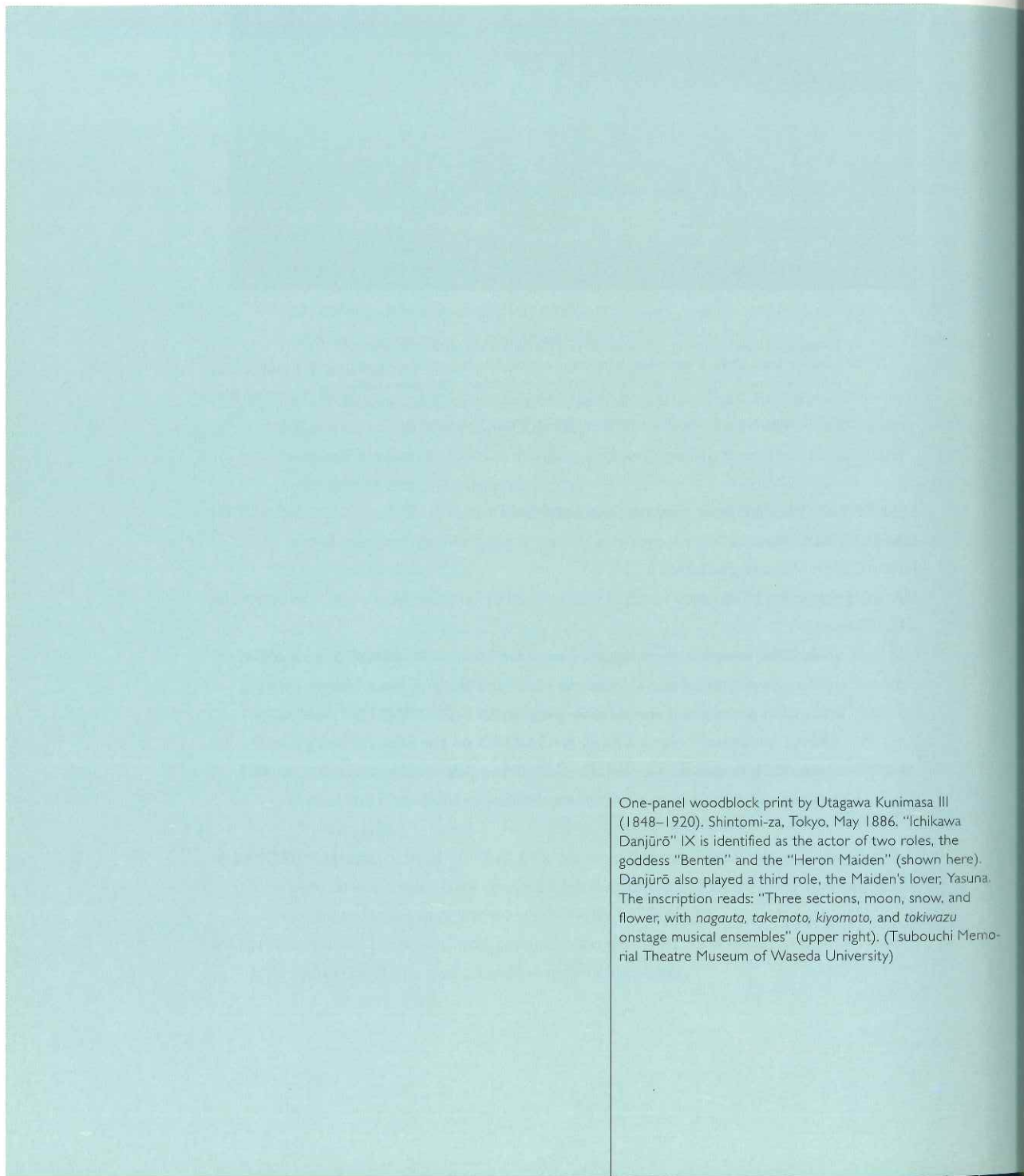




One-panel woodblock print by Utagawa Kunimasa III (1848–1920). Shintomi-za, Tokyo, May 1886. "Ichikawa Danjūrō" IX is identified as the actor of two roles, the goddess "Benten" and the "Heron Maiden" (shown here). Danjūrō also played a third role, the Maiden's lover; Yasuna. The inscription reads: "Three sections, moon, snow, and flower; with *nagauta*, *takemoto*, *kiyomoto*, and *tokiwazu* onstage musical ensembles" (upper right). (Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum of Waseda University)

The Heron Maiden
Sagi Musume

Anonymous (text); Kineya Tadayirō (music)

