome by jealousy, became an ogress; was incarcerated; and then smashed her prison, came forth, and danced. The mask used has long, wild hair." Two other, quite different versions of the story behind *Butô* (which has no words) are difficult to connect with Sakagami.

13. The first eight lines of this *agents* passage (including the repeated line) are from a *kusumai* piece called *Togoku kakuri* ("Going down to the East") that Zeami incorporated into *Ôtowa monogurui*. The road to the East led over Ôsaka Pass. The lines in parentheses acknowledge puns on the names Kamo and Shira-kawa, both rivers that one would cross on the way out of Kyoto via Awata-guchi. Pine Hill (*Matsu-zaka*) rises beyond Awata-guchi, and Otowa Mountain, which stands over Kiyomizu-dera, is another familiar feature of this landscape. Beyond Otowa lies the village of Yamashina.

10. In the original, the following monologue by Sakagami is not divided into verse and prose; it is all in prose, if anything, but at least parts of it are sung.

Crazed I may be, yet my heart is pure,
pure as the loud rapids of Kiyotaki River:¹⁴
good people, let me pass on by!

SAKAGAMI

Upon Ōsaka,
the toll-station spring
shows him his face:
startled, he bridles,
the colt from Fullmoon¹⁵

CHORUS

keeps up a swift pace, and Ōsaka nears:
Rushing Spring's waters reflect my form
and I, even I, recoil, aghast:
the hair on my head a snarl of thorns,
eyebrows an inky tangle:
yes, Sakagami herself, in the water,
mirrored in ripples as night comes on,
the picture of madness!

Sakagami has arrived upon Ōsaka Mountain. She now sits, invisibly as it were, against the back wall of the stage. Semimaru, in the hut, opens his fan and holds it as though plucking a biwa. As he sings, Sakagami steals forward to bare square, listening.

SEMIMARU (*sabi*) The first and second strings quaver, low,
with autumn winds sighing through the pines,
and the third, no, fourth imperial offspring,¹⁶
yes, Semimaru touches these strings,
while the season turns to cold autumn showers.
Ah, the heart-chilling, endless nights!

This world of ours,

O it will do,
fare one well or ill:
palace or straw hovel,
neither can last long.¹⁷

14. The *kyô* of Kiyotaki ('Pure Cascades') River means 'pure', but the river itself is in north-western Kyoto, nowhere near Sakagami's present location.

15. A poem by Ki no Tsurayuki, included in the *Shûishû* (late 10th c.). Mochizuki (literally, 'full moon'), was a locality in Shinano province (now Nagano Prefecture) that presented tribute horses to the capital.

16. These lines allude to a poem on the *ô'u* (a zither like the Japanese *koto*) by Po Chû-i (772-846), included in the *Wakoku rûi shû*. The second pair of lines goes: 'The third and fourth strings sing high: a caged crane's voice, crying for its children in the night.'

17. A poem attributed to Semimaru in the *Shûinshû* (1206).

SAKAGAMI How very strange! Here is a straw hut,
and from within I hear strings nobly plucked:
the music of a lute!

What playing, to come from so poor a place!
How can this be?

And O the fond memories that crowd in upon me!
Rain bears on the roof, to drown my silent steps,
as I steal close and stand, listening.

Sakagami moves to centre. Semimaru folds his fan.

SEMIMARU Who is there? Who is making that noise outside? Are you
the one who has been visiting me lately? Hakuga no Sammi, is that
you?

SAKAGAMI His voice is very close. It is the Prince's voice, my brother's!
Hello, it is I, Sakagami! Semimaru, are you there?
SEMIMARU Sakagami? My sister? Astonished, I open the door,
[steff in hand, rises and opens door.]

SAKAGAMI and a painful sight greets my eyes!

Semimaru comes forth from hut as Sakagami goes to him.

SEMIMARU Each reaches out for the other's hand.

They place their hands on each other's shoulders.

SAKAGAMI My brother, is it you?

SEMIMARU O my sister, is it you?

CHORUS Each calls the other's name, as on Ōsaka
the cocks call to greet the dawn,
and with freely streaming tears
each moistens the other's sleeves.

Both weep. Sakagami then sits at centre.

