Foxes in Japanese Culture: Beautiful or Beastly?

By Janet Goff

Although the fox is portrayed around the world as a sly creature, the manifestations of that trait vary from culture to culture. The Japanese, for instance, nurture a dual image of the fox, whereas the Western tradition treats the fox mainly as a trickster. The slender shape, long graceful tail, bright eyes and Fleet-footedness of the fox, together with its nocturnal habits, have instilled a belief in Japan that foxes possess magic powers enabling them to change into human shape at will. This capacity is harnessed and beheld in human beings gives the fox an unseemly reputation as a fox and beast, and Japanese folklore abounds with stories about kitsune-kai, or fox possession, which manifests itself in a form of hysteria. Sometimes, a spell can encompass a whole family and last for generations.

Even so, the fox has been revered since ancient times as the embodiment of the rice spirit and, by extension, as a symbol of fertility and bearer of good fortune. Its golden tail and tendency to live in the proximity of rice fields makes the association with rice quite natural. The fox is worshipped as the messenger of the god of grain, at more than 30,000 Inari shrines around Japan. The shrines not only outnumber all other kinds, but also are easy to recognize with their vermilion torii gates and innumerable statues of foxes. During the New Year holidays, millions of Japanese make a special point of visiting the shrines to pray for prosperity.

The Western tradition of fox lore dates back to Aesop’s fables in ancient Greece, which depict the fox as a clever creature that outfoxes others, but is sometimes outfoxed itself. It is even capable of self-delusion: The expression “sour grapes” comes from the fable about a fox that could not reach a bunch of grapes on a vine and concluded itself by saying that they were sour anyway.”

The fox’s reputation in Europe as a trickster was firmly fixed by Reynard, the main character in Roman de Renard, a medieval beast epic that satirized French society. Reynard’s outrageous behavior included raping the wife of his best friend the wolf and then promising at his trial to reform his ways, only to revert after he was set free. The epic circulated throughout Europe in the middle ages. Indeed, writes David MacDonald in Running with the Fox (1987), “Reynard is a fox who has had greater influence upon European culture and perceptions than any other wild creature.” So renowned was Reynard that his name became synonymous with the word “fox.” His story is best known in English through the tale of the cock Chanticleer in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, who falls for a fox’s flattery and nearly loses his life.

In the theater, the comedy Volpone (1606), by Shakespeare’s contemporary Ben Jonson, provides a ready reminder of the medieval Western tradition. The hero
A stone fox at Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto

through the centuries, however, the Japanese have also avidly read Chinese tales of the supernatural, and produced similar stories, embodying the belief in the ability of foxes to transform themselves at will into any shape of their choosing, from scholars, students and bodhisattvas to beautiful women who seduce men.

The Japanese also developed their own traditions of fox possession and transformation. Fox-wolf tales are an excellent example. A variation on the Chinese theme of foxes that assume the form of beautiful women and bewitch men, the genre depicts women as both benevolent and beneficent. The unusual nature of the genre, from a Western standpoint, can be deduced from the predominance of male characters such as Reynard and Volpone, the image of the fox as a lover and the long custom of referring to malicious, ill-tempered women as “vixens,” an Old English adjective denoting a she-fox. “Foxy lady,” American slang for an attractive, sexy woman, is only of recent vintage.

The genre of fox-wolf tales in Japan dates back to a story in an early ninth-century collection of Buddhist tales called Nihon Ryōiki about a man searching for a wife. While crossing a field, he comes upon a pretty woman who agrees to marry him. Around the time that she bears the man a son, their dog gives birth to a puppy which sees through her disguise. Eventually she becomes so frightened that she turns into a fox and runs away.

Kôki, a brief account of fox magic composed in Chinese by the learned scholar Oe no Masafusa, records that Kyoto suffered from a rash of fox pranks in 1101. Although the tricks did not include the seduction of men by foxes in the shape of beautiful women, Masafusa ends the account by listing several Chinese

April–June 1997 * Japan Quarterly 67

92
until he made the mistake of taking her with him on a hunting excursion to Mawei, where she was attacked and killed by his dogs. It so happens that Yang Guifei, the legendary beauty whose spell over Emperor Hsuan Tsung, or Xuan Zong, nearly caused the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, was killed at Mawei. Thus Masafo to may have intentionally mentioned Miss Ren’s name with that in mind.

