

[Article]

The Function of the *Tamamo no Mae* Legend in Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh*

Paul D. McGRATH

Faculty of Foreign Studies
Nagoya Gakuin University

Abstract

Korean American author Alexander Chee employs the Japanese legend of *Tamamo no mae*, a fox demon, in his novel *Edinburgh* (2001). The unique subjectivity Chee attributes to the legendary figure allows Chee's gay protagonist to resolve his inability to experience the self. John Bergman (1991) has discussed the historic inability of the American gay writer to experience self; this paper looks at Chee's novel in the context of Bergman's ideas.

Keywords : Korean American literature, gay fiction, Alexander Chee, Tamamo no mae, post-ethnic literature

Alexander Cheeの *Edinburgh* における玉藻の前伝説の役割

ポール D. マグラス

名古屋学院大学外国語学部

I

Alexander Chee is a Korean-American writer whose novels (*Edinburgh*, 2001; *The Queen of the Night*, 2016) have been highly praised. *Edinburgh* received the Asian American Writers Literary Award as well as the Michener/Copernicus Prize in fiction. This paper deals with issues of identity in *Edinburgh*, looking at Chee's appropriation of Japanese folklore and tying that to issues of identity in American writing traced by David Bergman (1991) in his *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*.

Chee's appropriation of Japanese materials to structure the mythological shape of his novel marks a post-ethnic trend in Asian American literature apparent as early as Henry David Hwang's (1983) appropriation of stories by Mishima and Kawabata in *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties*. Chee sees this blending of ethnicities in the history of his own ancestors' emigration from China to Korea in the 15th century, a migration they conveniently forget when they accuse the American Chee of not being "Korean enough":

My father's family in Korea keeps traditions they brought with them from China in the 15th century that the Chinese no longer keep; they use an archaic Chinese script in the keeping of our family's records. They perform, inside the confines of my family, these rituals of this lost homeland—even as they tell me they fear I'm "not Korean enough," with no sense of irony whatsoever. ("Korean Enough": *Guernica: a magazine of art and politics* (online publication) June 14, 2008)

"What people of every ethnicity do," Chee maintains, is to "create highly subjective, imperfect and partial narratives." In *Edinburgh* Chee takes materials from Asian folklore on the fox and gives them a Japanese twist. In particular he takes the legend of Tamamo-no-Mae, a seemingly trans-national destructive female seductress fox and conflates her with Korean legends of the fox. In an online interview (2009) with *Rediver: a journal of new literature and art* Chee explains how he adapted the Japanese legend of Tamamo-no-Mae:

The Lady Tamamo is a figure from Japanese myth-when she escapes, in the legend, it's said she leaps from a rock that split from her standing on it, and she vanished into the air. I looked up where it took place, and it was easy for me to imagine her flying through the air and landing on an island off the coast of Korea... She didn't strike me as the self-destructive type. She struck me as an enormously resourceful character. (np)

As we shall demonstrate in this paper, the protagonist in *Edinburgh* claims identity with Lady Tamamo and finds in her a source of healing and a ground of being which keep him from the suicidal

tendencies that claim two of his friends.

II

Edinburgh is a story of sexual abuse perpetrated by a choir director upon his low teen choirboys. It is narrated by one of these boys, the Korean American Aphias Zhe, nicknamed "Fee." The story uses a motif of burning which ties together the fiery suicide of Fee's beloved, Peter, and the legend of Lady Tammamo, (as Chee spells it). Fee learns the legend of Lady Tammamo from his Korean father, who declares it to be a part of Korean folklore about the fox-demon.

"The Lady Tammamo was a fox who fell in love with a man and took the shape of a woman in order to marry him," Fee tells us, recounting his father's story (2). "Her hair remained red," he continues, which led to people fearing her, as red hair was the mark of the demon, according to Korean belief at the time. This red hair serves as a sign of affiliation with the legendary figure; the adult Fee, narrator of the story, tells us "My hair is brown. But in my beard, the red threads grow" (4). This is an early indication in the novel that Fee's identity is conflated with the fox demon who loved her husband so much that she climbed onto his funeral pyre and perished with him.

