

**The Japanese Fox: sustaining or subverting the negative view of women?**

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17 January 2020

MA Topical Readings in Classical Japanese

The fox is a popular animal in Japanese folklore. She often takes the form of a beautiful young woman, whether that be to trick men for fun, reward men out of gratitude or other purposes. In today's world where more and more attention is being paid to the story of women in history, literature and the like, one might wonder how these fox-ladies are portrayed and why. One might even examine these stories to see if they hold up to modern feminist standards, and conclude that the stories are "good" because they "empower" women. Christopher Kincaid comes close to this when he argues the following in his book *Come and Sleep: the Folklore of the Japanese Fox*:

The stories allow women to feel empowered in their social role, but the stories do not try to break women out of that role. From our modern perspective, this looks like a failure. After all, they reinforce the idea that a woman's place is in the home. But the stories subvert the negative view of women.<sup>1</sup>

While it is perhaps a problematic endeavor to place moral judgment – whether good or bad – on stories from the past in the first place, I want to focus on the idea of female empowerment and subversion of the negative view. To what extent is this actually true? This negative view Kincaid speaks of is based on proverbs that generalize women as "inferior, stupid, ill-natured, weak, and overly talkative".<sup>2</sup> One example he gives is: "A smart woman ruins the castle."<sup>3</sup>

Does the portrayal of the fox-wives really subvert this negative view of women? In order to answer this question, I will first look at the Fox as the Archetypal Feminine, elaborately discussed by Anne DeLong in *Medea And Medusa: The Archetype Of The Witch In Literature*. Secondly, I will examine the fox as an outcast and her relation to the patriarchy.

As for my hypothesis, I expect the portrayal of foxes to sustain, rather than subvert, the negative view of women. Although foxes can definitely be positively portrayed, ultimately their marriages fail and they are bound to leave the domestic life.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Kincaid, *Come and Sleep: The Folklore of the Japanese Fox* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015): 27

<sup>2</sup> Kincaid, *Come and Sleep*, 25

<sup>3</sup> Kincaid, *Come and Sleep*, 26

## 1. The Fox as the Archetypal Feminine

In her dissertation Anne DeLong examines the Witch Archetype in relation to the Archetypal Feminine. Building upon the research of Carl Jung and Erich Neumann, she created a schema with the Witch as Healer (M+), as Destroyer (M-), as Knower (A+) and as Bewitcher (A-). The M refers to the Maternal axis which has an elemental character, and the A refers to the Anima axis which has a transformative character.<sup>4</sup> She argues the Witch encompasses the entire Archetypal Feminine – both negative and positive, both fearsome and divine – and this reasoning can be applied to the Japanese fox as well.

The Anima axis has the Knower and Bewitcher as its poles and is much concerned with spirituality over physicality. The Bewitcher holds her victim captive using her charms or magic and renders her victim powerless, which is akin to a spiritual death as opposed to a physical one.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the Knower brings spiritual rebirth in the form of inspiration or enlightenment, as opposed to a physical birth.<sup>6</sup>

The Maternal axis has the Healer and Destroyer as its poles and is concerned with physicality over spirituality. The Destroyer causes physical death, rather than spiritual as is the case with the Bewitcher, and the Healer brings physical birth, rather than the spiritual rebirth brought by the Knower.<sup>7</sup>

The fox as Destroyer is clearly present in the belief of foxes as “female” animals with *yin* energy, that may therefore feed on the *yang* energy of human males.<sup>8</sup> Through these relations the man usually dies and the fox seeks to achieve immortality or permanently keep her human body.<sup>9</sup> The fox as Bewitcher is seen in cases of fox possession and illusions, wherein the fox causes the spiritual death of her victim and temporarily takes control of his reality. The fox as Healer is exemplified by the fox-wife who bears a human child. The fox as Knower is present in the practice of fox sorcery, wherein the fox lends her divination abilities and in a sense provides divine knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 3

<sup>5</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 4

<sup>6</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 4

<sup>7</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 4

<sup>8</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox: the Imagery of Transformation and the Transformation of Imagery in Japanese Religion and Folklore* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2001): 48

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Jörg Uther, “The Fox in World Literature: Reflections on a “Fictional Animal”,” in *Asian Folklore Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006): 140

According to Neumann, the witch has both the elemental and transformative nature of the goddess through her power over her environment, which likens her to ‘The Great Mother’.<sup>10</sup> This befits the fox that is in several ways associated with the divine. An example of this are the white foxes as messengers and guardians of the shrine of the god Inari; some people even believe these foxes to be identical to Inari<sup>11</sup>, although their divinity is not automatically related to Inari.<sup>12</sup> Another example is the fox as a divine ancestor, that protects her often exemplary descendants.