The link between fox and feminine fatale is clearly spelled out in The Old Graven, a work by the T’ang poet Po Chu-i, or Bai Juyi, that was alluded to by countless Japanese writers. The poem is about a fox in an old grave changing into a beautiful woman with fine makeup and a lovely hairdo, its tail flowing like a long red skirt. The end of the poem declares that a fox disguised as a woman does little harm, whereas a woman who acts like a “vulpine enchantress” can lead to ruin.

The medieval war epic Gengert Setsuhi (The Rise and Fall of the Minamoto and Heike Clans) quotes those lines at the end of an anecdote about Bao Si (known in Japan as Hojo), the favorite concubine of the last king of the Western Zhou Dynasty, who ruled in the eighth century B.C. Like numerous other medieval sources, the epic maintains that the enchantress turned into a fox after causing the downfall of the dynasty.

By the 14th century in Japan, the association between foxes and fatales had coalesced in the story of Tanamo no Mot, a fox disguised as a beautiful woman who suddenly appeared at court in 1174 and cast a spell over Retired Emperor Toba. A central figure in the political intrigues that plagued the court in the 12th century, the retired emperor became locked in a dispute with his oldest son Emperor Sutoku over the emperor’s successor. The dispute led to a rebellion in 1156 that foreshadowed the civil war between the Minamoto and Heike clans.
Cunning, Crafty Cultural Icons

A legion of white hawks confronts a warrior in a scene from Kabuki theater in Tokyo.

April-June 1997 * Japan Quarterly 69
in the 1180s, which ended the Heian period (794-1192) and paved the way for centuries of military rule. In all likelihood, the story of Tamamoo no Mae brings to light the real world of palace politics.

The oldest extant version of Tamamoo no Mae’s story dates from the 14th century, when there were two courts ruled by separate emperors. Tamamoo no Mae is described in the accounts as a beauty whose true identity was exposed by a court divider named Abe no Yasumori after retired Emperor Yoba suddenly fell ill. During the divination, she identified herself as a fox living in Naza no mori (in what is now Tochigi Prefecture). She confessed that she had appeared long ago as the deity of the burial mound worshiped by King Kanamana-pada (King Hisaku-i) in India and subsequently as Fuso Shō in China. During the pacification rites that followed the divination, Tamamoo no Mae changed into a fox which two famous warriors from the eastern provinces, Minva no Suke and Jumata no Suke, tracked down and killed in Naza. The fox’s spirit turned into the death rock of Naza, which riled all living creatures.

The account cites the Ninon-hyō (Benevolent King’s Sutra) as the source of the Indian king’s story. The sutra describes the king as a pagan ruler who sought to cut off the heads of a thousand kings to offer to the deity of the burial mounds, but later converted to Buddhism. Although the sutra makes no mention of foxes, a close link between the animal and grave sites can be found in nature and in literature, as Po Chu-i’s poem demonstrates.

Tamamoo no Mae’s story evolved into a monogatari, a long narrative tale, some versions of which circulated in the form of illustrated scrolls. By around 1500, the story had worked its way into the newly developed theatrical form called noh. Known as Sesshūbō (The Death Rock), the play is still performed today, its dramatic reenactment of the confusion and execution of a demon is a striking example of metamorphosis in the traditional Japanese performing arts.

Sesshūbō begins with the entrance of a Zen priest named Genzō, who is heading back to Kyoto in autumn after having been in northeastern Japan. When he reaches Naza, his companion suddenly notices birds falling to earth when they fly over a large rock. The travelers draw closer to take a better look, whenupon a woman suddenly appears and warns them not to go near the rock. “It is called the Death Rock of Naza,” she says. “All human beings, birds and beasts that go near it die.” She explains that the rock contains the veritable spirit of a former concubine of retired Emperor Yoba called Tamamoo no Mae.