Peter, the tow-haired fellow choirboy and object of Fee's affection, sets himself on fire in a dramatic suicide that haunts Fee. Peter was more affected by the sexual abuse he endured than Fee was. Fee blames himself for not having warned Peter of the danger involved in belonging to the choir. Fee mistakenly conflates his own sexual desire for Peter with what the choir director, Big Eric, does. After the suicide Fee muses to himself:

Sometimes I wonder if he knew why I always asked him to never tell.

Why I helped Big Eric hide in plain sight. I didn't have an answer for Peter then but he never asked. I have an answer, now.

Hiding him hid me. (70)

The burning comes full circle when Big Eric, out of prison and on parole as a known sexual predator, is killed by his own son, who has found his father's photo collection of the boys he violated. Warden, Big Eric's son, sets the house on fire to complete the destruction of his father and his miserable past. Fee, the narrator, comments: "Ways to kill a fox-demon: Burning. Trap it in a house. Set the house on fire" (203).

But the destructive demon that was Big Eric is not to be confused with Lady Tammamo, who chooses to end the destruction of her demonhood by burning together on her husband's funeral pyre. Fee studies the Greek gods and goddesses and compares them with Lady Tammamo.

Tammamo, I decide, is mightier. For the man she loves lived to die a natural death, and the Greeks always kill the mortals they love, through design or accident. None of these gods would renounce their godhood. (25)

The Tammamo who chooses to perish in a conflagration with her husband is, of course, Chee's own creation, the product of his imagination. He has Fee draw her, in manga-fashion. In his picture "Tammamo's hands each hold a ball of fire-lightning" (24). She is leaping "into the wind's wide arms, her hair a torch". Fee speculates on the demon's having fallen in love and in the process gives her a human sheen:

Before she fell in love, I think, she would have been mad with grief, wanting love. How would she have fallen in love with her husband? Was she preparing to destroy him and fell for him instead? (24)

Fee's cousin in Korea has sent him a Korean manga version of the story of Lady Tammamo. The English translation the cousin has added gives the demon something of a *yamauba* flavor; she is similar to the mountain witch who waits for young men to pass by her mountain hut: "FOX-DEMON MUST EAT THOUSAND LIVERS, YOUNG MEN VIRGINS, TO BECOME HUMAN" (24) are the words the cousin has penciled in. The representation of the fox "has been drawn ugly, but she wears a beautiful mask, made from the face of a victim, to hide her ugliness". According to the cousin, "she is Korea's most famous fox-demon"(24). Whatever her fame in Korea might be, the legendary fox-demon is central to Fee's identity and survival, as we shall see.

III

Fee's identity problems are not solely the result of the experience of sexual abuse. From the beginning of his narrative there is evidence that he has difficulty in experiencing the self. Part of this comes from the reaction to his non-Anglo appearance; when Fee joins the choir the reaction of the boys to his ethnicity is something Fee has experienced before: "Are you Chinese?" one of the boys asks. Fee feels divided: "No, I say, Korean. Half. Saying it always makes me feel split down the middle. Like a cow diagrammed for her sides of beef"(9).

After meeting Peter, the other "new boy" at the choir session, Fee experiences first a desire to "inhabit" him: "What do you want of him, I ask myself. I tell myself, to walk inside him and never leave. For him to be the house of me" (10). But his desire for Peter leads to an inability to inhabit himself. After spending time with his new found friend Fee locks himself in the bathroom at home and won't come out. When his mother, alarmed, knocks on the door, Fee gives us his reaction: "I say nothing because that is what nothing says. I am nothing, a 0, an outline around a hole" (15).

