

# SUMIDAGAWA

## *The Sumida River*

A translation prepared by the NIPPON GAKUJUTSU SHINKOKAI

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CHORUS How far I have come from home!  
—Scene 3.



## INTRODUCTION

*Sumidagawa* belongs to that division of the Fourth Group plays known as *kyōjo-mono* or 'mad woman' piece. When they are bereaved mothers, the heroines in this division are represented as abnormally sensitive and peculiarly susceptible to their surroundings, and fall into fits of poetic exaltation which expresses itself by frenzied gestures. When their lost ones are found, their temporary madness leaves them. In this particular piece, however, the heroine discovers her lost child to be dead and the play ends on a tragic note, not usual in 'mad woman' pieces.

The scene is laid on both banks of the river Sumida and on the river itself. The place where the incident is supposed to have occurred is situated on the river near the present Asakusa in Tokyo which was then open country. As the Sumida ferryman is about to row across, a traveller appears, who asks to be ferried over, and is followed shortly after by a distraught mother who, for many months, has been seeking her only child. It is a spring evening. At the sight of white birds floating here and there on the river, the mad woman recalls a poem in the *Ise Monogatari*, which awakens in her a frenzied longing for her child, which finds dramatic expression in a *kakeri* dance.

The scene that follows takes place on the ferry. Questioned as to the meaning of the solemn chanting across the river, the ferryman tells the traveller that on that very day a year before a kidnapped boy was struck down by sudden illness, and was left by the slaver to die on the roadside. The kind-hearted villagers who subsequently buried him on the bank of the river are now holding a memorial service for the repose of his soul. Hearing the sad story, the mad woman guesses that the child is indeed her long-sought boy and that she has reached the end of her quest. In the concluding scene the grieving mother is led to a grassy mound by a willow-tree under which the child was buried, and is asked by the villagers to lead their prayers to Amida Buddha. While they are chanting, the child repeatedly appears before her eyes, only to fade away every time she attempts to clasp him in her arms. Finally as dawn breaks, the ghost vanishes for ever into the mound, leaving her disconsolate.

Author: Jūrō Motomasa (1395–1459), son of Zeami Motokiyo.

Source: None has as yet been ascertained. It seems likely that the author based his plot on some ancient legend or contemporary incident.

## SUMIDAGAWA

### *Persons*

FERRYMAN OF THE SUMIDA RIVER	<i>Waki</i>
TRAVELLER FROM MIYAKO	<i>Waki-zure</i>
MOTHER, A MAD WOMAN	<i>Shite</i>
GHOST OF UMEWAKA-MARU, HER CHILD	<i>Kokata</i>

### *Place*

Sumida River, Musashi Province

### *Season*

Spring

*Stage-attendants place a framework mound covered with willow branches in front of the Orchestra, inside which the ghost-child is hidden.*

### 1

*While the entrance music nanoribue is being played, the FERRYMAN OF THE SUMIDA RIVER enters the stage and stands at the Shite Seat. He wears a striped kimono, suō robe and trailing divided skirt.*

FERRYMAN I am he who rows the ferry across the Sumida in the province of Musashi. To-day I must quickly ferry people across the water because we are holding a solemn memorial service<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The tomb of Umewaka is in the precincts of the Mokubo-ji, a small temple on the left bank of the river Sumida, roughly opposite the present Asakusa. Since the temple is believed to have been built after the present play became popular, it is very doubtful the tomb is really that of Umewaka.

for someone at the village on the other side of the river where both priest and laymen are gathering in great numbers. Mark this well, all of you !

*Sits down in front of the CHORUS.*

2

*While the entrance music shidai is being played, the TRAVELLER FROM MIYAKO enters with a mushroom hat on. He wears a striped kimono, kakesuō robe and white broad divided skirt.*

TRAVELLER To the far Eastland I am bound,  
*shidai* To the far Eastland I am bound ;  
Tedious days of travel lie before me.

CHORUS To the far Eastland I am bound ;  
*jidori* Tedious days of travel lie before me.

TRAVELLER I come from Miyako. I have a friend in the Eastland and now I am going there to visit him.

*michi-yuki* Behind me wrapt in clouds and mists  
Lie the mountains I have crossed,  
Lie the mountains I have crossed.  
Many a barrier have I passed through,  
Many a province have I traversed.  
Here lies the far-famed Sumida,  
And now I have reached the ferry,  
And now I have reached the ferry.

