

# Japanese Nō Dramas

*Edited and translated by ROYALL TYLER*

## *Sumida-gawa* · THE SUMIDA RIVER

*The Sumida River* is by Zeami's eldest son, Motomasa (c. 1400-1432), whose early death plunged Zeami into despair. Motomasa left only a few plays that can be confidently attributed to him, but this one more than any other has assured his fame. Modern critics acclaim it, and there is no more popular play in the whole repertoire. The text of *The Sumida River* is read by all high school students, and the play is often performed for student audiences.

Compared to a work by Zeami, *The Sumida River* tells a tightly knit, easily understood story. Moreover, it develops an incident that could have happened in ordinary life. No written source for the play has been found, but unhappily there is nothing implausible about 'traders in children' stealing a woman's son. Two other nō plays, one by Zeami, treat the same theme. In Zeami and Motomasa's time, the east and north of Japan were developing regions with an acute need for labour, and children were sometimes sold into slavery there.

*The Sumida River* builds upon the existing tradition of *mongorai* ('madman' or 'madwoman') plays, and scholars have noted obvious parallels with an earlier work (no longer performed) named *Fue mongorai* ('The Madman with the Flute'). However, it constitutes in many ways a new departure for the genre. For one thing, although many nō plays focus on a parent separated from a child, only this one fails to end in happy reunion. Instead, the Woman in *The Sumida River* discovers that her son is dead. Zeami himself wrote that a skilfully performed *mongorai* play will make an audience cry. *The Sumida River* can certainly achieve that effect. It is so tragic that during the Edo period (1600-1868) it was felt to be unsuitable for performance at the shogun's or emperor's palace.

Zeami's writings and sayings show how interested he was in *The Sumida River*, and they record two disagreements with Motomasa about the play. First, Zeami held that the dead boy should not be represented in any way at the end of the work. Motomasa, on the other hand, insisted that the play could not stand at all unless the dead boy's

phantom appeared on stage. Later actors and audiences have generally backed Motomasa.

Second, Zeami felt the play needed more 'colour' and recommended a more striking costume for the Traveller. Scholars now take his opinion to be the source of a disagreement that still persists about the Traveller's identity. The earliest extant text of the play (in the hand of Komparu Zempō, 1454-1520), has him as a merchant, and so do all modern performances except those in the numerically dominant Kanze school. In the Kanze line of texts, which can be traced back as far as a copy dated to the Eiroku era (1558-1570), the Traveller is a man from Miyako. Only such a figure, and not a merchant from the East, could wear the costume that Zeami preferred. Three other textual variants are indicated in the notes to this translation. There are a good many other, minor discrepancies not only between but within the two major lines of texts.

One scholar (Itō Masayoshi) has pointed out several instances in which Motomasa's evocation of the boy's tomb seems to draw upon the poetry of Po Chü-i (772-846). However, the only classic work indispensable for understanding *The Sumida River* is a part of episode no. 9 of *Ise monogatari* ('Tales of Ise', 10th c.). Motomasa used this passage so concertedly that the Woman's lines in the first part of the play (until she boards the ferry) can be difficult to follow unless one knows it.

*Ise monogatari* was assumed in Motomasa's time to tell the story of the courtier and poet Narihira (825-880). Narihira's affair with a future empress got him into such trouble at court, so the story goes, that he had to leave the capital and travel down to the East. He and his companions took the same route as the Woman of the play when she went in search of her son.

On and on they went until, between the provinces of Musashi and Shimōsa, they came to a large river. 'Sumida River' was its name. Clustering together on the bank, they groaned to think how far they had come. Meanwhile, the ferryman cried, 'It's sundown! All aboard!' They felt very downcast as they boarded the ferry and set out to cross, for every one of them had left someone dear behind in Miyako. It happened that white birds the size of snipe, with red bills and feet, were just then sporting upon the water and catching fish. They had not seen birds like that in Miyako and did not know what kind they were. To their questions, the ferryman replied that these were 'Miyako birds'. On

hearing his words, [Narihira] made the poem: 'Are you true to your name? Then, Miyako birds, I put you this question: the one I love does she live or does she die?' All on board wept.

Motomasa superimposed this episode on the Woman's own plight in order to heighten the play's artistic appeal, and the skill with which he did so has elicited much praise. Still, his use of such material seems different from his father's.

The boy's grave-mound (Umewaka-zuka) is at Mokubo-ji, on the east bank of the Sumida River in modern Tokyo. It is surmounted by a willow tree. Although near an expressway, the spot is a quiet one, cut off from the rest of the world by a huge apartment development. Scholars agree that the temple's account of its history was made up from the play itself, but at a more popular level, the account has long been accepted as genuine.

