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# Fox-Kuzunoha: The Actor Print and the Expression of Female as 'Other' in the Late Edo Period

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Fox-Kusunoha:  
The Actor Print and the Expression of Female  
as 'Other' in the Late Edo Period

By  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors  
in the Department of Visual Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

JEFTS, KARA    Fox-Kuzunoha: The Actor Print and the Expression of Female as ‘Other’ in the Late Edo Period

ADVISOR: Sheri Lullo

Stories of the supernatural are a rich part of Japan’s cultural history, and one way to explore the popularity of these tales is through the widely produced visual medium of Ukiyo-e prints. By the eighteenth century, kabuki theatre became a dominant theme in Ukiyo-e, and kabuki plays provide a way to access diverse folk traditions involving the supernatural, often based on Shinto beliefs or Buddhist principles. Confucian values, at the core of Edo Period society, commonly frame these subjects in contrast to traditional familial relationships. Using the visual language of the stage, moments of dramatic climax in kabuki are emphasized by *mie*, which naturally lent to the style of Ukiyo-e actor prints. The term *Ukiyo-e*, associated with the “the floating world,” is a concept which depicts everyday life in Edo Japan as ephemeral and impermanent. A strong connection between the supernatural and the uncertainty of the Edo Period experience can be made through the interpretation of characters in kabuki plays; one such iconic character is fox-Kuzunoha – a fox in female form – known for her role in the popular Edo Period play *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*. Ukiyo-e prints offer important evidence to understand Edo culture and in this analysis I will explain Kuzunoha’s popularity in print form: from the kabuki stage, to the publishing industry, to the consumer. My goal is to reveal the significance of fox-Kuzunoha’s supernatural identity as it relates to women in mid-nineteenth century Japan.

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Stories of the supernatural are a rich part of Japan's cultural history, and one way to explore the popularity of these tales is through the widely produced visual medium of Ukiyo-e prints. By the eighteenth century, kabuki theatre became a dominant theme in Ukiyo-e. Broadly speaking, kabuki plays provide a way to access diverse folk traditions involving the supernatural, which were often based on Shinto beliefs or Buddhist principles. Confucian values, the core of Edo Period (1600 – 1858)<sup>1</sup> society, commonly frame these subjects in contrast to traditional familial relationships.<sup>2</sup> Using the visual language of the stage, moments of dramatic climax in kabuki are emphasized by *mie* (an actor's frozen pose showing a high point in the drama) which naturally lent to the style of Ukiyo-e actor prints.<sup>3</sup> The term *Ukiyo-e*, defined as “the floating world,” is a concept which depicts everyday life in Edo Japan as ephemeral and impermanent.<sup>4</sup> In this way, a strong connection between the supernatural and uncertainty of the Edo Period experience can be made through the interpretation of kabuki characters; one such iconic character is fox-Kuzunoha – a fox in female form – known for her role in the popular Edo Period play *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* (*Ashiya Dōman Ōuchi Kagami*). Ukiyo-e prints offer important evidence to understand Edo culture and in this analysis I will explain Kuzunoha's popularity in print form: from the kabuki stage, to the publishing industry, to the consumer.<sup>5</sup> My goal is to reveal the significance of fox-Kuzunoha's supernatural

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<sup>1</sup> Nishiyama Matunosuke, *Edo Culture: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600-1968*, (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1997). There are conflicting records of the dates of the Edo Period, however, we will follow the historian Nishiyama Matunosuke's account for these dates.

<sup>2</sup> Benito Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 171-172.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Secor and Stephen Addiss, “The Male Ghost in Kabuki and Ukiyo-e,” in *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural*, ed. by Stephen Addiss, (New York: George Brasiller, Inc., 1985), 50.

<sup>4</sup> Iris Newsom, ed., *The Floating World of Ukiyo-e: Shadows, Dreams and Substance*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2001), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Reigle Newland, *The Commercial & Cultural Climate of Japanese Printmaking*, (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2004), 188.

identity as it relates to women in mid-nineteenth century Japan.

Kusunoha proves to be a very prolific character in Ukiyo-e prints from the Edo Period. The majority of prints depicting scenes from the play *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* are of her character, however, her image extends beyond the format of actor prints. Kusunoha is represented in fan designs, in collections of illustrated poems, as a character in landscape series of Japanese provinces, as a figure representing one of the paragons of filial piety, and even in advertisements for famous restaurants (figure 1). This variety suggests that not only was Kusunoha's image used as a way of promoting profit, the primary concern for the industry producing the prints, but also that her character was easily relatable to a diverse audience in Edo.



The fox-Kuzunoha character was popular in part due to the virtuoso performance of the *onnagata*, or male kabuki actor playing a female role. The fourth act of *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*, which stars Kuzunoha, is defined by the technically difficult performance known as a *henge mono* or “transformation piece.” This type of scene was highly popular among audiences; the *onnagata* actor employed smoke and mirror style



tricks in order to play two characters almost simultaneously.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Kuzunoha, the male actor does not wear a fox mask on stage, but instead conveys a feminine and supernatural duality through subtle movements and suggestive poses. For example, the kimono was sometimes positioned in such a way to suggest a tail underneath – hinted at by the volume created by the actor’s leg positioned under the loose kimono fabric. In movement, the actor would prance around holding his hands in a “fox paw” position, alluding to his disguised animal form. These techniques, carefully honed by the *onnagata*, were among the most important means of portraying the dual identity of fox-Kuzunoha.<sup>7</sup> While acting technique was key to the demonstration of fox-Kuzunoha’s character, the translation of her supernatural nature performed by actors on stage was also encoded in the form of Ukiyo-e prints. The center of this analysis, in turn, highlights the popularity of these prints as they served to memorialize the performance and signify the fame of fox-Kuzunoha’s supernatural identity when collected by kabuki fans.

This paper is essentially divided into two sections. The analysis begins in chapter one by looking at the plot of *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* in order to understand how fox-Kuzunoha is established as a leading heroine in the play, and why the act that stars Kuzunoha was essential to the popularity of the performance. In Chapter two I will then step back to explain more about the social and commercial climate during the Edo Period, and the ways in which the Confucian hierarchy and the growing middle class encourage the development of the kabuki culture from which her character is born. In the third chapter we will discuss the influence of kabuki in Edo, focusing on the ways in

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<sup>6</sup> *New Kabuki Encyclopedia*, ed. Samuel L. Leiter (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), s.v. “Henge mono.”

<sup>7</sup> Janet Goff, “Conjuring Kuzunoha from the World of Abe no Seimei,” in *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance*, ed. by Samuel L. Leiter, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 281.

which plays critiqued the social structure while cleverly evading government regulation in order to express ideas that were otherwise considered taboo. After building this backdrop, I begin the second section in chapter four by outlining Ukiyo-e in an art historical context, emphasizing techniques developed by artists of the Utagawa school. By closely analyzing three prints of Kuzunoha in this chapter I will bring to light visual references used to define her character, and through the materials utilized we will be able to recognize the marketing of her character to a variety of collectors, highlighting her popularity specifically among the merchant class. Finally, in chapter five, I will explain folk traditions surrounding the fox in order to understand how the heroine, fox-Kuzunoha, is simultaneously supernatural “other,” wife and mother, and how these dualities work together to illustrate the power of influence of women in Edo Japan, while avoiding censorship by the Tokugawa regime.