Travelling in haste, here I am at the Sumida ferry and over there I see a ferry-boat about to leave. I will make haste and board it. Hi boatman ! I want to get in your boat.



*Removes his hat.*

*Puts it on again.*

*Removes his hat.*





FERRYMAN All right sir! Get in. But first may I ask you what is the meaning of that unusual noise from where you have just come?

*Rises*

TRAVELLER It is a crazy woman from Miyako and people are amused by her mad dancing.

FERRYMAN Then I will delay the ferry-boat for a while and wait for the mad creature.

*Sits on the Waki Seat to the right of the TRAVELLER.*

3

*While the entrance music issei is being played, the MOTHER appears and stops on the Bridgeway by the First Pine. She wears a Fukai mask, wig, painted gold-patterned under-kimono, embroidered koshimaki outer-kimono, broad-sleeved robe. She has on a mushroom hat, and carries a spray of bamboo.*

MOTHER      “ Although a mother’s mind  
*sashi*            May be unclouded,  
                    She well may lose her way  
                    Through love of her child.”<sup>1</sup>  
                    How true that is!  
                    Where does my darling stray?  
                    Shall I ask these travellers?  
                    Does he know his mother’s grief?  
                    “ Does not the skyey wind  
CHORUS        Whisper to the waiting pines? ”<sup>2</sup>



*The MOTHER advances on to the stage and per-*

<sup>1</sup> Poem by Fujiwara-no-Kanesuke contained in the *Gosenshū*.

<sup>2</sup> Poem by Lady Kunaikyō included in the *Shin Kokinshū*. In its complete form it reads:

Has he (the lover) not heard the saying,  
That even the wind blowing  
Through the upper regions of the sky  
Does not disdain to visit the pine?

The word ‘pine’ has a double meaning of ‘tree’ and ‘pining heart.’

*forms a kakeri dance.*

MOTHER In this world fleeting like the dews  
Upon Makuzu Field,<sup>1</sup>

CHORUS Should I thus pass my days  
Complaining of my bitter day?

MOTHER For many years I lived  
*sashi* In Miyako, at Kita-Shirakawa<sup>2</sup>;  
Then suddenly I lost my only child,  
Kidnapped by a slaver.



They told me he was taken  
Beyond the Ōsaka Barrier<sup>3</sup>  
Eastwards, to far-off Azuma,<sup>4</sup>  
Since when with mind distraught  
I wander on my desperate quest,  
Torn by longing for my boy.

CHORUS “ Though he be a thousand miles away  
*sage-uta* —’Tis said—a mother ne’er forgets her child,”<sup>5</sup>  
*age-uta* And yet the bond of parenthood  
Cannot survive the grave,  
Cannot survive the grave.<sup>6</sup>

Ah! Woe is me  
That even in this world I must be parted  
from him  
Like the “ four young birds that left their  
nest.”<sup>7</sup>



*Weeps.*



<sup>1</sup> Field at the foot of Higashiyama Hill in Kyoto, where there is now Maruyama Park.

<sup>2</sup> Eastern suburbs of Miyako.

<sup>3</sup> See *Tamura*, p. 34, note 1.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. Eastland. See *Tamura*, p. 23, note 1.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from a poem by Po Chu-i which more exactly reads: “A parent may go a thousand miles from home, but he never can forget his child.”

<sup>6</sup> Due probably to a Buddhist theory it was currently believed that the bond between parent and child lasts only during the present life while that between man and wife endures for two lives.

<sup>7</sup> Allusion to a conversation between Confucius and Yen Hui (顔回) found in the *Words and Deeds of Confucius* (孔子家語) where it is told that once, very early in the morning, Confucius was sitting with his disciple Yen Hui. Hearing very mournful cries, the master enquired what they were, whereupon the

Will my weary quest end here?  
Now I have reached the Sumida,  
Now I have reached the Sumida  
That flows between Musashi and Shimōsa.



MOTHER Pray, boatman. Let me get into the boat.

FERRYMAN Where are you from and where are you going?

MOTHER From Miyako I have come in search of  
someone.

FERRYMAN Since you are a woman of Miyako and mad  
to boot, I will not take you aboard unless you  
amuse us with one of your crazy dances.