Mokubo-ji claims to have been founded in 977 as a result of the miraculous apparition at the boy's tomb, although its existence is more likely to be connected with the rise of Edo (the pre-1868 name of Tokyo), which became the shogun's capital in 1603. Many elaborate versions of the play's story were produced for Edo readers and theatre audiences, especially in the eighteenth century, and Mokubo-ji no doubt prospered as a result. The temple was razed in about 1870 in the attempt to disestablish Buddhism, and an 'Umewaka [Shinto] Shrine' was erected on the site. Within twenty years, however, it was rebuilt, and had to be rebuilt again after 1945. In 1976, it was moved slightly to accommodate urban redevelopment, but a Society to Preserve the Umewaka-zuka was then formed to protect the grave-mound. An 'Umewaka Festival' is still held at the grave every year on 15 April, and prayers are offered for the boy's spirit.

It is upon an earlier translation of *The Sumida River* that Benjamin Britten based his opera *Curtlew River*.

## THE SUMIDA RIVER

Persons in order of appearance

A Ferryman	waki
A Traveller	wakizure
A Woman (Fukui mask)	shite
A Boy, Umewaka-maru	kakata

*Remark:* A fourth-category play (*yoibusume-nawa*) current in all five schools of nô. The Boy can be treated in different ways. Zeami opposed representing him in any way, but the playwright, Motomasa, disagreed. The present version, in which he appears on stage, is the most popular, but his presence can also be evoked simply by a voice from within the grave-mound; or even this voice can be omitted.

\* \* \*

*Stage assistant places a grave-mound, with a willow branch set in its top, before drums; the Boy is invisible inside it.*

*To nanori-bue music, enter Ferryman. He stands in bare square.*

FERRYMAN (*nanori*) You have before you a ferryman on the Sumida River in Musashi province. Since this is an important crossing, we take the ferryman's duty turn by turn. It is my turn today. I will therefore wait for travellers to come and then ferry them across the river.

[*Sits before Chorus.*]<sup>1</sup>

*To shidai music, enter Traveller. He stands in bare square, facing back of stage.*

TRAVELLER (*shidai*) Eastward lies the goal: in travel wear

castward lies the goal: in travel wear

I go, daily bound for distant skies.

*Fates audientic.*

(*nanori*) You have before you a merchant from the eastern provinces.

1. This *nanori* passage is from the Zempô text, the earliest surviving one. The text upon which the rest of this translation is based has: 'You have before you a ferryman on the Sumida River in Musashi province. I must row on quickly today and ferry people across the water. And there is something else, as well. For a certain reason, a Great Invocation is to be held at this place. It is open to all, clerics and laymen alike. Please, good people, note the present announcement!' Dramatically, this passage of the Zempô version seems distinctly preferable. However, the whole text has not been published.

Recently I went up to Miyako, and now that I am done with my trading, I am again on my way home.<sup>2</sup>

(*ogenta*) Clouds and mists

obscure far mountains that drop behind

obscure far mountains that drop behind,

while tollgate by tollgate, down the long road

I journey on, the provinces pass,

and my way leads to the Sumida River

*Mimes walking.*

of song and story:

here at the crossing I have arrived

here at the crossing I have arrived.

(*tsukizerifu*) Having come so swiftly, I seem already to have reached the ferry crossing on the Sumida River. Yonder I see a ferry about to set out. I must hurry aboard.

(*mondo*) Excuse me, ferryman, but I wish to board your boat.

FERRYMAN Certainly, certainly! Please do so. But you know, that woman coming up behind you is making the most extraordinary racket. What can be the matter with her?

TRAVELLER She is a madwoman, you see. She has come all the way from Miyako. Her ravings make a very entertaining show.<sup>3</sup>

FERRYMAN In that case, I will delay sailing and wait for her.

*Traveller sits at witness position, Ferryman before Chorus.*

*To issai music, enter Woman, carrying a sasa branch as a sign of her madness. She stops at first pine, facing audience.*

WOMAN (*sashi*) O it is true,

A mother's heart,

though not in darkness,

may yet wander, lost,

for love of her child.<sup>4</sup>

This I know well, now I roam, astray,

the highroads, among the travellers.

How can I tell them, how shall I seek

2. This second *nanori* passage is from the current non-Kanze school texts, which descend from the Zempô text. The text adopted for the rest of the translation has: 'You have before you a man from Miyako. A friend of mine lives in the East, and I am therefore on my way to see him without delay.'