During the desolate autumn evening, the woman recounts Tamamoo no Mae’s story. A renowned beauty of unknown origins, Tamamoo no Mae won the heart of the retired emperor. When her beauty was noted, she promptly answered every question regarding the Buddhist scriptures, Japanese and Chinese classics and music. One dark evening late in autumn, a musical party was held at the palace. When a fierce storm suddenly blew out all of the lights, a glow radiated from Tamamoo no Mae’s body, filling the entire room, whereupon the emperor fell ill. Upon being summoned to determine the cause of the emperor’s illness, the yin-yang diviner Abe no Yasumori blamed Tamamoo no Mae. Accusing her of disguising herself as a beautiful woman in order to overthrow imperial rule in Japan, Yasumori advised performing a pacification rite. Having lost the emperor’s affection, Tamamoo no Mae turned back into a fox and vanished to Naza.

The woman admits to Genzō that she is the spirit of the death rock. Promising

April-June 1997 • Japan Quarterly 73
to reappear that night if he will pray for her, she disappears inside the rock.

Genô offers flowers, burns incense and chants Buddhist prayers to entice the spirit of the rock to attain salvation. Striking the ground with his sword, a long, staff with a thick tuft of hair at the end, he intones: "Quickly, quickly, go away. Go away." The rock suddenly splits in two, revealing the spirit of the rock. "Going into the brilliant light," Genô exclaims, "I see the figure of a fox that is strangely human in shape."

The spirit confesses that it had appeared as the deity of the burial mound, worshiped by King Kalmasoda-pida in India, and then in Fan Si in China, before...
assuming the form of Tamamo no Mae in Japan. It recounts how the pacification site caused Tamamo no Mae to flee to Nasuno, and tells how Miwa no Suke and Kazusa no Suke, two warriors commissioned by the emperor, tracked down the fox and killed it with an arrow. Tamamo no Mae’s vengeful spirit remained in Nasuno as the death rock and took many lives, says the spirit. Bowing before Omen in submission, the spirit promises never to inflict harm on human beings again and disappears.

In the first part of Sanshūdō, the actor playing the woman wears a costume and mask that are typically used in noh to denote "a local woman." At different points
during the retelling of Tamamomo no Mae’s story, the music and the movements of the actor intimate the woman’s true nature. For example, the tempo of the music suddenly changes, and the actor takes quick fox-like steps before disappearing into the rock.

The actor changes into a demon’s costume inside the rock while Gennō’s companion explains Tamamomo no Mae’s story in further detail. (In performances where no rock is used, the actor temporarily exists from the stage.) In the second part of the play, the actor wears a fierce yahari (field fox) mask that emphasizes the spirit’s vulpine aspect, or a mask that is used in a variety of demon’s roles. In recent times, a variant style of performance that emphasizes the spirit’s identity as Tamamomo no Mae has been developed. The actor wears a woman’s deigam (golden eye) mask that projects a blend of human and supernatural aspects, a crown adorned with the figure of a nine-tailed fox and red pleated trousers or nagasahakama (long trousers).

The casting of a historical figure rather than an anonymous person as the traveler at the beginning of a noh play is highly unusual—a Zen priest even more so. Although one nowadays associates Zen with quiet meditation, in the middle ages members of the Sōtō sect such as Gennō, a 14th-century priest, traveled widely around Japan proselytizing and founding new temples. Zen literature of the day is full of supernatural encounters. Gennō’s name, especially, was associated with kami and spirits, including the exorcism of the death rock at Nasunō. His biography was incorporated into later, expanded versions of the Tamamomo no Mae story, the likely source of Sesshūduei.

The court diviner’s exorcism of Tamamomo no Mae’s spirit and the warriors’ killing of the fox in Nasunō suggest an effort on the part of different constituencies to cast themselves as protectors of the throne in the middle ages. The use of Gennō’s story as a frame for the Tamamomo no Mae legend transforms Sesshūduei into a kind of advertisement touting the religious and social benefits of Zen.

The Tamamomo no Mae legend was later adopted in Nloruri and karakuri. Its reincarnation as a dance called Sakakou Yoko-den (Tales of a Bewitching Fox in Three Countries), at the National Theatre in Tokyo in 1954 reflects the continued interest in and vitality of the story. Accompanied by music from India, China and Japan, the dancer, Nagamine Yasuko, depicted the successive transformations of the fox, ending with her disappearance inside the rock of Nasunō after being shot by an arrow. The prevalence of fox possession stories in the Japanese countryside today is further testimony to the durability of the fox’s image as a trickster.