MOTHER What a clumsy way of speaking! Since you  
are the Sumida ferryman, you should have  
answered, "Come on board, for the day is  
spent,"<sup>1</sup>

Yet you refuse a passage  
To me, a city lady.  
How ill-becoming a Su-  
mida boatman  
To speak so rudely!



FERRYMAN How like a woman of Miyako to use such  
elegant language!

MOTHER Your words remind me of the poem Narihira  
once composed at this very spot.

"O, birds of Miyako,  
If you are worthy of your name,

pupil replied that they could not be lamentations over the dead, and told him the story of a bird which had built its nest on Mt. Han-shan. When the four young birds it had reared had grown up and prepared to leave the nest, the mother-bird had uttered heart-rending cries not unlike those they were now hearing. Upon enquiring from the neighbour it turned out that the master had died and that in order to defray his funeral expenses, the family had been obliged to sell one of the children into slavery, and were now about to part from him for ever. Confucius praises his pupil for his keenness in distinguishing voices.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the *Ise Monogatari*, chap. viii, where Narihira, the supposed author, describes his travels through the Eastland in search of a place to settle in, after his life in Miyako had become too unpleasant. The chapter ends with his crossing the river Sumida.

Tell me, does my love still live? ”<sup>1</sup>

O, boatman, yonder is a white bird not found *Turns towards the right.*  
in Miyako. What is its name?

FERRYMAN It is a sea-gull.

MOTHER How unpoetical! By the sea you may call  
it a gull or a plover or whatever you will, but  
here by the Sumida river why not “Miyako-  
bird?”

FERRYMAN Truly I was in the wrong!  
Living in this famous place  
’Twas thoughtless of me,  
Instead of Miyako-bird,

MOTHER To call it sea-gull.

FERRYMAN So Narihira long ago

MOTHER Asked, “Is she still alive?”

FERRYMAN Remembering his lady in Miyako.

MOTHER Moved by like yearning,  
I am seeking my lost child  
In the Eastland.

FERRYMAN To long for a sweetheart,

MOTHER To seek after a lost child,

FERRYMAN Both spring

MOTHER From love.

CHORUS O, Miyako-bird, I too will ask you,  
*age-uta* O, Miyako-bird, I too will ask you,  
Is my dear child still living  
Somewhere in the Eastland?  
I ask and ask, but it will not answer.  
Oh, rude Miyako-bird!  
I’ll call you ‘rustic-bird.’  
“By the River Horie



*The MOTHER turns  
towards the Waki  
Front.*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the same. ‘Miyako-bird’ is a poetic name for sea-gull.

Where boats hurry past each other,  
Miyako-birds utter their cries : ”<sup>1</sup>

There at Naniwa in the West,  
Here by the Sumida in the East—  
How far I have come from home !

But, pray, O boatman,  
Let me come on board.

Though crowded be your boat,

O, let me too on board, I pray !



*She goes to the First Pine and touching the brim of her hat gazes into the distance.*

*Returning from the Bridgeway, she goes up to the FERRYMAN and dropping the spray of bamboo, joins her hands in supplication.*

FERRYMAN So sensible a mad woman I never saw. Be quick and come aboard. This is a dangerous crossing ; please take care and sit still. You too, traveller, get in.

*Slips his right arm out of his kimono and picks up his pole.*

*The MOTHER removes her hat and holding it in her left hand, steps forward as if getting into a boat and sits down. The TRAVELLER sits sideways behind the MOTHER while the FERRYMAN stands at the back and plies his pole.*

4

TRAVELLER Why are all those people gathered together over there, under that willow-tree ?

FERRYMAN They are holding a solemn memorial service connected with a sad tale which I shall tell you while the boat is crossing to the other side.

*katari*

It happened last year, on the fifteenth of the third month ; yes, and this is the very day on which it happened. A slave-trader was on his way to the Northeast, taking along with him a boy he had bought—a tender lad some twelve years old. Wearied out by the unaccustomed hardships of the road, the boy was seized with a mortal illness. He was so weak, he said he could not drag himself a step farther, and lay down on the bank. What heartless men there are in this world !



<sup>1</sup> Poem by Ōtomo-no-Yakamochi contained in the *Manyōshū*.

The slaver abandoned the boy by the roadside and went on his way.