When he finally emerges, he finds his mother in the garden cutting away the dead blooms. Fee's thoughts emphasize his consciousness of the lack of self:

It's still daylight and I find my mother in the yard. Hey there, she says. She is squatting over a plant. Poppies, she says. After they bloom, they die back. You can't see them. I run a finger over the fuzzy leaves. Now I know what I want to be when I grow up. (16)

Musing on his real first name, Aphias, Fee observes, "The difference between a remainder and a reminder is an A, which stands for Aphias, my name, and the letter slips in and out like a cartridge in a rifle" (16).

Perhaps the most dramatic treatment of Fee's missing self in the novel appears during a trip to Korea with his grandparents. It is the summer after his high school graduation, and he goes on a pilgrimage with his grandparents to the family shrine on a Korean island, Moolsan-do. Back in Seoul, on the return trip, Fee's grandmother decides to call in a shaman, a *mudang*, to exorcise whatever is wrong with her grandson.

The shaman goes into a long chant. Fee has been told to wait in his room. He listens to the chant coming in through the window and falls into a dream-like state. He is suddenly aware of a presence:

Two eyes glow at me in that dark, green-gold, irisless. Hello, a voice says.

Miss me?

No, I say.

They brought me here for you.

It's something that they want, I say. Yowu. (92-93)

The ambiguous passage suggests that Fee's self has been conjured up and has a fox-like identity, from the description of the eyes and the final word Fee utters, *yowu*, Korean for fox. As the dream fades, the shaman appears with a message for Fee: she cannot find his ghost. In her broken English she expresses her astonishment: "How you life? How you life no ghost?" And as she departs, a final bit of information: "Is hard to die, no ghost." (93-94)

IV

In the chapter "Choosing Our Fathers" David Bergman discusses the ego-lessness of the gay writer. The cause of this phenomenon is not to be found in some Oedipal crisis, Bergman asserts, "but in the sociohistorical constellation from which the child develops his object world"(45). To develop a healthy ego, he continues, there must be "support, recognition, or modeling of others, all of which are

needed for consonance of signification. The child who will grow up to be gay gazes at himself through a cracked mirror”(45). Such lack of identity, Bergman specifies,

is not merely an inversion of selfhood—being the opposite of what others expect one to be—but rather an absence of identity—no one can point the gay child toward a model of who he is. Gay selfhood is constantly being lost in the opacity of the parental gaze. (45)

Bergman sees Whitman as the prototypical gay writer unable to experience a sense of self; the poet “particularly feels the isolation of having no one in which to ‘see himself reflected,’ since without such a mirror, he loses his integrity, his sense of being, his identity”(50: internal quotes from Whitman’s *Prose and Poetry*, 83). Michael Moon’s (1991) treatment of this absence in Whitman, Bergman goes on to say, offers us a new way of seeing Whitman’s passion as a “practice of representing ‘subjectivity simultaneously *in the grip of a deforming cultural formation... and in the act of imagining*, subverting the formation” (50: 163 italics in Moon’s text).

In Chee’s novel, Fee has lost his sense of self along with his beloved Peter. The self that comes to him under duress in Korea as the shaman invokes that spirit is a foxlike being, further conflating Fee with the nine-tailed fox, Lady Tammamo. Fee has been subjected to the “deforming cultural formation” of compulsory heterosexuality as well as the deformation of sexual abuse. His imagination focuses on the fireball-throwing energy of Lady Tamammo in its attempt to subvert those deforming forces.

V

In his study of the fox in world folklore, Uther (2006) points out that China, Korea, and Japan share similar stories about the vixen. East Asian stories about the fox often represent the animal as a shape-shifter who appears as a beautiful woman who seduces a young man and saps his energy. “Her beauty and desire, together with deceit, have to be seen in analogy to the behavior of a beautiful woman standing outside societal norms”(140).

Chee uses this paradigm of the fox as outsider and ascribes a fund of creative energy to the shape-shifting creatures in his text. As noted above, Chee saw the figure of Lady Tamamo in a positive light from his first acquaintance with the legend: he declares her to be “an enormously resourceful character”. This is in contrast to the treatment of foxes in Korean folklore; Uther tells us that “in Korea foxes are seducers or partners, but in most cases they are evil-minded”(141).