CHORUS (*kuri*) The sandalwood tree, they say, smells sweet
the moment it puts forth its first two leaves.¹⁸

And so for us two, who in a life gone by
must have sought shelter beneath one tree,¹⁹
the air all around us breathes memories.

Twin blossoms we were, on a single bough!
SAKAGAMI (*sabi*) In a land far away,

Jōzō and Jōgen, two brothers,

18. A proverb meaning that genius or, as here, gentle birth are obvious from the start.

19. An expression often used to explain a bond in this life in terms of a meeting that must have taken place in an earlier one.

led their own father to the truth;²⁰
 while two others, Sôri and Sokuri,
 suffered bitter exile together.²¹
 Nearer to hand, Emperor Ôjin's two sons,
 the Naniwa Prince and the Uji Prince,
 insisted on ceding each other the throne.²²
 Such is the warmth of fraternal love.
 Yet, my brother, I never dreamed
 that *you* might be living in this place,
 till through walls of straw I heard your music
 and knew your touch on the sounding strings
 that drew me on to plumb with you
 the deep springs of a brother's and sister's love.
 Fondly, I believed neither sun nor moon
 could fall to earth, even when the world
 has reached these latter, degenerate days.
 Yet somehow we, expelled from princely state,
 have fallen so far: shut out from the court,
 to wander, lost, beyond the Palace skies:
 one, with crazed wits roaming town and country,
 one, a pitiful wretch, haunting a mountain road --
 and no one to turn to but travellers
 journeying through far-off lands.
 Only yesterday, glowing silks were ours,
 to wear in pavilions decked with jade,
 on gleaming floors in halls bright with gold.
 Yet today, suddenly, shelter means
 bamboo posts, a bamboo fence,
 gaping caves, a rattling door,
 straw to sleep on, a straw window,
 and on the floor, matting of straw,
 where, before, there lay brocade.

20. In the *Lotus Sutra*, they led their father to faith in the Buddha. It is actually unclear whether they (or the pair mentioned immediately below) were brothers or a brother and sister.

21. In a Buddhist tale mentioned in *Tailhiki* and *Gwapei jôshiki*, these two children of a Brahman king in southern India were cast out by their stepmother and died in the wilderness.

22. Both refused to accept the throne until the Uji Prince died. The Naniwa Prince then became Emperor Ninroku (c. 313-399).

SEMIMARU
 CHORUS

No one comes calling. I only hear
 monkeys crying from trees on the mountain,
 as my tears fall; and the pattering showers
 I tune my lute to, their sound my own
 on through the hours, the long, long hours:
 a music of weeping, a rain of tears
 in the hut's deep silence. While straw eaves
 through ragged gaps may let in moonlight,
 these eyes of mine, alas, are blind.
 Denied the moon, in a hovel of straw
 that shuts out even the sound of rain,
 day or night, my every thought
 is of grief and misery.

Both weep.

SAKAGAMI

(*young*) I cannot stay. These sad farewells,
 however prolonged, could last for ever.

Both rise.

SEMIMARU

Goodbye, then: goodbye, Semimaru.
 Even those who take shelter beneath the same tree
 grieve when they part. Think how I suffer,
 now my sister leaves and I stay behind!
 O, it breaks my heart!

Starting to leave.

SAKAGAMI

To me, at least, travel offers some solace.
 But to stay on here! O I feel for you!
 And with this cry she stops, in tears.

Weeps.

SEMIMARU

Hear him call on the Osaka road,
 a frightened bird, as darkness falls,
 yearning still for her long, black hair.

SAKAGAMI

O stop her, please, Ôsaka Barrier!

SEMIMARU

The woods of the pass recede behind me,

SEMIMARU

her voice grows distant, fading away

SAKAGAMI

as by eaves of straw

SEMIMARU

I stand alone,

CHORUS

calling as she calls: Goodbye, goodbye!
 O come again, come often to see me!

To first pine.

Sakagami looks back at Semimaru from third pine, then, as text continues, again starts away. Semimaru takes a few steps towards her, listening. Again she looks back.

Whisper-faint, the voices still carry:
 he straining to hear, she gazing back,
 weeping, weeping.

prince and princess have gone their ways
prince and princess have gone their ways.

Exit Sakagami, weeping. Semimaru weeps in place.