Not all divine qualities of the fox are as clear-cut, though. An interesting thing to look at would be *tama* 玉(‘jewel’). As a symbol it is more ubiquitous than the fox and is associated with fire, light, and even souls.<sup>13</sup> It can be found in the name of Tamamo no Mae, “the Jewel Maiden”. She embodies the fox as Destroyer for her spirit inhabited the “killing stone” that killed all passers-by,<sup>14</sup> but also the fox as Knower since in later versions of her story she reaches enlightenment with the help of a monk.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the jewel motif can be found in the depiction of the bodhisattva *Dakini-ten* who rides a fox and holds a sword and the sacred fox jewel.<sup>16</sup> This jewel is depicted on the fox’s tail as well.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, a more subtle reference to the jewel perhaps exists in a ninth century tale called “On Taking a Fox as a Wife and Bringing Forth a Child” in *Nihon ryōiki*, which tells the story of a man who unknowingly takes a fox as a wife. The fox bares him a son, but leaves when the family dog frightens her and so doing makes her reveal her true form. The man tells her to come and sleep with him despite her nature and he composes the following poem:

恋は皆我が<sup>うへ</sup>上に落ちぬたまかぎるはろかに見えて去<sup>い</sup>にし子ゆゑに<sup>18</sup>

*Koi ha mina wa ga uhe ni ochinu tamakagiru haroka ni miete inishi ko yue ni*

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<sup>10</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 2

<sup>11</sup> Kiyoshi Nozoki, *Kitsuné, Japan’s fox of mystery, romance and humor* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1961): 12

<sup>12</sup> Karen A Smyers, *The fox and the jewel: shared and private meanings in contemporary Japanese Inari worship*, (Honolulu, [Hawai’i] : University of Hawai’i Press, 1999): 191

<sup>13</sup> Smyers, *The fox and the jewel*, 184

<sup>14</sup> Ian Stuart Ferguson, *The Evolution Of A Legend—A Comparison Of The Character Of Tamamo No Mae Portrayed In Muromachi Period Otogizōshi And In The Late-Edo Vendetta Tale, Ito Guruma Kyūbi No Kitsune (The Spinning Wheel And The Nine-Tailed Fox)* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007): 3

<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, *The Evolution Of A Legend*, 5

<sup>16</sup> Nozoki, *Kitsuné*, 169

<sup>17</sup> Nozoki, *Kitsuné*, 169-170

<sup>18</sup> *Nihon ryōiki*, vol. 1, p. 27, line 15-16

Kyoko Nakamura translated this as:

Love fills me completely  
After a moment of reunion  
Alas! She is gone.<sup>19</sup>

However, such a poem can harbor many potential meanings. To illustrate this, I will show the initial translation I attempted: Love entirely illuminated the surface of my being, after the dim shimmering of the *tama* was visible from far away, originating from my love who left.

This is, of course, completely different, and not just because it is not nearly as poetic. If we separate the poem into three parts – “*koi (...) ochinu*”, “*tamakagiru (...) miete*” and “*inishi (...) ni*” – the first and final part are not radically different, but the middle part is, because I interpreted the *tamakagiru* as referring to a shining *tama*. When written with the kanji 霊 or 魂, *tama* can refer to someone’s soul or a spirit. This spirit can be (semi)divine in nature.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the use of *tama* can indicate a certain divine quality that is associated with the fox.

## 2. The Fox as the Outlander

According to DeLong, the witch’s aggressive and intellectual qualities should be identified with the primordial feminine, retaining some of its original androgyny.<sup>21</sup> It therefore predates the dichotomy of masculine and feminine and this androgynous nature of the Witch Archetype allows the witch to retain her masculine side – or Animus – which the patriarchal society represses.<sup>22</sup> This also means that the Archetypal Feminine is an outsider. She cannot exist wholly in the patriarchy; there is a certain tension between them. It would be worthwhile to discuss the fox’s relation to the patriarchy further, to clarify why she is and always will be an outcast.