TRANSLATED BY CODY M. POULTON



The Heron Maiden

INTRODUCTION

The Heron Maiden was first performed by Segawa Kikunōjō II (1741–1773), one of the leading actors of female roles (*onnagata*) of his time, as part of a dance finale called *The Chirping of Tiny Birds in the Willows* (Yanagi ni Hina Shochō no Saezuri); it featured the first use of the revolving stage (*mawari butai*) for a dance play. The piece quickly became a classic of the dance play (*shosagoto*) repertoire, one that continues to challenge every important *onnagata*. In recent years, the dance has become a showpiece for the talents of Bandō Tamasaburō V (b. 1950) and is an excellent vehicle for the display of this talented *onnagata*'s eerie eroticism. Music is provided by a full onstage *nagauta* ensemble consisting of eight to ten singers, an equal number of shamisen players, four or five drum players, and a flutist.

This play is the earliest extant example of a "transformation piece" (*henge-mono*), a spectacular type of dance that originated during the Genroku period (1688–1704). Its chief aim is to demonstrate, through a series of quick changes (*hayagawari*), a striking variety of costumes and identities. Until the end of the eighteenth century, transformation pieces were exclusively performed by *onnagata* to the accompaniment of a ballad in *nagauta* style. With the introduction of special effects (*keren*) and virtuoso acting in the early nineteenth century, actors of leading male roles (*tachiyaku*) also began performing transformation pieces. These later dances featured a wide variety of personalities, both male and female, young and old. Early pieces generally presented no more than four or five changes, but later on, as many as twelve were performed. Two types of classical changes are used: *hikinuki* and *bukkaeri*. Each involves the removal by a stage assistant of basting threads holding the costume together. At the proper moment, the assistant suddenly whisks off the outer costume to reveal another one underneath, all of this being done before the audience's eyes as the actor performs. In *hikinuki* ("pulling out"), the entire outer kimono is removed, while in *bukkaeri* ("sudden change"), only the upper portion drops to cover the lower part of the original costume. A stage assistant may hold the disassembled fabric up around the actor as he strikes a pose framed by the new colors revealed. New dance pieces were often composed for styles of kabuki music, such as *tokiwazu*, created around 1739, and *kiyomoto*, founded in 1814.

Although the chief purpose of a transformation piece may be to show off the

lead dancer's skill through the dazzling display of sudden costume changes, an early piece such as *Heron Maiden* also reveals that—as in many *no* plays—the spectacle of transformation expresses an underlying theme of metamorphosis. *The Heron Maiden* portrays the resentful spirit (*onryō*) of a heron, who, having assumed the form of a young woman, falls in unrequited love with a man. Five costume changes take place as, before our eyes, we see the heron first take the form of an innocent young girl and then an older and more experienced woman. In the end, she is wounded, and, having resumed the form of a heron, dances out her death throes. In short, this play depicts different facets of a woman's psyche, as well as a kind of montage of both human and avian identity.

The composition of the dance sequences in *Heron Maiden* closely follows the six-part structure of *nagauta* music, which provides a considerable variety of musical and emotive effects. It begins with a quiet "prelude" (*oki*) and proceeds to the entrance of the dancer, during which the full chorus sings a "travel scene" (*michiyuki*). Both dance and music become more lyrical in the "lament" (*kudoki*), which is typically a vocal solo accompanied by one shamisen. The music grows swifter and brighter in the fourth section, called a "drum chorus" (*taikoji*) or sometimes a "dance section" (*odori*). The music continues to increase its pace and complexity in the "scattering" (*chirashi*) section, in which the music seems to compete with the dancer, culminating in a feverish climax. The pace and tone return to a solemn lyricism in the "finale" (*dangiri*).

Performance variations exist for most sequences in the work. For example, depending on the leading actor's preference, the musical prelude to the dance can be performed while the curtains are still closed, in the dark, or with the lights up. Frequently, the dancer is already onstage, but in past productions an elevator trap would likely have raised him into view on a dais. The interlude during the lament is an opportunity for the *nagauta* orchestra to display its skill; the quick change during this section is frequently performed onstage (as in this translation), but sometimes the actor will exit and execute the change offstage. The dance during the drum chorus is usually performed with a single umbrella, but Nakamura Ganjirō III (b. 1931) has revived an older version in which he dances with two umbrellas. In the intermediate sections of the dance, costume changes will reveal kimono that vary in color and pattern from actor to actor. However, the lead actor always wears a white kimono at the beginning and the end to signify the heron's identity. The major innovation in performance business (*kata*) for this dance occurs in its ending. In early *kata*, the dancer struck a defiant pose, then either disappeared via a trap or remained standing while the curtain was run closed. Some per-

formers today prefer this conclusion, but under the influence of Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova's performance earlier this century of "The Dying Swan," which strongly influenced Onoe Kikugorō VI (1885–1949), a more pathetic depiction of the heron's death became popular. The stage notes here, based on Tamasaburō's performance, reflect this modern interpretation.