## Part One

### Chapter One

#### Kuzunoha and *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*

Both kabuki theatre and Ukiyo-e prints are considered primary components of the popular artistic tradition during the Edo period. It makes sense, then, to look at trends of the supernatural through an intersection of these mediums. At first glance, Kuzunoha does not appear to fit in the category of the supernatural. The scene depicted in figure 2 focuses on a woman who is writing a poem on a traditional *shoji* paper door. She is joined by other characters – her husband and her son – but we see no imagery to suggest there are supernatural forces in play. This woman, Kuzunoha, is in fact not a woman at all. She is a fox in the guise of a woman, and she is scrawling a regretful poem after her true identity has been revealed. This act is the climax of *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*. The *onnagata* playing Kuzunoha does not wear costume revealing fox-like features, but instead demonstrates supernatural “otherness” by writing calligraphy with his teeth.<sup>8</sup> This performance, which challenged the actor’s ability, stands out as the primary reference to Kuzunoha’s unusual nature in each of the prints I will analyze in section two.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacob Raz, “Kuzunoha the Devoted Fox Wife: A Storyteller’s Version,” in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1984): 79.



**Figure 2.** Utagawa Yoshiiku, *Actors Bandô Hikosaburô V as Kusunoha and Sawamura Tosshô II as Abe no Yasuna*, Edo period, 1865, from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 2, by an artist of the dominant Utagawa school is visually rich, saturated with color and closely cropped to highlight the main characters. On the right is fox-Kusunoha, writing a farewell poem, on the left outside of the circular window is Abe no Yasuna, Kusunoha's husband, observing the scene undetected from afar. Yasuna's gaze leads us to find the finger tips of our third character, Abe no Seimei, their child.

This climatic moment is a direct allusion to the child-separation scene from the play *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*. The full script weaves the biography of a historical figure, the astrologer Abe no Seimei (921 – 1005), with the folklore of

Kuzunoha the fox-wife in five acts.<sup>9</sup> Our analysis of Kuzunoha, who stars in act four, is best described in popular prints of the child-separation scene such as this. First, I will look at a summary of the kabuki play in all five acts to better understand the relationship between the characters in the larger drama.<sup>10</sup>

In act one, a master astrologer dies abruptly without bequeathing the scroll of his knowledge to any of his students. Two primary disciples, Abe no Yasuna (who later becomes Kuzunoha's husband) and Ashiya Dōman (for which the play is titled) battle to obtain this scroll that in the end is stolen by Dōman. In the process, Yasuna's betrothed, Sakaki, commits suicide to prove her innocence in the theft by Dōman. Following Sakaki's death Yasuna loses his mind with grief and wanders into Shinoda forest.

In act two, Dōman, who through his deceit has gained the title of court astrologer, is urged to produce an heir. In order to ensure his wife bore a son, Dōman began to hunt for a white fox. In folk tradition, the white fox is said to have magical and medicinal values, curing a range of illnesses from vertigo to ulcers, to use as a "love potion" for frigid wives.<sup>11</sup> Also, the relationship of the fox to the rice god Inari identifies this creature as a symbol of fertility. Inari shrines are the most prevalent shrines in Japan and many offerings are made to Inari, and subsequently the fox, with hope of building both fertile crops and families.<sup>12</sup> In this case, Dōman hunts a fox in Shinoda forest in order to place its sacrificed body beneath his wife's bed, ensuring that an heir would be born.

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Raz, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Eisaburo Kusano, *Stories Behind Noh and Kabuki Plays*, (Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo News Service, Ltd., 1962), 71 – 76. This summary is based on the description of the play in five scenes as included in the following collection of Kabuki plays.

<sup>11</sup> T.W. Johnson, "Far Eastern Fox Lore," in *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (1974): 38.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Goff, "Foxes in Japanese Culture: Beautiful or Beastly?" in *Japan Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, (1997): 66.

In act three, Yasuna, still wandering in distress, stumbles upon the younger sister of Sakaki, Lady Kuzunoha.<sup>13</sup> She is paying tribute to the Shinoda shrine in the forest where Yasuna is roaming. Taken by the resemblance to his late love Sakaki, Yasuna is pulled out of his mad stupor. Meanwhile, the evil Dōman approaches, stalking a white fox that runs between where Yasuna and the Lady Kuzunoha stand. The beautiful lady is striking to Dōman as well, and his preoccupation with her allows for the fox to escape. Distracted, Dōman then challenges Yasuna in battle for the lady's attention. Yasuna is left badly injured in the dispute, and before he succeeds in ending his own life Kuzunoha (actually the white fox in disguise) appears to aide his wounds. Yasuna is not aware that Dōman has left with the real Lady Kuzunoha.

In act four, Yasuna and fox-Kuzunoha are married and have a son, Abe no Seimei. One day, after their family lived happily for many years, the real Lady Kuzunoha visits Yasuna and discovers her imposter. She confronts Yasuna with this discovery, and he is unsure which woman is truly his wife. Before Yasuna can decipher this inexplicable duality, fox-Kuzunoha decides to leave her husband and son in an act honoring her filial virtue. Here, in the climax of the play, is the child-separation scene that forms the center of this analysis. Before departing Kuzunoha regretfully scrawls a parting poem that reads:

If you long for me,  
come seek me in Izumi,  
where, in the forest of Shinoda,  
you'll find your Kuzu

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<sup>13</sup> To make certain there is no confusion when I briefly mention the human Lady Kuzunoha in this paragraph, take note that for the entirety of the paper when I refer to Kuzunoha I am referring to fox in guise of the Lady Kuzunoha. I will refer to this transformed fox character as both Kuzunoha and fox-Kuzunoha interchangeably.

of the clinging vine.<sup>14</sup>

In the final act, Yasuna and Seimei travel back to Shinoda forest, looking to beg for fox-Kuzunoha's return. When they meet she refuses their plea, and instead bestows a gift of magical knowledge to Seimei before transforming back into a white fox and running away. Seimei uses this supernatural gift to defeat the corrupt Dōman, restoring the rightful family lineage that was once robbed from his father.

When we look at *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* as a whole, we see sweeping themes of corruption and greed, justice and redemption, all of which surely reflect contemporary frustrations with the Tokugawa regime. An audience viewing this play understood the themes of corruption represented by the rivalry between good and evil: Yasuna and Dōman.<sup>15</sup> However, the play was often fragmented, and only act four, which focuses on fox-Kuzunoha, was performed on stage. Kabuki themes that hint to political corruption were likely more susceptible to censorship by Tokugawa officials, but that is not the only reason the child-separation scene was highlighted.

In order to ensure the success of a kabuki theatre, the manager sought to provide the audience the most sensational drama experience possible, and that also accounts for the popularity of the scene in act four. There are few themes more dramatic than a mother's separation from her child. However, while Kuzunoha makes a regretful sacrifice by leaving her family she also asserts power through the supernatural gift she passes on to her son. The impact Kuzunoha had on Yasuna and Seimei is relevant to the experience of the Edo period audience. By unpacking the context of Ukiyo-e prints that depict this

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<sup>14</sup> James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage: Brilliance & Bravado, 1697 – 1766*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 143. There are multiple translations of Kuzunoha's parting poem, however, all make reference to the Shinoda forest and make use of the poetic reference to Kuzu leaves from which she gets her name.

<sup>15</sup> Janet Goff, "Conjuring Kuzunoha from the World of Abe no Seimei," 276.

scene I will reveal a deeper understanding of Edo culture, particularly as it relates to the power of Kuzunoha's influence on her nuclear family.



## Chapter Two

### Edo, the Pleasure District, and Ukiyo-e Publishing

There was a mutual interaction between the *ukiyo-e* industry and kabuki theatres, and it is important understand the cultural context of both to provide a background for the analysis of prints depicting Kuzunoha. The Edo Period is recognized as a time of peace and prosperity following a period of devastating violence and civil unrest. After closing Japan's borders to the outside world, the ruling samurai class established a strict and heirarchical Neo-Confucian government system centered in Edo city, present day Tokyo. This re-established hierarchy was comprised of samurai, peasants, artisans and merchants. The samurai were at the top as the leading governmental faction, followed by peasants who provided the necessary food and resources to their samurai lords, below them, artisans who used their skill to craft objects needed for daily life, and at the very bottom were merchants, who merely peddled goods and did not possess any real skill deemed honorable by this hierarchical society.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their low rung on the Confucian scale, the merchant class' wealth was rising greatly. They were helping to build a middle class in Japan, earning large incomes through trade along Edo's ports. Because the political system was still based on an agrarian culture, the merchants and their commercial profits were not taxed or regulated making profit margins exceedingly high. Merchants could easily develop monopolies on imported goods in high demand, amassing riches that equaled and sometimes even surpassed the wealth of powerful samurai.<sup>17</sup> The hierarchy in Edo was strict, and highly

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<sup>16</sup> Benito Ortolani, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Benito Ortolani, 168

discouraged the mingling of the merchant class with other higher social orders. This exclusion led the merchant class to “take their money elsewhere,” to a realm of leisure and extravagance: the pleasure district.