3. In medieval times, the ravings of the mad were scarcely distinguished from the antics of entertainers, and many of the *nanogurui* ('mad') figures in nô actually are entertainers. In fact, a display of song and dance was the main object of many earlier *nanogurui* plays. The Traveller's remark is not as heartless as it sounds.

4. From a poem by Fujiwara no Kanesuke in the *Goenidô* (c. 955).

the place where my son has gone?

(*isei*) Ah, do you hear?

The wind, even the wind  
coursing the skies,  
sings welcome tidings  
to the patient pines.<sup>5</sup>

(QUASI-DANCE: *kakeri*)

*She performs an agitated kakeri circuit of the stage.*

Frail the dew on Makuzu Moor,

and I, as frail, am I to live on,  
ever bitter at my lot?

CHORUS

WOMAN (*ushi*) I lived for many years at Kita-Shirakawa, in the northern district of Miyako. One day, alas, disaster struck, for my only

son,

enticed away by traders in children,  
vanished from my side.

I sought him, and learned they had spirited him off

eastward, across Ōsaka Pass,  
to distant lands, to unknown Azuma.<sup>6</sup>

News so distressing confused my wits.

The one thought left me was to go there,  
to find my darling boy;

and now, in my quest, I am wholly lost!

CHORUS (*uguisu*) A thousand leagues are never far  
to a fond mother's heart, they say,  
when she cannot forget her child.

(*uguisu*) That bond in life

is always so fragile, yet now he is gone

is always so fragile, yet now he is gone,

when he might still have stayed with me a while,

and we are sundered, mother and son.

Just so, long ago, a mother grieved  
to see her nestlings fly.<sup>7</sup>

5. A *Shinkokinshū* (1206) poem by Kunaikyō.

6. Azuma is the old name of the wild region of eastern Japan: in modern times the Kanto Plain, centred on Tokyo.

7. A proverbial expression derived from a passage in *Kūshi kogo* (Ch. *K'ung-tz'u-chün-tū*, 'The Sayings of Confucius').

This anxious heart can go no further.

Here, the road ends where Musashi stops  
and Shimōsa province begins:

to the Sumida River I have come at last  
to the Sumida River I have come at last.

*Ferryman rises.*

WOMAN (*wando*) Please, please, let me come aboard, too!

FERRYMAN Where have you come from and where are you going?

WOMAN I have come from Miyako, and I am looking for someone.

FERRYMAN So, you are from Miyako, and you are mad into the bargain. Rave for us, then, rave and entertain us. Otherwise, I will not let you aboard.

WOMAN Cruel man! If it is you, the ferryman on the Sumida River, then you should be calling, 'It's sundown! All aboard!' Yet instead I hear, 'No, I'll not let you aboard!' Do not talk like that, for if you do, how can I believe that you are the ferryman?<sup>8</sup>

FERRYMAN Sure enough, you really are from Miyako. Your spirit and wit are true to the capital's name.

WOMAN And that expression you just used will not pass unchallenged, either. Here at this crossing, long ago, Narihira sang,

(*kami-no-ai*) Are you true to your name?

Then, Miyako birds,

I put you this question:

the one I love –

does she live or does she die?

(*wando*) Come, ferryman, those white birds there are like none I ever saw in Miyako. What do you call them, then?

FERRYMAN Gulls, they are called. They are seabirds.

WOMAN What an answer! Perhaps by the sea they are gulls, or even plovers for all I care. But why do you not answer, here on the banks of the Sumida River, that they are Miyako birds?

FERRYMAN Ah, why indeed? I confess my mistake. Here I live in this famous place, and still, I dully failed in reply to call them Miyako birds.

8. This speech begins the passage in which the playwright superimposes episode no. 9 of *Le songe d'Ivan* on the Woman's own situation. The Ferryman, in his reply, recognizes the allusion and acknowledges, as people often do in *nô* plays, the superior qualities of those who come from the capital.

WOMAN Gulls from the sea? No, for evening waves<sup>9</sup>

wash back to times past when Narihira

put that question:

Does she live or does she die?

recalling his love left in far Miyako.

For me, it is eastward my love goes

to the child I seek, as Narihira sought:

he, his dear lady,

I, my own son.

FERRYMAN The two loves are one,

and at love's urging,

CHORUS (*ageuta*) I in my turn

put you the question, Miyako birds

put you the question, Miyako birds:

the child I love, on this Azuma road,

does he live or does he die?

Again and again I question you,

but you give me no reply.

Miyako birds, your silence is rude.

Shall I name you, then, 'rustic birds'?

