

## Foxes in Japanese Culture: Beautiful or Beastly?

By Janet Goff

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Although the fox is portrayed around the world as a wily 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 to haunt and bewitch human beings gives the fox an unsavory reputation as a liar and cheat, and Japanese folklore abounds with stories about *kitsune-tsuki*, 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 worshiped as the messenger of Uga no Mitama, the god of grain, at more than 30,000 Inari shrines around Japan. The shrines not only far 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 outsmarted itself. It is even capable of self-deception: The expression "sour grapes" comes from the fable about a fox that could not reach a bunch of grapes on a vine and consoled 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 Renart*, a medieval beast epic that satirized French society. Reynard's outrageous behavior included raping the wife of Isengrim the wolf and then promising at his trial to reform his ways, only to recant 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



Matthias Ley

A stone fox at Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto

is a rich old miser called Volpone, the Italian word for an old fox. With the aid of his parasitic servant Mosca (the fly), Volpone tries to dupe prospective heirs into thinking that he plans to leave them all of his money. His antic attempt to rape the virtuous wife of one of his prospective heirs also echoes Reynard's behavior.

By the time that Aesop's fables were introduced in Japan by European missionaries in the late 16th century, the Japanese already possessed a rich and varied store of fox lore. The earliest Japanese written records simply mention white and black foxes as portents of good or evil, a concept imported from China. Down

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-wife 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 bene and benefactresses. 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 loner 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-wife 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.

*Kobiki*, a brief account of fox magic composed in Chinese by the learned scholar Ōe 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

Da-ji	妲己
Zhou	紂
Yin	殷
Miss Ren	任氏
T'ang	唐
Yang Guifei	楊貴妃
Hsuan Tsung	玄宗
Po Chu-i	白居易
Bao Si	褒姒
Western Zhou	西周

historical precedents, including the names of two women. One was Da-ji, the beautiful consort of King Zhou (about 11th century B.C.), the last ruler of the Yin Dynasty. Although Masafusa simply mentions that Da-ji turned into a nine-tailed fox, Japanese and Chinese histories accused the renowned beauty of having tempted the king to commit crimes that brought down the Yin Dynasty.

The second woman, Miss Ren, was a character from a popular short-story genre called *ch'uan-ch'i* (tales of the supernatural). The story, which dates from the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), tells about a man who fell in love with Miss Ren, a beautiful woman who was really a fox. Although the man later discovered the truth, the couple lived happily together

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 T'ang Dynasty, was killed at Mawei. Thus Masafusa may have intentionally mentioned Miss Ren's name with that in mind.

The link between fox and femme fatale is clearly spelled out in *The Old Grave*, 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 *Genpei Seisuiiki* (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 Hôji), 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 femmes fatales had coalesced in the story of Tamamo no Mae, a fox disguised as a beautiful woman who suddenly appeared at court in 1154 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

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## Cunning, Crafty Cultural Icons



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A legion of white  
foxes confronts a  
warrior in a scene  
from *Yoshitsune*  
*Senbon Zakura* at  
Kabukiza Theater in  
Tokyo.

in the 1180s, which ended the Heian Period (794-1185) and ushered in centuries of military rule. In all likelihood, the story of Tamamo no Mae sprang from the real world of palace politics.

The oldest extant version of Tamamo no Mae's story dates from the 14th century, when there were two courts ruled by separate emperors. Tamamo no Mae is described in the account as a beauty whose true identity was exposed by a court diviner named Abe no Yasunari after Retired Emperor Toba suddenly fell ill. During the divination, she identified herself as a fox living in Nasuno moor (in what is now Tochigi Prefecture). She confessed that she had appeared long ago as the deity of the burial mounds worshiped by King Kalmasada-pada (King Hansoku-ô) in India and subsequently as Bao Si in China. During the pacification rite that followed the divination, Tamamo no Mae changed into a fox which two famous warriors from the eastern provinces, Miura no Suke and Kazusa no Suke, tracked down and killed in Nasuno. The fox's spirit turned into the death rock of Nasuno, which killed all living creatures.

The account cites the *Ninnô-kyô* (Benevolent Kings' 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.

Tamamo 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 *Sesshōseki* (The Death Rock), the play is still performed today. Its dramatic reenactment of the confession and exorcism of a demon is a striking example of metamorphosis in the traditional Japanese performing arts.

*Sesshōseki* begins with the entrance of a Zen priest named Gennō, who is heading back to Kyoto in autumn after having been in northeastern Japan. When he reaches Nasuno, his companion suddenly notices birds falling to earth when they fly over a large rock. The travelers draw closer to take a better look, whereupon a woman suddenly appears and warns them not to go near the rock. "It is called the Death Rock of Nasuno," she says. "All human beings, birds and beasts that go near it die." She explains that the rock contains the vengeful spirit of a former concubine of Retired Emperor Toba called Tamamo no Mae.