Also of note, the values established in Edo placed an emphasis on education through the pursuit of Confucian understanding from Chinese classics like the *Analects* (500 b.c.).<sup>18</sup> The teachings of Confucius in the *Analects* set a standard for moral and ritual concerns during the Edo Period, emphasizing ideals such as the feudal order and the importance of filial piety.<sup>19</sup> The growing literacy among both the samurai and merchant classes encouraged the study of these ancient texts, and copies were made readily available with the success of publishing shops that established themselves right outside the pleasure district gates.<sup>20</sup> The increasing literacy of the merchant class not only furthered their success in business, but made them powerful cultural patrons.

Recreation was also a growing industry in Edo. The samurai upper class and wealthy merchants amused themselves within the pleasure districts, host to kabuki theatres, tea-houses, and other leisure industries. While samurai rulers were known to frequently partake in such entertainments, they also kept a critical eye on the merchant's patronage, ensuring the content of entertainment such as kabuki plays was not in conflict with the interests of the Tokugawa regime.

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<sup>18</sup> Nishiyama Matunosuke, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 70.

<sup>20</sup> Nishiyama Matunosuke, 69.



**Figure 3.** Okumura Masanobu, *Large Perspective Picture of the Kabuki Theater District in Sakai-chô and Fukiya-chô*, Edo period, ca. 1745, collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The scene in figure 3, by the Ukiyo-e master Masanobu, depicts the outer gates of the pleasure district: the home of leisure. It conveys the bustling popularity of this Edo Period cultural Mecca. The expression of modern Japanese culture was taking form within these gates; shaped by the merchant patrons, and independent of the rigid Confucian structure enforced by the Tokugawa court on the outside. Kabuki was not free from regulation, but its placement outside of “accepted” Edo culture, within the pleasure district, made it an appealing venue for experimentation. Kabuki theatres were recognized by the regime as a home for gaudy or provocative entertainment, and the untouchable *senmin* class that included actors and prostitutes. Within the pleasure district the *senmin*, merchants, artisans, peasants and even samurai co-mingled. It was a place so

far outside the ordered barracks of the Tokugawa court, that social distinction was no longer a concern.<sup>21</sup>

The merchant's gold gave them influence within the pleasure district. The investment of wealthy Japanese merchants fanned the flames of the flourishing culture there, as represented in great volume in prints from the floating world. As earlier mentioned, the floating world refers to a specific genre prints that emphasize the fleeting nature of life; often kabuki actors, beautiful women, and other scenes from the pleasure district were the subject for these prints. The massive distribution of Ukiyo-e from the floating world both within and without Japan represents the strong influence of this popular culture during the Edo Period.

In addition to kabuki theatres, the pleasure district was host to the publishing houses that sold Ukiyo-e prints. The location of the publishing houses in relation to the theatres was a symbiotic relationship: it was key to both advertise the performances, drawing in the audience and perpetuating the superstardom of the actors, while simultaneously encouraging the sale of prints as souvenirs of the experience. This mutual dependency launched the success of both popular art forms: kabuki and Ukiyo-e.

Prints were often purchased by tourists and travelers as souvenirs to bring back from the bustling entertainment district to their families in provincial cities and rural areas.<sup>22</sup> These theatre-goers were, again, members of the merchant middle-class with a growing expendable income allowing for entertainment and pursuit of culture. The development of large-scale color printing drastically changed accessibility to traditional Japanese woodblock prints; and behind every print was a publishing house.

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<sup>21</sup> Benito Ortolani, 166.

<sup>22</sup> Nishiyama Matsunosuke, 64.

There were essentially 5 steps involved in the production of a print: the publisher first commissioned an artist to create the desired imagery; the artist then worked to develop a design in collaboration with the theatres based on the given commission; the publisher then took this design to a block-cutting studio where a set of woodblock plates were produced; once the plates were carved, the publisher arranged for the printers to create a run of no fewer than 1,000 editions; and finally, the publisher would take the finished prints and try to turn a profit above the production costs invested in materials and labor.<sup>23</sup>

Because of the significant investment required in the production of these prints, the publisher sought to ensure that the initial design would have a strong consumer appeal, or even better, would work on a commission from teahouse courtesans or kabuki theatre managers who were looking to advertise.<sup>24</sup> Of course, kabuki theatre was at the height of popular culture during this time, and therefore depictions of actors in memorable performances were a safe bet for Ukiyo-e publishers looking to profit. Again, this emphasizes the mutual dependency between kabuki play houses and the Ukiyo-e print industry.

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<sup>23</sup> Amy Reigle Newland, 11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Amy Reigle Newland, 14.

## Chapter Three

### Inside Kabuki Culture

The influence of kabuki in Edo is often related to a critique of the social structure, expressing ideas that were otherwise considered taboo. To narrow the lens of analysis from the culture of pleasure district to the genre of actor prints that depict Kuzunoha, I will now look at the rich tradition of kabuki theatre. The origin of kabuki can be traced to shamanic ritual, but more specifically, the performance of a dance called *kabuki odori* (1603).<sup>25</sup> This dance, first performed by female prostitutes impersonating male samurai, began in contrast to the all-male performance characteristic of later kabuki. The *kabuki odori* mocked and exaggerated samurai without position for the entertainment of the imperial court, and as a way for the female prostitutes to promote their other services.<sup>26</sup> This early connection between kabuki and sensuality influenced later stigmas against the theatrical art by the Tokugawa regime.

The ruling Tokugawa class consisted of hundreds of powerful samurai, however not all received an official appointment under the new regime. Those left without a position were known as *rōnin*. These samurai were stripped of their title, often frequenting the growing playground of the merchant class: the pleasure district. While many *rōnin* remained loyal to the Confucian order, concealing their identity when associating with the merchants, others rebelled in protest exaggerated costume consisting of bright kimono, and carrying oversized accessories such as swords and four-foot long tobacco pipes (figure 4). These rebels were known as *kabuki mono*, and here one

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<sup>25</sup> Jacob Raz, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Benito Ortolani, 174- 175.

discovers the etymological origin of kabuki theatre. This subversive behavior led the government to label these samurai as *kabuki mono* – where *kabuki* means “to slant” or “to tilt.”<sup>27</sup> They were construing the standards of dress code to express their protest of the regime. Despite this criticism, the colorful dress of the *rōnin* was celebrated in song and on stage by the women performing *kabuki odori*, mimicking the dress and props of these outlaws for the entertainment of the inner court. It was from this origin that the flamboyant theatrical tradition of kabuki theatre was born.<sup>28</sup>



The first documented kabuki play followed in 1614, and was also performed by women in male roles. The plot included supernatural folk tales typical of shamanic ritual,

<sup>27</sup> Benito Ortolani, 164

<sup>28</sup> Benito Ortolani, 174- 175.

and the popularity of otherworldly themes was demonstrated in many of the first performances.<sup>29</sup> By the 1630's, kabuki theatres, actors, and plays proliferated within Edo under increasingly rigid regulation by the Tokugawa regime. Kabuki was viewed as a threat to the refined traditions of the imperial class, and regulations broadened to control criticism. Theatres were banned to the pleasure districts; plays were no longer allowed to depict real events or people; and in 1629, women were banned from performing on stage, their overt performance of sensuality conflicted with Tokugawa morals that emphasised feminine purity.<sup>30</sup> The regime sought to prevent any unfavorable sentiment that conflicted with the authority the ruling class. These strict regulations did not, however, hinder the popularity of kabuki, which became increasingly fashionable and continued to shape the cultural backdrop of Edo.