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<sup>19</sup> Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura, *Miraculous stories from the Japanese Buddhist tradition : the Nihon ryōiki of the monk Kyōkai* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973): 105

<sup>20</sup> “Tama: Japanese Spirit,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tama-Japanese-spirit>

<sup>21</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 9

<sup>22</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 10

The patriarchy can be said to have a desire to master the powers of the witch – or the fox – by means of marriage or enslavement.<sup>23</sup> This is partly due to her somewhat autochthonous, or self-born, nature that gives her a relative independence toward men.

In the case of fox-wife stories, the fox takes the form of a beautiful woman, concealing her “wild” nature and using her powers of transformation in service of her husband. When she appears as a woman in these stories, there are often subtle hints of her true nature. An example would be the meeting of the man of the fox woman in “On Taking a Fox as a Wife and Bringing Forth a Child”. Firstly, the meeting takes place in a field (*ya* 野) which is the first part of *yakan*, another word used for foxes, and hints at a distance from civilization and thus wild animals.<sup>24</sup>

While this does not really indicate a patriarchal desire, another hint might. The scene in question has been translated as follows:

[de Visser:] After a long time he met in the field a beautiful woman, of whom he asked: “Will you be my wife?” She consented; whereupon he took her with him to his house and married her.<sup>25</sup>

[Nakamura:] In a field he came across a pretty and responsive girl. He winked at her and asked, “Where are you going, Miss?” “I am looking for a good husband,” she answered. So he asked, “Will you be my wife?” and, when she agreed, he took her to his house and married her.<sup>26</sup>

While these scenes show the fox’s consent – she is not forced to enter a marriage – both translators appear to gloss over a certain sentence in the classical text:

其の女、<sup>をとこ</sup> 壮<sup>コ</sup>に媚<sup>ナツ</sup>ビ馴<sup>メカリウ</sup>キ、壮 睨<sup>ツ</sup>。 <sup>27</sup>

*Sono onna, wotoko ni kobi natsuki, wotoko mekari utsu.*

Here the word *natsuki* is used, which comes from *natsuku* 懐く meaning something like ‘to become familiar with’. Notably, the word is written with the kanji for *narafu* 馴ふ which can mean ‘to get used to’, but also ‘to become tame/ domesticated’. The sentence, therefore, could potentially hint at the domestication of the wild fox through marriage. Although this statement may seem farfetched, the scene and word usage do align with the patriarchal desire, not just

<sup>23</sup> DeLong, *Medea And Medusa*, 95

<sup>24</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 59

<sup>25</sup> M.W. de Visser, *The fox and the badger in Japanese folklore* (S.I.: Asiatic Society of Japan, 1909): 20

<sup>26</sup> Nakamura, *Miraculous stories from the Japanese Buddhist tradition*, 104

<sup>27</sup> *Nihon ryōiki*, vol. 1, p. 26, line 14-15

because of the domestication of the woman through marriage, but also the willingness of such a beauty to devote herself to a man.

Another way the patriarchal desire of these women serving men is visible, is through the portrayal of the fox's children. A fox mother can be used as an explanation for exemplary children, like the famous Heian wizard Abe no Seimei whose mother was said to be the fox Kuzunoha. In a way the male child is placed in the forefront and his mother behind him. Fox-wife tales could explain power and wealth of a certain family and the fox-wife would be identified as a divine ancestress protecting her descendants and helping them prosper.<sup>28</sup>

However, the marriages in fox-wife tales inevitably end in the departure or death of the fox. If the marriage aligns with the patriarchal desire and even both the man and woman are reluctant to separate, why would it fail? The fox is a powerful outcast which likely makes her ownership both desired and feared by the patriarchy.