As the old song goes,

On the broad banks

of Horie River,

terming with boats,

they settle in flocks,

the clamouring Miyako birds.<sup>10</sup>

But that was Naniwa. Now I stand here

by the Sumida River, in the depths of the East.

What distances this search has led me –

endless! But let that be.

O ferryman, your boat may be full,

perhaps it is small, but still I beg,

O ferryman, take me aboard!

9. The expression 'evening waves' involves a pun, very common in *nô*, on *yû*, which means both 'evening' and 'say'. It appears even in passages where one does not expect to find 'evening'.

10. A poem from the *Mum'yôdai* (late 8th c.), by Ôtomo no Yakumochi. Naniwa, the scene of the poem, is the site of present Osaka. The poem's function is to stress how far the Woman has come from home.

Do me a kindness, ferryman, please,

make room for me as well!

Ferryman, with the outer robe now off his right shoulder in preparation for work, and pole in hand, is ready to cast off.

FERRYMAN (*woudô*) Never was there a madwoman so well-spoken. Come aboard, then. Hurry! [Woman sits near stage centre, towards witness square.] This crossing is tricky. Please make sure you stay quiet.

Traveller moves to sit slightly behind Woman, to her left. Behind them stands

Ferryman. They are in the boat.

WOMAN (*woudô*) Pardon me, but I see on the far bank a crowd gathered around a willow tree. What are they doing?<sup>11</sup>

FERRYMAN They are holding a Great Invocation,<sup>12</sup> and the reason why is a very sad story. Let me tell it to you while we make our crossing.

(*entari*) Last year, on the fifteenth day of the third month – why, that means it was exactly a year ago today! – a trader in children came by here from Miyako. He had with him a twelve-year-old boy whom he had bought, and he was bound for the far north. But the boy was not used to travelling. He was exhausted and had become very ill. Unable to walk another step, he collapsed here, on the bank of the river. Ah, what heartless people there are in this world! The trader simply abandoned him and went on his way. Meanwhile, the people here noticed that the boy seemed to be from a good family. They looked after him as best they could, but no doubt his own karma opposed his recovery, because he grew weaker and weaker until he clearly was dying. They asked him then who he was, and where he was from. 'What is your family's name,' they said, 'and which is your province?' 'I am from Miyako,' he replied, 'from Kira-Shirakawa. My family name is Yoshida, and I am an only child. After my father died, I stayed alone with my mother. Then I was stolen away by traders in children, and that is how I came here. I miss so much the sight and sound of the people of Miyako! So

11. In the oldest extant text, it is the Traveller who asks this question.

12. A *dai nembutsu*, or 'Great Invocation to Amida': a gathering, usually lasting seven days, at which people called the name of the Buddha Amida, praying for his grace and for rebirth in his Western Paradise. The participants prayed more for the benefit of others than for themselves. The practice could be associated with the death of a child, and the Zempô text of the play shows that this is the case here. The Woman arrives on the last day of a *dai nembutsu* held for the spirit of her son.

please build a mound over me, by this roadside, and on it plant a willow tree.<sup>13</sup> He spoke very sweetly. Then he called the Holy Name four or five times and it was all over. What a sad, sad story! (*mondo*) Actually, I see we have people from Miyako aboard with us now. Of course, the boy was no relative of yours, but do pause, none the less, and call the Name too, for his soul's comfort and guidance. Well, what with all my chattering, we are already here.

TRAVELLER Then I will stay here today, and although I myself have no tie to him, I will call the Name for the comfort and guidance of his soul.

*Traveller sits at witness position. Woman weeps.*

FERRYMAN (*mondo*) Now then, madwoman, why are you not getting out too? Please go ashore. Oh, poor thing, the story I told just now has made you cry! But quickly, do please step ashore.

WOMAN Tell me, ferryman, when did all that happen?

FERRYMAN Why, in the third moon of last year, on exactly this day.

WOMAN And the boy, then - he was

FERRYMAN twelve years old.

WOMAN His given name was

FERRYMAN Umewaka-maru,

WOMAN and his family name was

FERRYMAN Yoshida.

WOMAN And after he died, no parent of his ever came looking for him?

FERRYMAN No, no relative came in search of him, ever.

WOMAN Especially not his mother. She never came, did she?

FERRYMAN No, naturally not.

WOMAN Of course no parent or relative ever came looking for him. He was the boy this poor madwoman has been seeking! Oh, am I dreaming? What horror is this?