After banning females from performing, the government also required the young male actors who filled their roles to shave their top-hairs. Shaving the hair on the crown of the forehead was a custom that was a standard rite of passage for boys entering manhood around the age of sixteen.<sup>31</sup> Because hairstyle was considered a key element to feminine sensuality, these mandates were intended to limit displays of sexual desire, particularly as it related to homoerotic behavior with young boys filling the roles women were banned from playing.<sup>32</sup> This law was particularly harsh, and it became a way for the regime to challenge female characters specifically.<sup>33</sup> In response, male actors utilized wigs and carefully positioned silk bands to cover their shaved hair, as illustrated by the

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<sup>29</sup> Benito Ortolani, 173.

<sup>30</sup> Benito Ortolani, 169-170.

<sup>31</sup> Benito Ortolani, 176.

<sup>32</sup> Faith Bach, "Breaking the Kabuki Actors' Barriers: 1868 – 1900," in *Asian Theatre Journal*, 12, No. 2 (1995): 254.

<sup>33</sup> Benito Ortolani, 169-170.



purple fabric tied across the forehead of the actor in figure 5.<sup>34</sup> The prints of Kuzunoha that I will later analyze are aligned in this same tradition; the young male *onnagata* actors who played her character assembled their costume in this same way.



When considering the lives of kabuki actors, one must not neglect the nature of the industry as a cohesive network – including theatre owners, playwrights, and of course, the publishing industry that publicized the plays and actors. As mentioned, the government regulated areas in which the theatres were allowed to operate, but they also required the theatre owners to obtain operational licenses. These licenses were issued to determine how many theatres were operating in any given district, and to maintain

<sup>34</sup> *New Kabuki Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Katsura”.

influence over the themes of the plays themselves. A kabuki company that staged performances openly criticizing the government would commonly find their license revoked and the producers, actors, and playwrights involved could be shackled, arrested, or sometimes even banished.<sup>35</sup>

Criticism of Tokugawa morals was commonly treated through themes of the supernatural, as this was a way to evade censorship and the resulting penalties. As mentioned, plays were no longer allowed to depict real events or people, so playwrights utilized double entendre as a way to appease the authorities while simultaneously exploring themes that would otherwise be considered taboo.<sup>36</sup> I will re-visit this idea later in the analysis of Kuzunoha, whose supernatural duality utilizes this clever kabuki convention.

The harsh regulations did not, however, hinder the popularity of kabuki. Figure 6 depicts the kabuki stage in a scene that captures the booming energy of the audience. It reveals a live performance, the fans shoulder-to-shoulder in the arena, engaged in clamoring conversation that competes with the actors on stage. The stage floor extends into the crowd, encouraging rowdy participation throughout the production. The goal of a successful performance in the eye of the theatre manager was to create audience interaction, encouraging a dialogue between the actors and their fans.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, "Edo Kabuki: The Actor's World," in *Impressions*, No. 31 (2010): 116.

<sup>36</sup> Benito Ortolani, 199-200.

<sup>37</sup> Fujisawa Akane, "The Mutual Flowering of Utagawa School and Kabuki," in *Competition and Collaboration*, ed. by Laura J. Mueller, (Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2007), 30.



**Figure 6.** Utagawa Toyokuni, *View of a Kabuki Theatre*, ca 1800, collection of the British Museum, London

In respect to this all-inclusive production, it is important to mention that the primary role of the playwright was not to showcase their own virtuosity, but instead to write dramas that would showcase the skill, appearance and charisma of the kabuki actors.<sup>38</sup> The theatre companies, from the producers at the top, to the stagehands and playwrights at the bottom, could not be sustained without the superstar power of successful kabuki actors.

By the end of the seventeenth century, superstar actors were receiving exorbitant salaries comparable to the Hollywood stars of today. While an average person in Edo at this time could live on 2 gold pieces, leading actors such as Danjurō I (1660 – 1704) earned a salary of up to 800 yen a year.<sup>39</sup> The actor salaries were cause for hardship for kabuki production companies, but despite their fame and fortune the actors themselves were also greatly hindered by the ways in which they could use their earnings. Actors were required to pay for their own costumes, and as much as a third of their salary went to maintaining extravagant wardrobes.<sup>40</sup> Modern fashion trends during the Edo Period were set by the style of kabuki actors, and as I will later explore, the promotion and sale of prints that helped actors to achieve fame was determinately connected to commercial interests promoting their fashion choices.

The astronomical expenses involved in each production were partially backed by wealthy merchant investment. Despite this backing, the theatre houses primarily depended on the fame of major kabuki stars to stay afloat. The production of actor prints was a large component of success in this regard. Again, highlighting the interdependence

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<sup>38</sup> Benito Ortolani, 198. Confucian social structures are layered even within the untouchables of society in Japan, and in this respect the playwright was considered low on the scale within theatre society, at the same level as a mere stage-hand.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, "Edo Kabuki: The Actor's World," 116.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, "Edo Kabuki: The Actor's World," 5.

of kabuki and Ukiyo-e, actor prints served to advertise the leading roles as well as promote the stardom of the actors. Ukiyo-e artists played an important role in the elaborate kabuki network, enlisted to design the prints that launched the fame of leading actors.

Before jumping to the analysis, it is important to again highlight the regulations placed on kabuki by the Tokugawa regime. Because of the links between early kabuki performance and subversive political or licentious themes, we must be reminded that when held to an overarching standard, kabuki was considered vulgar and closely monitored.<sup>41</sup> Playwrights were skilled in building double-entendre roles that conformed to Confucian values and Tokugawa regulations, while satisfying the Edo audience's desire for the sensational through veiled constructs including emphasis on the supernatural.<sup>42</sup> Popular outlets for these devices included tragic romantic dramas like that of Kuzunoha which critiqued the social values while evading government regulation through an expression of the supernatural I will surmise in part two.

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<sup>41</sup> Benito Ortolani, 167.

<sup>42</sup> Benito Ortolani, 171-172

## Part Two

### Chapter 4

#### Fox-Kuzunoha in Actor Prints by Utagawa Kunisada

Much can be learned through the direct comparison of materials and iconography in representations, which ultimately determines the audience for which the images were produced. By deconstructing three prints of the same moment in *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*, one is able to pick apart distinct differences in: the technical complexity determined by the materials used; underlying themes expressed through the visual iconography; and the intended audience or consumer for each example. The aim of this analysis is to “close the loop” in the discussion of Kuzunoha, revealing how three representations of the child-separation scene inform us about the kabuki play and the production of the prints, and ultimately, the collector’s appeal to these prints. Before beginning this straight forward analysis, I will place Ukiyo-e in a general art historical context based on the understanding of a variety of scholars.