The play's meaning is clear enough even without an understanding of the *nagauta* ballad, but the lyrics are beautiful. Typical of much classical Japanese verse, the lyrics are highly elliptical and rife with phonetic effects and associations; a translation into English can only hope to give an approximate sense of these poetic effects. Like the linked verse (*renga*) of *nō* drama, a slim narrative is told almost exclusively in a telescopic flow of images, most of which have to do with water or some other form of moisture: clouds, snow, dewdrops, marshes, and, inevitably, tears. These are linked to cherry blossoms as well as to the maiden's umbrella, the latter also serving to symbolize the wheel of karma, driving the dancer into the jaws of hell in retribution for her wrongful attachment to a man. One can only pity this spirit and feel that her fate was excessively cruel. Perhaps for this reason, the lyrics for the "torture segment" (*seme no dan*), depicting the heron-maiden's torture in hell, are usually greatly abbreviated in performance. Throughout the play, its anonymous author has skillfully strung images together, creating an atmosphere that is intensely visual, almost even palpable, accentuating not only the erotic qualities of moisture, the airiness, and the evanescence of snow and blossoms but also the burden of snow and sorrow. This work succeeds in achieving the same integrity of word, sound, and image that we see in the best *kuse* sequences in *nō* plays. Indeed the music, with its eerie flute, drums, and calls (*kakegoe*), pays tribute to *nō*. For this translation, I have used the 1892 text of the production starring Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838–1903) at the Kabuki-za in Tokyo, published in Toita Yasuji et al., eds. *Kabuki Kessakushū*, Vol. 19.

CHARACTERS

HERON MAIDEN, *spirit of a heron who assumes the form of a woman*

STAGE ASSISTANT, *a formally dressed kōken*

NAGAUTA, *chorus of singers accompanied by an orchestra of shamisen, drums, and flute*

(Before the curtain opens, the beat of a stick drum and the eerie sound of a flute [netoribue] are heard from offstage [geza], signifying the presence of a spirit or

The spirit of the Heron Maiden (Nakamura Jakumon IV) appears in human form carrying an umbrella over her shoulder; her head modestly covered. (Umemura Yutaka, *Engeki Shuppansha*)



apparition. The beat of a hand drum [kotsuzumi] joins the prelude [oki] of the formal musical composition that is sung and played from behind the curtain: "Lost in you, my love is a night's moon / drowned in clouds of delusion." The curtain opens to reveal the NAGAUTA singers and instrumentalists seated on a dais at right. To right and left stand "wave boards" [namiita], screens painted with a marsh scene, and stakes to indicate the water's edge. A willow tree is planted at right. The HERON MAIDEN stands at center with her back to the audience, wearing a plain, white, long-sleeved kimono [furisode] with a black satin obi. Her hair, dressed in a style popular among young women, is covered in a white hood of glossy silk. She wears black lacquered clogs and holds an umbrella covered with flakes of snow. The chorus begins the travel scene [michiyuki] section of the music and of the play.)

NAGAUTA:

Though the gales of love blow seeds of dissent / and burden my umbrella with snow, / this growing passion's but the slightest of flakes / vanishing on this vain journey!

(Slowly, the MAIDEN turns around to face the audience, then closes her umbrella. A soloist sings.)

The darkness of my heart, deep in thoughts of you, / so wretched this evening. / A heron drenched in drifting snow, / so lovely in her solitude!

(The MAIDEN swirls, spreads her arms, lays down the umbrella, and kneels. She stands and raises one leg at a time, miming birdlike steps. Presently, to a quiet interlude of hand drum and drummer's calls, she removes her hood. Eerie flute music joins the shamisen to support the solo singer.)

The thin course of this vagrant heart / is a single, trickling stream of droplets. / The white heron knows naught but bitterness: / at home in water, her dripping steps / only vanish like the dew.