But the people of this neighbourhood, judging from his appearance that the lad was of gentle birth, nursed and tended him as best they could. But perhaps because of his *karma*, he grew worse and worse. When he was at the point of death, we asked him, "Where were you born, who are you?" "I was born in Miyako—he replied—at Kita-Shirakawa, the only child of Lord Yoshida. My father being dead, mother and I lived alone. Then I was kidnapped and now am brought to this pass. Please bury me here by the roadside, so that passers-by coming from dear Miyako may at least cast their shadow over my grave: and plant a willow-tree in memory of me." He said these words, calmly, like a man; invoked Amida Buddha several times, and died. What a piteous happening!

There may be some people from Miyako in this boat. Let them offer prayers for the repose of his poor soul, even if they are not relations of the dead lad. Look! While you were listening to my long and tedious tale, the ferry has reached the bank. Make haste and land!

TRAVELLER I will surely remain here to-day and though I had nothing to do with the lad, I will offer up a prayer for him.

FERRYMAN Come, my mad creature there! Why not get out of my boat? Hurry! How tender-hearted of you to shed tears over such a story.

*The MOTHER weeps.*



*Going to the Waki Seat, addresses the FERRYMAN and then sits down.*

*Turns and looks at the weeping MOTHER.*

Please get out of the boat quickly !

MOTHER Boatman, when did the event you have just told us take place?

*Turns to the*  
FERRYMAN.

FERRYMAN It took place last year, in the third month, on this very day.

MOTHER What was the lad's age?

FERRYMAN Twelve.

MOTHER His name?

FERRYMAN Umewaka-maru.

MOTHER And his father's name?

FERRYMAN Lord Yoshida.

MOTHER Since then have neither of his parents been here?

FERRYMAN Nor any of his kin.

MOTHER Much less his mother !

FERRYMAN No, that would have been out of the question.

MOTHER No wonder, neither kin nor parent came.  
He was the child  
This mad woman is seeking.  
Is this a dream?  
O cruel fate !



*Lets fall her hat and weeps.*

FERRYMAN Who on earth could have dreamt of such a thing? Until now I thought it was none of our business. The boy was your child. You are to be pitied ! Now let me show you where the boy is buried. Please come with me.



*Puts away his pole and standing behind her, helps her out of the boat, then takes a few steps towards the mound.*

5

FERRYMAN This is the grave of your dead child. Pray for his soul's repose, as only you can do.

*Goes to the Waki  
Seat and sits down.*

MOTHER I had hoped against hope  
To find my child

*Moves to the left,  
half facing the mound*

And now I have reached strange Azuma, *and sits gazing at it.*

He is no more upon this  
earth ;

Naught but this mound  
remains.

O, how cruel !

Was it for this that he was born,  
To be taken from his native land,  
To the remotest part of Azuma,  
Only to become dust by the roadside ?

Does my dear child truly lie beneath this  
grass ?

*Half rises and fixes  
her eyes on the mound.*

CHORUS  
*sage-uta*

O you people there,  
Dig up the sod  
So that I may once again  
Gaze on his mortal form.

*The MOTHER turns  
towards the FERRY-  
MAN and moves her  
hand as if to dig, then  
subsides on to the stage  
and weeps.*

*age-uta*

He whose life was full of promise is  
gone,  
He whose life was full of promise is  
gone,  
And she whose life is worthless left  
behind.

Before the mother's eyes the son appears  
And fades away

As does the phantom broom-tree.<sup>1</sup>

In this grief-laden world

Such is the course of human life.

The winds of death

Scatter the spring-time flowers of life ;

The clouds of mutability



<sup>1</sup> Mythical tree shaped like a broom said to have stood in a village called Sonohara on the boundary between Shinano and Mino Provinces. It had the mysterious property of being seen clearly from afar, but of disappearing when anyone approached closer.



O'ercast the shining moon  
That should light up the endless night of  
life and death.<sup>1</sup>

Now my eyes see how fleeting is this life,  
Now my eyes see how fleeting is this life.

6

FERRYMAN Your tears no longer serve ; chant but your  
prayers for his repose in the other world.

The moon has risen,  
The river breeze is blowing,  
The night is at its height,  
'Tis time we began our night prayers.  
Asking her to join them  
They start to beat their gongs.