The first comprehensive historical survey of Ukiyo-e prints was *Masters of Ukiyo-e* written by Ernst Fenollosa in the late nineteenth century. Fenollosa defines Ukiyo-e as work that “deals with the transitory or trivial phases, contrasted in the Buddhist phrase with the permanent life or moral idealism.”<sup>43</sup> In more familiar language, Fenollosa is contrasting prints of the floating world with traditional Japanese painting. Classical painting styles often contain a Buddhist sentiment emphasized by empty space

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<sup>43</sup> Ernst Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Vol. II, (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 180-181.

in the composition, intended to reflect the philosophy surrounding nothingness and nature.<sup>44</sup> In conflict with these notions, later Ukiyo-e prints like the saturated composition seen in figure 1, and again in the selected prints that follow in this analysis, create a different visual language that emphasized themes reflecting the popular culture of the Edo Period. The actor prints of Kusunoha deviate far from classical aesthetic style. Though early western scholars criticized the format of these late Ukiyo-e examples in contrast to the “more refined” tradition of painting, contemporary historians such as David Bell have a different view. Fenollosa connected the rise of actor print popularity with the fall of connoisseurship, but Bell finds this idea highly debatable.<sup>45</sup> Indeed the pictorial style of Ukiyo-e became more standardized over the nineteenth century, but these new conventions were a direct result of mounting government regulation and stylistic approaches developed to fulfill rapid production demands, and did not reflect an artistic decline.<sup>46</sup>

The format of Ukiyo-e encompasses a broad range of representations, including not only woodblock prints, but paintings, drawings, book illustrations, and ephemera such as fans and advertisements. While Ukiyo-e can be described in comparison to early pictorial types as outlined by Fenollosa, they are perhaps better analyzed in the context of the popular themes depicted, such as: beautiful women, warriors, sumo wrestlers, Edo landscapes, erotica, and of course, kabuki actors.<sup>47</sup> My analysis will follow the contemporary historical model of Bell, defining Ukiyo-e through accessibility and the

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<sup>44</sup> Nishiyama Matunosuke, 71.

<sup>45</sup> David Bell, *Ukiyo-e Explained*, (Kent, United Kingdom: United International, 2004), 7-9.

<sup>46</sup> David Bell, 15.

<sup>47</sup> David Bell, 1-2.



appeal to popular culture rather than through Fenollosa's critical comparison that relates the aesthetic style of Ukiyo-e to traditional Japanese painting.

Of the tens of thousands of Ukiyo-e prints created during the Edo Period, it is estimated that nearly half were of kabuki actors.<sup>48</sup> As earlier outlined, kabuki culture dominated popular trends and fashions in Edo Japan, and the fervent fandom of Edo audiences is recognizable by the sustained popularity of actor prints from the floating world.<sup>49</sup> The genre of kabuki actor prints is comparable to "pin-up" images of the twentieth century – the equivalent of a movie poster. Kabuki fans, like movie fans, collected images relating to their favorite star or character.<sup>50</sup> I can only assume from the large volume of representations of fox-Kuzunoha in kabuki actor prints, ephemera and advertisements, that her character appealed to an expansive fan base.

The prints I will analyze in this chapter are attributed to the Edo Period artist Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786 – 1865), the most prolific artist of Ukiyo-e prints during the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> While his work was neglected by many early art historical surveys, Kunisada was widely regarded as a major talent among his contemporaries.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the Utagawa school was the most prolific school of the late Edo Period, and the production of actor prints was marked by increasing demand requiring artists like Kunisada to rapidly produce designs with a focus on marketability.<sup>53</sup> The founder of the Utagawa school, Utagawa Toyoharu (1735 – 1814), standardized the style of actor prints with his publication *Quick Instruction in the Drawing of Actor Likenesses*

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<sup>48</sup> Arendie Herwig and Henk Herwig, *Heroes of the Kabuki Stage: An Introduction to Kabuki with Retellings of Famous Plays Illustrated by Woodblock Prints*, (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2004), 60.

<sup>49</sup> David Bell, xi.

<sup>50</sup> Fujisawa Akane, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Fujisawa Akane, 30-31.

<sup>52</sup> David Bell, 19

<sup>53</sup> Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 288.



(1817).<sup>54</sup> This invention became a model for the format of kabuki prints, creating a manual of sorts for the depiction of actors in a variety of roles, allowing artists to utilize design strategy in connection with conventionalized *mie* poses to meet the publishers demand for rapid production in high volume.

While Kunisada's achievement was influenced by the constraints of high volume, his design ability was quite advanced, and his artistic prominence is proven in primary documents collected by the Tokyo National Museum. A collection of letters written by the artist to an influential patron and wealthy merchant from the Mitani family help us to understand Kunisada's discerning artistic style.<sup>55</sup> The correspondence includes preparatory drawings with notes that indicate specific instructions for Kunisada's preferred block carver, Mr. Horitake, ensuring attention to the fine detail outlined:

Greetings Mr. Horitake. For this elderly figure (on the left), please carve white hair on his sideburn on the left, as you do so on the right. Please also carve his eye-brows as white hair. I ask that you carve all of these areas as fine, individual hairs.<sup>56</sup>

These notes reveal the level of control Kunisada retained over the completion of his initial designs. Unlike Fenollosa's argument, he was in fact concerned with and invested in maintaining a refined aesthetic as his design moved through the production process to its final form as a Ukiyo-e print. It is fitting then, to use the following depictions of fox-Kuzunoha by Kunisada in the following formal analysis.

For each of the following prints, I will describe the representations of Kuzunoha through a comparison of the materials and iconography used by Kunisada. By looking

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<sup>54</sup> Arendie Herwig and Henk Herwig, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Kobayashi Tadashi, "Ukiyo-e Artists and Their Patrons: The Case of Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III) and the Wealthy Merchant Mitani Chôzaburô," from *Competition and Collaboration: Japanese Prints of the Utagawa School* (Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2007), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Kobayashi Tadashi, 26.

closely at these elements, I will reveal not only the artist's design ability, but the publisher's intended consumer for each composition. In the end, the selected prints of Kusunoha's child-separation scene will inform our understanding of the popularity of her character in Ukiyo-e prints.



**Figure 7.** Utagawa Kunisada I (Toyokuni III), Actors Nakamura Shikan IV as the Fox Kuzunoha (Kusunoha Kitsune) and Kawarazaki Gonjūrō I as Abe no Yasuna, Edo period, 1861, collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The first print by Kunisada (figure 7) provides the most complete representation of the child-separation scene. The drama unfolds on a full set, more elaborate than what would be on stage during the actual performance. Fox-Kuzunoha is writing a lament on the *shoji* paper door, while holding her son Abe no Seimei, in her arms. She is scrawling characters with a brush held in her teeth, which is explained by accounts of the narrative: as Kuzunoha begins to write a poem she completes one line in a normal fashion, from top to bottom, and then as she becomes more distressed she begins to write the second line backwards, working from bottom to top, then Seimei runs into his mother's arms requiring her to complete the poem with the brush in her mouth.<sup>57</sup> This difficult performance, as aforementioned, demonstrates Kuzunoha's supernatural abilities akin to the challenge it sets for the *onnagata* actor performing her role. It is the depiction of this skilled technique that directly translates the actor's portrayal of Kuzunoha's supernatural nature from the kabuki stage to Ukiyo-e print.

Despite the play being set in the summer, the background of Kunisada's print reveals autumn leaves, used as a device to heighten the moment of intensity. In poetic tradition, autumn is associated with melancholy, separation and transition; all themes expressed in this scene.<sup>58</sup> The lacquer mirror that sits facing Kuzunoha, adds further symbolism as an elusion of her fox identity. In "fox-lore," a fox disguised as human can be revealed in a variety of ways: being chased by a dog, giving off a strong odor, but also when looking at its own reflection.<sup>59</sup> Standing in the doorway we see Abe no Yasuna, Kuzunoha's husband; his inclusion in this print has other implications, as I will explain at the end of this analysis.

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<sup>57</sup> Janet Goff, "Conjuring Kuzunoha from the World of Abe no Seimei," 280.

<sup>58</sup> Janet Goff, "Conjuring Kuzunoha from the World of Abe no Seimei," 274.

<sup>59</sup> Jacob Raz, 74.