The negative image of the fox as an enemy of the throne in Sesshūduei is counterbalanced by another noh play from the same era called Kokujī (The Swordsmith), which portrays the fox as a messenger of the Inari Shrine and protector of the throne. Set during the mid-Heian Period, the apogee of court culture, Kokujī tells how a strange dream prompts Retired Emperor Ichijō to dispatch an envoy to ask the swordsmith Munechika to make a sword, a symbol of the Japanese throne. Lacking a suitable assistant, Munechika goes to his local Inari Shrine to pray for help. A handsome youth appears and recounts the story of famous swords in China and Japan. After promising to assist Munechika, the spirit vanishes. Munechika reads a ceremonial platform and offers prayers, whereupon the fox deity of Inari Shrine appears and helps him make a sword. The deity wears the kind of demon mask worn by the spirit in some performances of

76 Foxes in Japanese Culture • Janet Goff

98
Sakurakun, and a crown decorated with a white fox.

The Inari Shrine also serves as a setting in Yobitsume Senbon Zakura (Yobitsume and the Thousand Cherry Trees), one of the most famous plays in the Bunraku and kabuki repertories. In Act 2, Minamoto no Yobitsume arranges as the Inari Shrine with a small band of loyal retainers while feasting from his broth-
er, the shogun Yoritomo. The captive is followed there by his mistress Shizuka Gozen, who wishes to accompany him. He tells her to wait for him in Kyoto and gives her a hand drum as a love-token. After he leaves, she is attacked by the shogun’s minions, but a loyal retainer named Satō Tadanobu, who is hurrying to catch up with Yobitsume’s band, comes along and rescues her.

Tadanobu travels with Shizuka to Kyoto, looking for Yobitsume, a journey depicted in the famous dance scene that opens Act 4. When Shizuka arrives alone at the mansion where Yobitsume is staying, it is discovered that her travel com-
panion had actually been a fox named Genkimaru. The fox had transformed itself into Tadanobu to be near Shizuka’s drum, which had been made with the skin of one of her parents. As a reward for taking care of Shizuka, Yobitsume gives the fox the drum. In exchange, the fox tells him about a plot to attack the mansion that night. The fox uses its magical powers to send off the attackers, later a legion of white foxes also appears to assist in defeating Yobitsume’s enemies.

The belief that grateful foxes return favors through the use of their magical powers crops up again in the famous legend about Kunugohira of Shinuda forest, a white fox whose life is saved from hunters by a man named Abe no Yasuno. Kunugohira is so grateful she turns into a beautiful woman and marries Yasuno. She bears him a son, who grows up to become Abe no Seimei, a Heian Period yin-yang divine renowned for his occult powers. Seimei actually had a descendant named Yamitori, although the chronology in the Tamamo no Mae legend is skewed. In the end, Kunugohira’s true identity is recovered, and she has to bid a tearful farewell to her husband and child. Her story has inspired a number of poignant kōtotsu and kabuki plays and dances.

The connection between the yin-yang diviner in the Tamamo no Mae and Kunugohira notes and the contrasting treatment of the fox as a benefactor rather than a scourge being the genre of fox-wife tales is full circle. Like the story of the fox and the grapes in Aesop’s Fables and Po Chu-i’s poem about the fox in the red grave, Kunugohira’s story echoes the behavior of foxes in nature. Just as foxes really do have a fondness for grapes and frequent grave sites, Kunugohira’s parting from her child steals from the maternal behavior of ina-kamano or northern foxes.

Whereas Tamamo no Mae reflects the more conventional view of the fox as a trickster, Kunugohira embodies novel aspects of Japanese fox tales, such as the idea that foxes impersonate human beings to return favors and even die or suf-
f er on behalf of human beings, rather than playing tricks on them. The fox’s role as the messenger of the deity at Inari Shrine is the foremost example of the ben-
efits bestowed by foxes.