MOTHER O'erwhelmed by grief  
The mother cannot say her prayer,  
But prostrate weeps upon the ground.

FERRYMAN This is not as it should be. However many  
people may gather together, it is a mother's  
prayers that will rejoice her dead child.

So saying he hands the gong to the  
mother.

MOTHER You say true—  
I'll take the gong  
For my child's sake.

FERRYMAN Ceasing her moan, in a clear voice

MOTHER She prays with them under the shining

*Stands up, holding  
a disc-like gong and a  
wooden hammer.*



*Striking his gong,  
turns towards the  
MOTHER.*

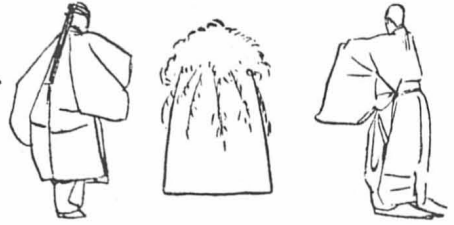
*After giving her the  
gong and hammer, he  
takes his place in front  
of the CHORUS.*

*Rises and faces the  
mound.*

<sup>1</sup> The full moon is likened to Sakyamuni who dispels the darkness of ignorance and enlightens mortal minds.

moon.

FERRYMAN Her thoughts wing straight  
To the Western Land of  
Bliss.



FERRYMAN and MOTHER  
Adoration to countless  
million Buddhas—  
Each one Amida

*Turning towards the mound, join their hands in prayer.*

In the Western Paradise,<sup>1</sup>  
The world of supreme bliss !

CHORUS Namu Amida ! Namu Amida !  
Namu Amida ! Namu Amida !

*The MOTHER beats the gong, accompanying the invocation.*

MOTHER From the Sumida  
Join in the voices  
Of the breeze and waves.



CHORUS Namu Amida ! Namu Amida !  
Namu Amida !

MOTHER True to their name  
Miyako-birds join the choir.

*Faces the Front audience.*

GHOST and CHORUS  
Namu Amida ! Namu Amida !  
Namu Amida !

*The voice of the GHOST of Umewakamaru is heard from inside the mound.*

MOTHER Surely just now among them I heard my  
child's voice. He seems to be praying inside  
this mound.

*Ceases to beat her gong.*

FERRYMAN We, too, have heard your child. We shall  
keep silent ; say your prayer alone.

<sup>1</sup> *Lung-shu Jōdomon* (龍舒淨土文; Collection of Texts relating to the Western Paradise, edited in Lung-shu by a man of the Southern Sung dynasty) states that seeing an aged couple assiduously repeating the *nembutsu* prayer and using a bagful of seeds to mark the number of repetitions, Sakyamuni was filled with pity at their pious device, and taught them a better means of doing so by saying: "Namu to the thirty-six trillion, one hundred and nineteen thousand five hundred Amida Buddhas of the Western Paradise, all having the same name and title."

MOTHER O that I might hear his voice but once again ! *Turns towards the mound and strikes the gong.*

Namu Amida !

GHOST Namu Amida ! Namu Amida !

CHORUS See, his voice and shape !

*The GHOST OF UMEWAKA-MARU comes out of the mound and stands in front of the Waki Seat. He wears a flowing black-hair wig, white broad-sleeved robe and white twill kimono.*



MOTHER Is it you, my child?

GHOST Is it you, my mother?

CHORUS And as she seeks to grasp it by the hand,  
The shape begins to fade away ;

The vision fades and reappears

And stronger grows her yearning.

Day breaks in the eastern sky.

The ghost has vanished ;

What seemed her boy

Is but a grassy mound

Lost on the wide, desolate moor.

Sadness and tender pity fill all hearts,

Sadness and tender pity fill all hearts !



*Turns towards the MOTHER.*

*The MOTHER drops the gong and hammer and runs up to the GHOST, who retreats and re-enters the mound. Dazed and weeping, she looks up and moves two or three steps towards the Shite Pillar. The GHOST reappears and stands at the Shite Seat. With stretched arms the MOTHER runs towards it, and attempts to embrace it, but as the GHOST retreats again into the mound, the MOTHER falls, claspng the empty air. Rising again she approaches the mound, gazing at the willow-branches, then, disconsolate, retreats slowly to the Shite Pillar and remains there weeping.*