This print of Kuzunoha is complex; both through the technical skill applied and the poetic references utilized. As a diptych, it fills two separate pieces of paper (a Ukiyo-e print extending to two pieces of paper is known as *ôban* format) and was afforded only by upper middle class theatergoers.<sup>60</sup> The liberally applied ink of multiple hues necessitated paper of a heavy weight at a greater cost.<sup>61</sup> In addition, this print required a significant number woodblock plates to create the intricate details of the kimono and stage set. Gathering from the expense of the materials and labor involved, which required a larger investment by the publisher, these factors also made this *oban* size print more expensive for the consumer.

Another notable feature of this print is the style of Yasuna and Kuzunoha's kimono, which represent cutting edge trends of Edo Period fashion. These trends, established by the actors' own personal wardrobe, were a huge component of Kabuki culture. Nishiyama Matsunosuke notes in her survey of Edo culture a related example where the actor Danûrô I wore a costume with characters that spelled out "I don't care." After the performance that included this costume, a fad mimicking this design swept through the city.<sup>62</sup> Kuzunoha's kimono in each print is embroidered with characters that were surely noticed by the fashion-forward consumer, increasing its appeal.

The interpretation of fashion required close collaboration between the actor and the artist. Artists conferred with actors, maintaining friendships that allowed them to have a behind the scenes access to costumes and wigs to be used in upcoming performances (also recall the fabric covering the actor's shaved top hairs).<sup>63</sup> The attention to wardrobe

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<sup>60</sup> Amy Reigle Newland, 176.

<sup>61</sup> Amy Reigle Newland, 174.

<sup>62</sup> Nishiyama Matunosuke, 221-222.

<sup>63</sup> Arendie Herwig and Henk Herwig, 62.

in this example further supports the idea that the publisher was consciously marketing to a consumer with refined taste and higher income.

Returning to the noted emphasis on Yasuna's participation, one can recognize additional references to value of this print through actor stardom. Yasuna leans toward Kuzunoha, drawing his hand toward his face, contorted in displeasure. It seems he is represented as an equal participant to Kuzunoha's action in the scene. With further research, it was discovered that the actor who plays his character, Kwarazaki Gonjûrô I, was a superstar from a prominent kabuki family. He was said to bring Kabuki to the level of refinement recognized in Noh theatre (Noh being the imperial theatrical tradition in Japan).<sup>64</sup> It was important to the discerning collector that Gonjûrô be represented fully, and the publisher also recognized that highlighting his stardom also made the print more marketable.

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<sup>64</sup> *New Kabuki Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ichikawa Danjûrô."





**Figure 8.** Utagawa Kunisada I (Toyokuni III), *Actors Arashi Rikaku III as the Fox (Kitsune) Kuzunoha, and Ichikawa Danjûrô VIII as Abe no Yasuna*, Edo period, 1852, collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Our second image (figure 8) is a *chuban* format, using only one sheet of paper and making it, respectively, more affordable than the *ôban* size print discussed in the first analysis.<sup>65</sup> While Kunisada closely crops this example revealing less of detail of the stage than the first representation, it is still a very full picture plane consisting of saturated ink on a heavy weight paper. The quality of materials indicates some investment, but using only one sheet of paper makes this example, perhaps relatively, afforded by any member of the Edo middle class.

While it does not include a complex set drawn to perspective as in the first print, it still reflects the preference for “flat” style painting with color filling almost the entire picture plane.<sup>66</sup> This tightly packed composition is characteristic of Ukiyo-e prints from the late Edo period, requiring many blocks of overlaying color, filling every area of the paper except for the actor’s skin and the *shoji* paper screen.<sup>67</sup> The scene is closely cropped, directing our attention to fox-Kuzunoha’s distress. Again, the composition focuses on the climactic moment of the play, with Kuzunoha in action as she pens the poem with brush in mouth, clutching Seimei tightly to her breast. Only the top of the child’s head and the tips of his fingers and toes are revealed as she buries him deep in her kimono, narrowing the focus of the scene to Kuzunoha’s character. Also distancing the viewer from the supporting characters, Yasuna is removed from the scene and included as an inset caption. This fragmented incorporation suggests that while Yasuna is aware of the action, he is not directly present. He is distanced, yet still included in a conventionalized way to reflect the overarching narrative.

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<sup>65</sup> Amy Reigle Newland, 176.

<sup>66</sup> Nishiyama Matunosuke, 71.

<sup>67</sup> David Bell, 6.



The cropping of the frame and inclusion of Yasuna and Seimei as secondary characters seems to bring the focus of this print directly to Kuzunoha. Her carefully coiffed hair has unraveled, revealing fine wisps that have come loose during her distress. Hairstyle was an important indicator of refined feminine virtue, and so, displaced hair was indicative that Kuzunoha had lost her composure as the drama was unfolding. This is in line with what was learned from the record of letters to the Mitani family, the delicate carving of these lines reflects instruction by Kunisada to the carver on his preference for the fine treatment of hair as he specified.

In this print, Kunisada provides us with succinct imagery, and it is possible that this was the type of design that was arranged before the play took place. It was common for theatres to commission prints that were made available in advance of the production. These prints were created as advertisements for the upcoming performance, and were marketed to the audience as souvenirs to take home from a performance. In the case of a pre-production print, the artist would have approximated the set and costume, which may account for the abbreviated detail in this image. The elements in Kunisada's composition draw heavily on Kuzunoha's action, capturing the conventionalized *mie* pose that was central to any actor's performance of this role.



Also a *chuban* single sheet format, figure 9 is left with a primarily white, un-inked background, requiring significantly less ink and woodblock plates to produce. The limited ink application would allow the printer to use a lower quality paper making it the most affordable, and therefore the most accessible, respective to the other examples. I assume from comparison, that it was commissioned as a pre-production print and offered as a souvenir or advertisement. I also assume that it would have been inexpensive in comparison because of the minimal investment upfront; this example required less ink, less woodblock plates, inexpensive paper, and less labor in general from beginning of the print production to the end.

In this representation, Yasuna is removed completely. Kuzunoha is standing in a composition that recalls the refined portraits of beautiful women by renowned artists such as Utamaro. While Kunisada's version of Kuzunoha may reference this earlier Ukiyo-e tradition, his depiction of the figure is much less graceful or refined. This figure has truncated proportions, standing only about 5 heads high, and wearing a bulky kimono that hides the feminine posture of the *onnagata* playing Kuzunoha's role. It is likely that Kunisada was responding to government regulations that prohibited overtly sensual representations, avoiding the seductive qualities that caused censorship of earlier Ukiyo-e beautiful women prints.<sup>68</sup> I will quickly note that the detail of Kuzunoha's unraveled hair is less intricately carved than the previous example, again, indicating that this print required less investment in skilled labor.

The scene is simplified in additional ways as well; the set is pared down, and the *shoji* paper door is a simplified to a blank white space. Kuzunoha's kimono is very basic,

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<sup>68</sup> David Bell, 7.

only hinting at the distinctive chrysanthemum pattern often worn by her character.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps the most significant indication that this print was the most affordable of the selections included in this analysis, the lack of color in the cartouches provides an important distinction. Referring back to the other two examples, one can see variation in the title characters, which are printed in simple black ink rather than layered red and gold. The distinction of colored cartouches is the mark of higher priced editions, relatable to the printing of a hardcover first edition book versus a cheap paperback.<sup>70</sup> It is likely that this print, like a paperback, was produced in a very large volume, utilizing cheaper materials and ensuring a large profit for the publisher.

Though all three of these prints by Kunisada may depict the same scene, the content of his design reveals that they were intended for a variety of audiences – from wealthy, to the middle class, to the masses. The materials offer a cursory understanding of how the value of these prints can be assessed. The attention to poetic references, the refinement of detail, and the distinction of the cartouches provide clear indications of what the audience was looking for when collecting each print; with a range of focus from content to affordability. At this juncture, one can surmise from the varied imagery in these selections that Kuzunoha was appealing to all classes, and in the last chapter I will pick apart her supernatural nature in order to understand exactly why Edo audiences related to her character.