Michael Bathgate elaborately discusses fox-wife tales as reflecting social tensions between men and women; foxes hereby symbolize the women in general<sup>29</sup> who participated in a paradoxical cultural logic in which they were central yet marginalized.<sup>30</sup> He locates the cause of those tensions in the anxieties that come with the logic of patrilineality, by highlighting two prominent motifs, which are the fox-wife's *foreignness* and "the *deception* by which she attempts (always unsuccessfully) to hide that strangeness".<sup>31</sup> Both the wildness and transformation of fox-wives are central qualities of the Fox archetype, as well as qualities that make women threatening to this patrilineality.<sup>32</sup>

The foreignness of the fox-wife lies in her wild origin which aligns with James Taggart's theory that male myths place men at the human center, as opposed to the wild non-human periphery where women reside.<sup>33</sup> This wildness is required as well as rejected by the domestic sphere.<sup>34</sup>

As for the deception, the fox-wife deceives by transforming her physical form and taking the identity of the human wife, not unlike the women who transform their identity when they leave their natal home and take on the group identity of their husband's family.<sup>35</sup> The transformation,

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<sup>28</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 46-47

<sup>29</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 52

<sup>30</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 53-55

<sup>31</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 55

<sup>32</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 55

<sup>33</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 57

<sup>34</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 62

<sup>35</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 63

movement and exchange of women came with certain anxieties that are shown in the fox-wife tales.<sup>36</sup> Like the wildness aspect, this is both necessary for and threatening to the continuing patrilineality.<sup>37</sup>

The issue of patrilineality is also visible when the fox-wife leaves her exemplary child (usually a boy), which may reflect the end of the child's early development led by the mother and the beginning of his further development led by the father and other men.<sup>38</sup> This is not only because of the symbolic nature-culture dichotomy, but also because the boy must be socialized into the father's family, to which the mother is a relative newcomer.<sup>39</sup> Because the mother comes from a different family – and in the case of the fox-wife, a different species – her natal identity can never fully make place for her new one.<sup>40</sup> This is exactly one of the anxieties resulting from the transformations of both women and foxes; the inevitable failure of the fox-wife's marriage suggests that she cannot be completely domesticated.<sup>41</sup> Because of her shapeshifting ability – with which she hides her true form – the husband might also doubt her sincerity and fear that while performing her role as wife, her commitment and love have been a mere façade.<sup>42</sup>

Fox-wife tales can reflect the frightening awareness that one cannot fully control another. Moreover, these tales show how the outcast in the end remains the outcast, no matter how sincerely they try to fit in and how well they keep up the façade.

They remain foreign, not just because of their wildness, but also their previously mentioned autochthonous quality; they create their own human form, which makes them self-born, in a way. Thus, they were not born into a society, family or social class, but they entered later in life with no predetermined place.

## Conclusion

While the fox-wife is positively portrayed, she is to a certain extent “on a leash”. Her power and intelligence are used in service of the husband and can, in that context, be positively viewed. This aligns with the patriarchal desire discussed by DeLong. From a feminist standpoint the

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<sup>36</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 63

<sup>37</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 63

<sup>38</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 70

<sup>39</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 70

<sup>40</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 70

<sup>41</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 73

<sup>42</sup> Bathgate, *The Shapeshifter Fox*, 73



Fox archetype is not particularly women friendly, but that is beside the point. The question is whether these tales subvert the negative views on women. As for my answer: no, they do not.

Fox-wife tales, despite their positive portrayal, generally end with either the death or departure of the fox. Rather than propagating the usefulness of intelligent and self-assertive women, they reinforce the idea that there is no place for them in society. There is no subversion, because the marriage fails and the fox is bound to leave, no matter how well she plays the part of wife. Rather than accepting these women, the fox-wife tales alienate them and demonstrate how they can never truly fit in.

After all, the fox encompasses the Archetypal Feminine and is thus essentially an outcast. She can be monstrous or divine, a fearsome trickster or a benefiting ancestress, but she can never belong. She is an intruder in a patriarchal society. Her androgyny, her autochthonous quality related to her shapeshifting abilities and her wildness are all reasons she will forever remain an outcast. Fox-wife tales do not win her a place in society; they sustain the belief that she does not have one.

However, this does not at all mean that these tales are “bad”. As stated in the introduction, it is perhaps problematic to judge an old story’s moral value. Of course, it would be perfectly fine to say it does not align with contemporary values, but it has no obligation to do so in the first place. These stories were told and read in contexts different from our own, so its moral character is bound to differ as well. Noticing such a difference, however, is not the same as judging it. And the judging is the problematic part. A story is not “good” or “bad” based on how well it aligns with our values; it is a product of its time and it does not have to transcend that.

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