FERRYMAN Oh, how awful! Here I had thought the story was about

13. The Ferryman's speech has been reworked a great deal over the centuries. The Zempô text does not have this request; the boy only asks to be buried beside the road so that he should be near the passer-by from Miyako. Nor does this text, unlike all subsequent ones, speak of a willow tree being planted upon the boy's grave. It mentions only a "marker" (*shirushi*). Perhaps the willow was simply an item in the landscape nearby, clearly visible from the boat. Nevertheless, a diary entry dated 1483 precisely describes a grave-mound surmounted by a willow at the spot. Scholars suspect that, even so early, this willow was there because of the play, rather than the other way round.

someone I myself would never know, and all the time he was your own son! What a terrible, terrible thing! (*unawad*) But come, further lamenting will never help him now. I will take you to his tomb. Please follow me. [*Putting down his ear, he helps Woman up and leads her before the mound. He then retires to sit before Chorus.*]

(*mondo*) This is the boy's tomb. Pray for him, pray for him with all your heart.

WOMAN (*kadobiki*) My eyes shall behold him -

or so I believed, until this moment.

For that, I travelled a weary way

to unknown Azuma,

only to find him gone from this world;

only to stand here before his tomb!

O the cruelty of it!

For his own death, he left his birthplace.

Deep in the East,

he became earth by the side of the road.

There he lies buried,

with only the new growth of spring

to cover his tomb.

CHORUS (*uta*) But come, good people,

turn the earth over. One last time,

show a mother her son as he looked in life!

(*agouta*) Had he lived on,

he would have known gladness; but hope was vain

he would have known gladness; but hope was vain,

yes, vain as living to me now, his mother,

for whom a while, a lovely figure,

he glimmered and then, like all things in this world,

suddenly was gone.

Such sorrows lurk in the blossoms' glory,

as storm winds of change howl with fiercer voice!

The moon, through the long night of birth and death,

is lost behind clouds of impermanence.

Ah, this sad world's truth is here, plain to see

ah, this sad world's truth is here, plain to see.

*Ferryman has put his right arm back through its sleeve. Now he rises, bell in hand.*

FERRYMAN (*sumido*) No lament of yours can help him any more. Just call the Name and pray for his happy rebirth in paradise.

(*kakéai*) Now the moon is rising,  
the river breeze sighs as the night wears on.  
Invocations will surely be heard.

In this spirit all present, urged on by faith,  
strike bells in rhythm,

WOMAN while the mother, overcome by sorrow,  
unable even to call the Name,  
lies there, prostrate, dissolved in weeping.

FERRYMAN This is not right! Even with all the people here chanting the Invocation, it is still his mother's prayers that will give the deceased the greatest joy. [*Goes to Woman, places bell and strikes before her.*]

Please, you too, take a chanting-bell.

WOMAN For my own dear son's sake?

Yes, how right you are!

I too, then, will take up the bell,

FERRYMAN cease lamenting, call with ringing voice,

WOMAN this night of bright moon, invoking the Name  
at one with all the others,

FERRYMAN with eager heart, drawn straight to the West:

BOTH *Hail, in Thy western Realm of Bliss!*

*Thirty-six million million worlds*

*ring with one cry, one Name: Amida!*

CHORUS (*unheard*) *Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

WOMAN On the banks of the Sumida River,

wind and waves now swell the chorus:

CHORUS *Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

WOMAN Are you true to your name?

Then, Miyako birds, add your voices, too!

CHORUS *Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

WOMAN (*sumido*) Listen! Listen to me! That voice, just now calling out

the Name: I am certain it was my child's! It seemed to come from within the tomb!

FERRYMAN We heard it too, as you say. We others must stop calling and let the mother chant on alone.

WOMAN Oh, please, let me hear that voice again, another time!

(*ate*) *Hail, Amida Buddha!*

BOY [*From within the mound*] *Hail, Amida Buddha!*

*Hail, Amida Buddha!*

CHORUS And from whence the voice came,

perhaps an illusion . . .

*Boy appears from behind the mound and stands in witness square.*

WOMAN Ah, my child, is it you?

BOY Mother dear, is it you?

*As Chorus sings, Woman goes to Boy, touches his shoulder; he slips away from her and re-enters the mound.*

CHORUS She takes his hand, his slips into hers,

but again his shape fades and is gone.

Her fond longing waxes; as in a mirror,

*Boy reappears in base square. She starts towards him, but again he slips into the mound.*

remembered form and present illusion

fuse, glimmering, now seen, now hidden,

till light streaks the sky and pale dawn

breaks into day. His shape has vanished.

What seemed a dear child is wild grasses

thick on the tomb, nodding in sign

over wide, grassy wastes,

O sorrow: nothing else remains

O sorrow: nothing else remains.

*Facing audience, Woman weeps.*