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<sup>69</sup> Arendie Herwig and Hank Herwig, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Chris Uhlenbeck, “Production Constraints in the World of Ukiyo-e: An Introduction to the Commercial Climate of Japanese Printmaking,” ed. by Amy Reigle Newland, *The Commercial and Cultural Climate of Japanese Printmaking*, (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2004), 17.

## Chapter 5

### The Fox, Wife, and Fox-Wife in Japan

Now I have discussed what was involved in the making of an actor print through the cycle of production: from the pleasure district, to the kabuki performance, to the artists design, to the production of Ukiyo-e, and finally, to the hands of the print collector. With this understanding, I will close with an investigation of Kuzunoha as a supernatural character, focusing on exactly how her popularity through this production cycle provides valuable insight into the social environment of Edo society. I begin by looking at the tradition the fox in Japan.

The fox is a pervasive character throughout the religious, superstitious and popular cultures in Japan. The earliest record of the fox is in relation to the Shinto God, Inari. The Inari Shrine, built in 711 a.d., is dedicated to the god of rice – a symbol for agriculture but also for life itself. The success of rice crops was central to the stability of Japanese society throughout the middle ages. There is a mythological story linking a pair of foxes who seek to create peace as a messenger of the god of Inari, and therefore when one pays tribute at this shrine they are also paying tribute to the fox.<sup>71</sup> The relationship to Inari identifies the fox as a symbol of fertility through the success of bountiful harvest. As the most prevalent shrine in Japan, many offerings are made to Inari, and also the fox, with hope of good fortune in building both fertile crops and families.<sup>72</sup>

While the fox is sometimes seen in this way as a bearer of good fortune, it has a complex role in Japan – it is also a foe of the farmer's labor. Known to steal small

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<sup>71</sup> Kiyosho Nozaki, *Kitsune: Japan's Fox of Mystery, Romance and Humor*, (Japan: The Hokuseido Press, 1961), 13-14.

<sup>72</sup> Janet Goff, "Foxes in Japanese Culture: Beautiful or Beastly," 66.

livestock, the fox can wreak havoc on a successful livelihood. The scholar Jacob Raz suggests that perhaps because of its dual role in this agrarian culture, the fox is treated with both gratitude and suspicion.<sup>73</sup> In this way, the fox in folklore becomes a scapegoat in order to explain anything that is out of the ordinary. Furthermore, tales of fox-to-human transformation often include a duality in some way, the most common example being the fox as a female seductress.

The earliest example of the female fox as seductress is seen in *Nihon ryōki*, an eighth century story about a man who marries a fox who has transformed into a beautiful woman. She transformed herself to repay an act of gratitude, and as a result the man finds both a wife and a bountiful crop of rice on fields that were once barren. This idea, of course, can be traced directly to the fox's identification with the fertile blessings of Inari. As the story continues, the wife is later revealed in her true form, a white fox, and she must then return to the forest. Her husband is distraught and cannot forget her, he lays awake and night thinking of her, and makes a wish for her to return to him each night to sleep by his side.<sup>74</sup> The conclusion of this story accounts for the etymological origins for the Japanese term for fox, or *kitsuné*. When broken down, *kitsuné* means both “come always” (ki-tsune) and “come sleep” (kistu-ne).<sup>75</sup>

The fox-wife from *Nihon ryōki* sets the standard for the trajectory of the fox-wife in Japanese folklore. She is a devoted wife, as her very transformation from fox to woman is a result of her indebted relationship to her husband, reflecting a desire to fulfill

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<sup>73</sup> Jacob Raz, 73

<sup>74</sup> Ivo Smits, “An Early Anthropologist? Ōe no Masafusa's *A Record of Fox Spirits*,” in *Religion in Japan: Arrows to Heaven and Earth*, ed. by PF Kornicki and IJ Mc Mullen, (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 80

<sup>75</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, “The Shapeshifter Fox: The Imagery of Transformation and the Transformation of Imagery in Japanese Religion and Folklore,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2001), 50.

traditional filial roles.<sup>76</sup> In addition, these stories emphasize her devotion through rewards offered by her supernatural powers, such as her influence over a successful harvest, birth of an heir, or her ability to bestow magical powers.<sup>77</sup> The common arc of the fox-wife tale also set a precedent for a woman's self-sacrifice. After establishing herself as wife and often mother, she must abandon these roles once she has revealed in her supernatural form.<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 10.** Utagawa Kunisada I (Toyokuni III), *Shimotsuke Province: Tamamo no Mae*, from the series *The Sixty-odd Provinces of Great Japan*, Edo period, c.a. 1845, collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

<sup>76</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Jacob Raz, 75.

<sup>78</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, 45.



Arguably, the most famous example of a fox-wife is the story of the nine-tailed Tamamo no Mae, a fourteenth century legend.<sup>79</sup> The representation of Tamamo no Mae in figure 10 alludes to her supernatural nature through the aforementioned iconography of the fox revealed in self reflection, and in this case she also shows signs of great distresses by her wild and unkempt hair and the placement of her kerchief at the corner of her mouth (common iconography for anguish). The overall narrative this image references a malicious female spirit who only takes pleasure in peoples suffering. Tamamo no Mae, a fox-seductress, was responsible for bewitching the emperor with her beauty, causing him to fulfill murderous requests in order to please her taste for the wicked. Eventually, her true fox-form is revealed by a wise astrologer (who happens be distant relative of Kuzunoha through her husband's ancestry) and she turns herself into stone.<sup>80</sup>

The legend of Tamamo no Mae serves as a cautionary tale, warning of the dangers of seduction. It highlights an underlying suspicion of women, particularly women who possess physically attractive qualities. This caution is notably highlighted in the moral lessons of *Konjaku Monogatarishu*, urging men to be wary of any beautiful woman they have not seen, as she might turn out to be a fox in disguise.<sup>81</sup> This, of course, has very broad implications about the treatment of women with suspicion. Any unmarried Japanese woman was expected to remain in private quarters as a way of preserving her honor; therefore nearly all introductions between man and wife were made sight unseen, potentially inciting such distrust.

Through these legends, one can easily trace the fox-wife's dualities. Being seduced by her feminine charms will either bring you to great fortune as illustrated in the

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<sup>79</sup> Ivo Smits, 80.

<sup>80</sup> Kiyosho Nozaki, 112 - 113

<sup>81</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, 49.



*Nihon ryōki*, or to harsh demise as shown in the tale of Tamamo no Mae. Kuzunoha, however, becomes one of the most relatable female characters during the Edo Period. The trajectory of her story follows the standard of a fortunate fox-tale where the fox-wife is an auspicious figure. To conclude, I will now explain Kuzunoha's role as a supernatural being as it reflects on the traditional Japanese family structure.

In the translated work by Yamakawa Kikue, *Women of the Mito Domain*, Yamakawa asserts that the structure of the Japanese family changed substantially during the Edo Period as a result of dominant ideals taken from *The Greater Learning for Women*. This study outlines Confucian concepts of obedience, where Tokugawa women were expected to conform to the strictly patriarchal concepts highlighted as the "Three Obediences."<sup>82</sup> These rules for women in Japan include: obedience while unmarried to a father; obedience when married to a husband and husband's family; and obedience when widowed to a son.<sup>83</sup> In this respect, Kuzunoha follows the Tokugawa ideal of an obedient wife; her primary concern is loyalty to her husband. Kuzunoha is indebted by Yasuna's role in saving her during the foxhunt. The greatest fulfillment of this loyalty is, of course, the birth of their son, Seimei. Even further, Kuzunoha's supernatural attributes re-establish Yasuna's official lineage in court at the close of the play. While she exemplifies the filial role a Confucian woman should hold in an Edo household, she also demonstrates a powerful influence over her family.

Despite these positive influences, I must account for Kuzunoha's regretful abandonment of her family, which is the primary context for the prints in this analysis.