During the desolate autumn evening, the woman recounts Tamamo no Mae's story: A learned beauty of unknown origins, Tamamo no Mae won the heart of the retired emperor. When her knowledge was tested, 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 Tamamo 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 Yasunari blamed Tamamo no Mae. Accusing her of disguising herself as a beautiful woman in order to overthrow imperial rule in Japan, Yasunari advised performing a pacification rite. Having lost the emperor's affection, Tamamo no Mae turned back into a fox and vanished to Nasuno.

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

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Tamamo no Mae,  
portrayed by Onoe  
Kikugorō, turns into  
a nine-tailed fox and  
flies away in this  
1984 Kabukiza  
performance of  
*Tamamo no Mae*  
*Kumoi no Hare*  
*Ginu.*



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to reappear that night if he will pray for her, she disappears inside the rock. Gennō offers flowers, burns incense and chants Buddhist prayers to enable the spirit of the rock to attain salvation. Striking the ground with his *bossu*, 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. "Gazing into the brilliant light," Gennō 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 mounds worshipped by King Kalmasada-pada in India, and then as Bao Si in China, before



Genkurō the Fox, portrayed by Ichikawa Ennosuke, fights off priests who are enemies of Yoshitsune's mistress Shizuka, at left, in the kabuki play *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*, a 1992 Kabukiza performance.

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assuming the form of Tamamo no Mae in Japan. It recounts how the pacification rite caused Tamamo no Mae to flee to Nasuno, and tells how Miura 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 Gennō in submission, the spirit promises never to inflict harm on human beings again and disappears.

In the first part of *Sesshōseki*, the actor playing the woman wears a costume and mask that are typically used in noh to denote "a local woman." At different points

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during the retelling of Tamamo 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 Gennô's companion explains Tamamo no Mae's story in further detail. (In performances where no rock is used, the actor temporarily exits from the stage.) In the second part of the play, the actor wears a fierce *yakan* (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 Tamamo no Mae has been developed. The actor wears a woman's *deigan* (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 *nagabakama* (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 Sôtô sect such as Gennô, a 14th-century priest, traveled widely around Japan proselytizing and founding new temples. Zen literature of the day is full of supernatural encounters. Gennô's name, especially, was associated with *kami* and spirits, including the exorcism of the death rock at Nasuno. His biography was incorporated into later, expanded versions of the Tamamo no Mae story, the likely source of *Sesshôteki*.

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

The Tamamo no Mae legend was later adopted in *jôruri* and kabuki. Its reincarnation as a dance called *Sankoku Yôko-den* (Tales of a Bewitching Fox in Three Countries), at the National Theatre in Tokyo in 1994 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 Nasuno 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 *Sesshôteki* is counterbalanced by another noh play from the same era called *Kokaji* (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, *Kokaji* tells how a strange dream prompts Retired Emperor Ichijô 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 readies 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



*Sesshōseki*, and a crown decorated with a white fox.

The Inari Shrine also serves as a setting in *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), one of the most famous plays in the *jōruri* and kabuki repertoires. In Act 2, Minamoto no Yoshitsune arrives at the Inari Shrine with a small band of loyal retainers while fleeing from his brother, the shogun Yoritomo. The fugitive 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 keepsake. 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 Yoshitsune's band, comes along and rescues her.

Tadanobu travels with Shizuka to Yoshino looking for Yoshitsune, a journey depicted in the famous dance scene that opens Act 4. When Shizuka arrives alone at the mansion where Yoshitsune is staying, it is discovered that her travel companion had actually been a fox named Genkurō. The fox had transformed itself into Tadanobu to be near Shizuka's drum, which had been made with the skin of one of its parents. As a reward for taking care of Shizuka, Yoshitsune 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 fend off the attackers; later a legion of white foxes also appears to assist in defeating Yoshitsune's enemies.

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

The connection between the yin-yang diviners in the Tamamo no Mae and Kuzunoha stories and the contrasting treatment of the fox as a benefactor rather than a scourge bring the genre of fox-wife tales 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 old grave, Kuzunoha's story echoes the behavior of foxes in nature. Just as foxes really do have a fondness for grapes and frequent grave sites, Kuzunoha's parting from her child steals from the maternal behavior of *kita-kitsune*, or northern foxes.

Whereas Tamamo no Mae reflects the more conventional view of the fox as a trickster, Kuzunoha embodies novel aspects of Japanese fox tales, such as the idea that foxes impersonate human beings to return favors and even die or suffer 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 benefits bestowed by foxes.