(The MAIDEN mimes with her sleeves the flapping of wings. She removes her hairpin, letting her hair fall, then mimes the delicate footsteps of the heron walking through the marsh. Her gestures simultaneously mime the actions of a bird and express a woman's regrets. Flute, hand drum, and shamisen accompany her first quick change of costume [hikinuki], which reveals underneath a beautiful kimono of red silk crepe with a collar of black satin. The dancer has now assumed the identity of a young townswoman, and the pace of the music becomes more sprightly.)

When even tears have dried, / sleeves stay damp in moonlight, / that talk we had the night we met forgotten.

(The MAIDEN kneels, clasps her hands in prayer, stands, then kneels again. The music's pace slows, becoming more reflective. A soloist sings the young girl's lament [kudoki] for a lost lover.)

After a quick change of kimono (*hayagawan*), the spirit of the Heron Maiden (Ichikawa Momnosuke VII) dances sensuously in human form. (Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum of Waseda University)



Oh, god who joins two lovers, / you have stolen away a happiness / that shames me with so many hues and scents.

(Holding a scarlet hand towel [tenugui], she mimes tying—that is, joining—lovers. The singing stops and instrumental music continues as she moves behind the umbrella to prepare for a rapid onstage costume change [bukkaeri]: the outer kimono top is peeled off to reveal an inner blue kimono with a pattern of flakes of snow and flowing water. She drapes the scarlet hand towel across her shoulders. The full chorus sings.)

Harder than drawing salt on Suma beach / is catching my lord's heart. / Believe me when I tell the truth!

(The MAIDEN mimes the actions of drawing saltwater. A soloist now sings, accompanied by a bamboo flute.)

Harder than plaiting folds in satin *hakama* / is soothing my master's breast. / Believe me, I would truly tell the truth.

(The MAIDEN dances using gathering, untying, and sweeping movements. She takes one end of the towel in her teeth, expressing her jealousy and frustration. The key of the music changes, becoming more solemn and melancholy.)

The white heron's wings scattering snow, / though like a scene of swirling blossoms, / alas, they would blow away these flurried thoughts! / They will blow away the snow! / A heart worn down by love, / laden with a blizzard of blossoms, / but this umbrella, these sleeves, are loath to brush them away.

(The MAIDEN opens the umbrella. Then, kneeling behind it, she undergoes her fourth quick onstage change, this one using the thread-pulling [hikinuki] method, revealing a pink kimono with a pattern of cherry blossoms. Once again, she takes up the umbrella and holds it aloft, proceeding to dance a catalogue of umbrellas [kasa zukushi]. So begins the drum song [taikoji]. The music becomes faster and brighter. And the full chorus sings.)

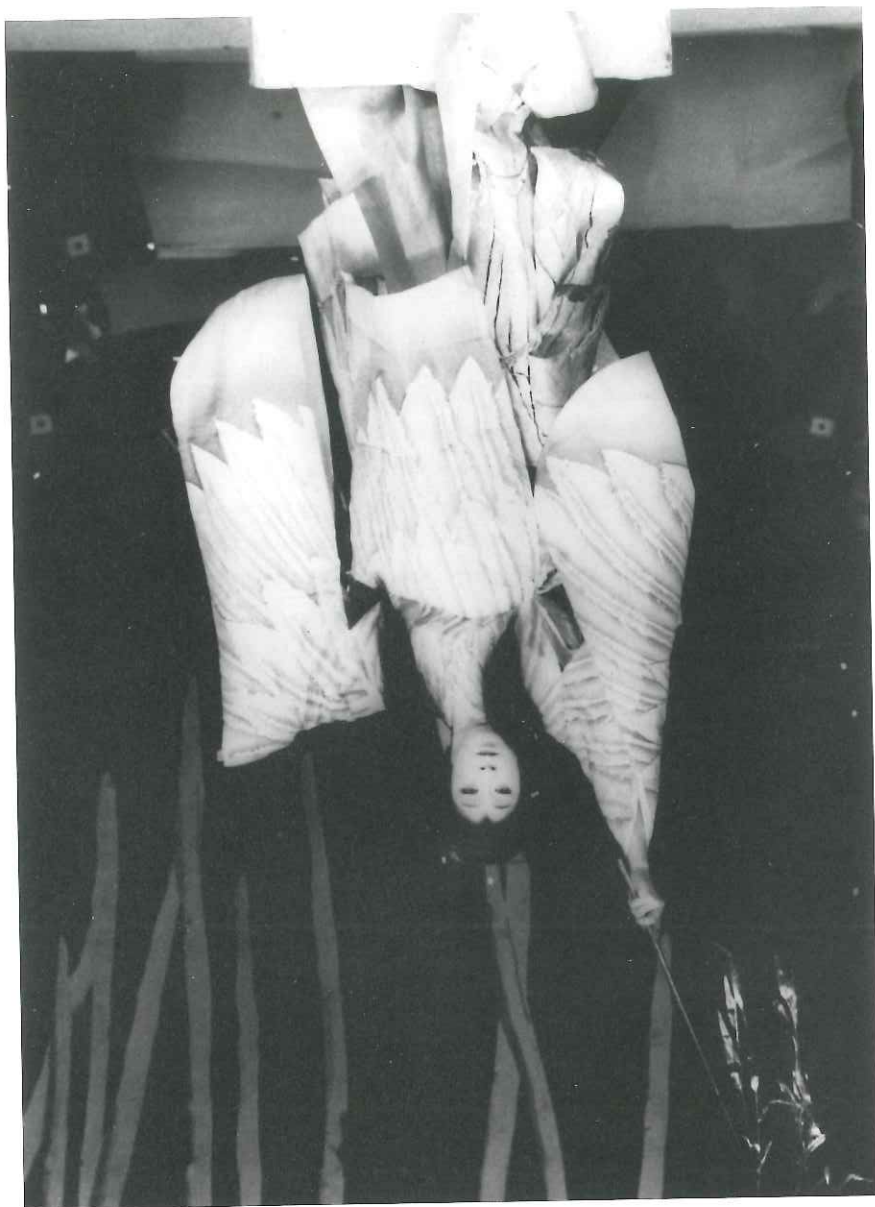
Oh umbrella, / if I must open you, / give me shade against the blazing sun! That's the way! / If I really must take shelter under you, / let's go to Yoshino and see the cherries, / a parasol for fragrant flowers. Yes, that's the way! / This parasol's a turning, turning wheel / of karma, moon, and sun. / That's the way, yes, that's the way!