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<sup>82</sup> Yamakawa Kikue, *Women of the Mito Domain: Recollections of Samurai Family Life*, trans. by Kate Wildman Nakai (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1992), 105.

<sup>83</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, "From Gay to Gei: The Onnagata and the Creation of Kabuki's Female Characters," in *Comparative Drama*, 33 (2000): 213.

Edo Period separation or divorce was considered the ultimate disgrace to a family. There were, however, some accepted reasons; the most common examples being the inability to bear children, and the inability to integrate into the husband's family, neither of which apply to Kuzunoha.<sup>84</sup> Obviously, Kuzunoha succeeds in producing an heir to her husband's lineage, the child Seimei. Also, Kuzunoha is not subject to the conflicting loyalty between her natal family and her husband's family; because of her role as a supernatural being she does not have loyalties to outside family.<sup>85</sup> Instead, the separation of Kuzunoha from Yasuna and Seimei is a result of her position as a supernatural figure, which cleverly evades standards for divorce set by Tokugawa society. If the plot of *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* had depicted this separation in an everyday context, without the elusion of supernatural themes, it would have surely incited negative attention from the Tokugawa officials. Kuzunoha is considered "other" through her supernatural nature, allowing for a critical view of the female as independent, free from strictly bound filial roles.

In his dissertation that extensively explores the position of fox-wife as "other," Michael Bathgate understands Kuzunoha as an uncanny example of a Japanese woman's estrangement from her natal family. Because the ties of bloodline are not easily broken, the wife is seen as a threat to the patrilineal family because she may retain conflicting loyalties. She is both indispensable to the survival of the nuclear family in her sole ability to produce an heir, and threatening to its stability by carrying the outside influence of her own lineage.<sup>86</sup> As a transformed fox, Kuzunoha conceals the secret of her supernatural identity from Yasuna, which as Bathgate argues, relates directly to a common anxiety

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<sup>84</sup> Yamakawa Kikue, 106.

<sup>85</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, 69.

<sup>86</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, 53.

about the sincerity of the wife towards her husband in Japanese families.<sup>87</sup> It is the portrayal of this idea – that Japanese women were always at risk of being considered “other” through their ties to the natal family – that relates to the elusion of supernatural in *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*.

Similarly, Barbara Fass Leavy discusses the fox-wife as threat to patriarchal values in her analysis of the animal bride in the book *In Search of the Swan Maiden* (1994). Leavy connects Chinese legends of the fox-wife to subversive intentions in the domestic sphere, where the animal bride aggressively seeks to deceive her partner.<sup>88</sup> This is not the case for Kuzunoha. In fact, one can easily argue that she seeks to support the family structure rather than dismantle it. This concept is best illustrated through Kuzunoha’s refusal to return to Yasuna and Seimei, an act that is self-sacrificial in her decision to put the interests of her husband and son before herself, restoring their lineage instead of choosing to reunite the family unit.

Revising act five of *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*, we remember that Yasuna and Seimei follow the instruction of Kuzunoha’s departing poem:

If you long for me,  
come seek me in Izumi,  
where, in the forest of Shinoda,  
you’ll find your Kuzu  
of the clinging vine.<sup>89</sup>

They plea for her return though she has already been revealed as a supernatural “other.”

However, when they find Kuzunoha in Shinoda forest, she refuses to return. Instead she

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<sup>87</sup> Michael R. Bathgate, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Barbara Fass Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender*, (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 201-202.

<sup>89</sup> James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, 143. There are multiple translations of Kuzunoha’s parting poem, however, all make reference to the Shinoda forest and make use of the poetic reference to Kuzu leaves from which she gets her name.

blesses Seimei with supernatural powers allowing him to regain the family legacy, a feat that Yasuna as father could not establish on his own. Kusunoha, as obedient but all-powerful mother, is the only character with the ability to repair this lineage. Perhaps this ability, while connected to her supernatural strength, reveals something more about the changing perceptions of women as the Edo Period comes to a close.

Remember, the merchant class that backed the kabuki theatres, attended the performances, and afforded Ukiyo-e prints, were in fact already removed from Tokugawa society. These members of the middle class were the primary patrons of this popular culture, and through that I assess that the expression of Kusunoha as a woman with power directly relates to a modern perception of the family structure. That is not to say that the rigid Confucian model did not still exist, but perhaps the merchants, particularly the women in these families who attended kabuki theatres and purchased Ukiyo-e prints, found the idea of a heroine very appealing.

## Conclusion

While kabuki actor prints were a prolific subject within the Ukiyo-e industry, drawing profit from an expansive fan base, the child-separation scene of fox-Kusunoha specifically highlights the changing perceptions of women in Edo Japan through her popularity with the merchant class audience. Purchasing prints of the child-separation scene allowed them to recall Kusunoha's role as a powerful member of the nuclear family. While many female kabuki characters emphasize Confucian ideals of the woman as gentle and submissive, as discussed in the case of fox-wife from *Nihon ryōki*, who obediently returns to her husband each night, there was a marked rise in popularity of figures that highlight a woman's influence in her family.<sup>90</sup> Kusunoha exemplifies the 'good wife and wise mother' image: she is an obedient wife, loyal to her husband, and produces and heir, fulfilling all of the important roles for a woman in this structure.<sup>91</sup> However, in contrast to submissive female characters, Kusunoha represents a woman who is independent, asserting her power, expressing the repressed desires of women who sought to shed these filial roles.<sup>92</sup> The plot of *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* highlights two ways in which Kusunoha asserts this independence: through her decision to leave the household and return to her home in Shinoda forest, paralleling a desire by women to return to their natal families; and in her ability to influence the status of her husband and son through the re-establishment of official position, demonstrating the influence Edo women could have over their nuclear families. There is no doubt that the

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<sup>90</sup> Sekiguchi Sumiko, "Gender in the Meiji Renovation: Confucian 'Lessons for Women' and the Making of Modern Japan," in *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (2008): 212.

<sup>91</sup> Sekiguchi Sumiko, 202.

<sup>92</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, "From Gay to Gei: The Onnagata and the Creation of Kabuki's Female Characters," 214.

kabuki audience, which was often predominately female at this time, was attracted to the theme of empowerment embodied by Kuzunoha's influence on her family.<sup>93</sup>

Of course, these subversive themes conflict with the roles set for women by the Tokugawa regime. Direct expression of ideals in disagreement with these Edo values would have incited censorship or even resulted in fines imposed on the theatres by regulating authorities. Kuzunoha's power was cleverly disguised on stage and in print to avoid such penalties through her supernatural nature. The playwright utilized double entendre to convey her feminine virtue on two levels: the obvious (obedient, loyal) and the concealed (independent, powerful).<sup>94</sup> A plot as realized in *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman* had to express views dominated by the male perspective, requiring Kuzunoha's sacrifice in favor of her husband and son, while discretely asserting her power as a heroine. Still, the viewer was well aware of this game of double entendre, which served to appease both authorities and the audience.<sup>95</sup> The translation of Kuzunoha's character to kabuki actor prints provides us with a useful picture of Edo society, from which we understand the significance of dual female roles in comparison to her dual identity as a fox.

Kuzunoha, through her prolific depiction in ukiyo-e prints, helps to define the changing perception of Japanese families through coded references. Her image is a relevant representation of Edo culture enabled and promoted through the flourishing publishing industry as it was connected to kabuki theatre. By representing Kuzunoha as supernatural, her character is cleverly aligned to be free from the scrutiny of Tokugawa

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<sup>93</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, "From Gay to Gei: The Onnagata and the Creation of Kabuki's Female Characters," 213.

<sup>94</sup> Benito Ortolani, 199.

<sup>95</sup> Benito Ortolani, 200.

censorship. She is a reflection of the female “other,” subversively symbolizing the influential power of women in Edo Japan.

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