(The MAIDEN tosses her umbrella in the air, catches it, and poses [kimari].)

That's the way romance begins: / I'd be with him, but I cannot, / and the keen blades of jealous talk, / they drive me from this world / to the very Mount of Swords.

(The MAIDEN dances to a sprightly rhythm, marking the beginning of the next dance section, the scattering [chirashi]. The tempo becomes swifter, introducing the torture sequence portraying the heron maiden's sufferings in hell. She takes the corner of the scarlet towel in her teeth, expressing frustration and jealousy. With the

Stage assistants drop the costume top of the Heron Maiden (Ichikawa Monnosuke VII) to reveal a white and pink kimono with feather designs beneath it, transforming the figure into its real bird form. (Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum of Waseda University)



aid of a formally dressed STAGE ASSISTANT [kôken], the dancer performs a hikinuki costume change, instantly revealing a scarlet underkimono beneath the removed layer. Then, this layer, too, is removed in a flash, through hikinuki, to reveal a white kimono decorated with a feather pattern. A red slash across the shoulder signifies that the HERON MAIDEN has suffered a mortal wound. She loosens her long hair and poses on her knees, facing away from the audience. She arches her torso backward in a "prawn-shaped pose" [ebizori no mic]. To the swift accompaniment of stick and hand drums and shamisen, the chorus continues to sing.)

Under a sheltering tree, I am afraid! / My eyes are filled with scenes of hell: / the judge of sins, King Enma, / verily I see his iron stave.

(The thin, trailing branches of the willow tree are likened to the iron staves of Enma and his demons. The MAIDEN's movements become more violent and painful. The snow falls heavily. She swoons, then collapses. When she rises, her movements are once again birdlike. The chorus continues to the accompaniment of flute and hand and stick drums.)

A hell for those who've taken life, / or a multitude of cries and screams; / the incessant beating of titans' drums. / Hell's minions swarm on me from every side, / wielding staves and gnashing teeth.

(The MAIDEN mimes her suffering and physical torture, culminating in a final quick costume change [bukkaeri] in which the kimono top is suddenly dropped, revealing a pattern of red and orange flames on its underside.)

Again and again, / all day and night, / 'round and 'round they pursue me now, / my body squeezed and crushed beneath. / Have mercy on this wretched flesh.

(As she mimes her sufferings in hell, the MAIDEN gradually loses strength and swoons. She falls prostrate. A temple bell tolls, followed by a ghostly flute melody [netori]. Shamisen quietly play "snow melody" [yuki aikata], marking the musical finale of the piece [dangiri]. The MAIDEN dies. The curtain is run closed to ki clacks as the bird-woman lies alone on stage.)