Ferguson’s thesis (2012) on the changing reputation of Tamamo no mae in Japanese literary history demonstrates how the reputation of the legendary figure altered in accordance with various developments in Japanese cultural history:

Her earliest accounts in literature seem to come from the Muromachi period, during which her various stories, now classified as *otogizoshi* (companion tales), were produced and principally preserved in *nara ehon*-style picture books and also *emaki* picture scrolls. From the Muromachi to the late Edo period, her character has endured many changes, which have altered her personality and positioned her in many roles. (iii)

Ferguson goes on to give us the transnational history of the legendary Tamamo no mae. Medieval Japanese texts depict her as a supremely gifted and exquisitely beautiful woman who became the beloved of Emperor Toba. The emperor gradually weakened and asked his diviner to discover the cause. The diviner found that “the sickness came from Tamamo no mae... a fox spirit who had been involved in the downfall of both Prince Hanzoku... in India and King Yu... in China”(1). Her identity revealed, the fox spirit was chased to what is now Tochigi Prefecture where, according to Nishida Shohei's *Tamamo no soshi*, she embedded her spirit into a rock after being slaughtered (2). This may be the rock which Chee mentions in his explanation of the Tamamo legend quoted in the first section above. Chee disregards the negative aspects of the story—the part of the legend that claims the rock emitted a poisonous gas “to kill every living thing that came near”(2).

Ferguson attributes the harshness of portraits of Tamamo no mae in the medieval texts to the didactic, moralizing nature of those religious texts which aimed to instill Buddhist precepts in the general populace. Those texts depict the fox-spirit “as someone who desired power and had a strong aversion to religion”(4). Yet it is the same religious fervor which lies behind the twist that marks the 1653 *Tamamo no soshi* and a noh play of the same era, *Sesshoseki* (The Killing Stone): Tamamo no mae repents for her crimes and is pictured as desiring Buddhahood.

Sesshoseki, Ferguson tells us, is an example of *mugen noh*, plays in which spirits and ghosts express their desire for Buddhahood (7). The typical plot of such plays involves a traveler, typically a Buddhist priest, in some remote setting. He meets a local person and they discuss some famous event that happened in this locale. In a later part of the play this person reappears as one of the characters directly involved in the historical event and acts out the event in a dance. The priest releases the ghost from her bondage to the place “so that she may be reborn in the Western Paradise and attain Buddhahood” (Shiveley, 136, in Ferguson, 8).

VI

Chee attempts a kind of release from the bondage of the past in *Edinburgh*, and he does it by invoking the spirit he calls Lady Tammamo. There is a curse in the novel, one that begins with “Big Eric” and his abuse of the boys in his choir. The damage from this curse includes the suicides of two of Big Eric's victims, both of them close friends of Fee's, not to mention Fee's inability to distinguish

his own gay longings from the sexual predator's desires. It is an ongoing curse like the one we find in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where the Furies pursue the crimes of the past without respite, demanding blood for blood spilled.

The latter part of *Edinburgh* has Fee returning to the east coast after some success in creating and marketing stoneware in San Francisco. In his transcontinental road trip he stops off in Chicago and goes to a gay bar where he has heard an old classmate is employed as a dancer. Bridey, the old classmate, decides to quit his job and travel to New York with Fee, as their chemistry as a couple seems to work.

They move to a small town in Maine where Fee has taken a job as art instructor and swimming coach at a private high school. Bridey dubs himself a "faculty wife" and goes about making a home for the two of them. The curse reappears in the person of Warden, a student on the swimming team who is attracted to Coach Fee. Warden has the blond complexion that Peter, the first suicide victim of Big Eric's abuse, had. Unknown to Fee, Warden is actually Big Eric's son.

The curse seems ready for its newest episode as Warden maneuvers Fee into a tryst at an empty faculty house. Fee's vulnerability is centered on the blond beauty that Warden embodies, the beauty that inflames his memories of the dead Peter:

Warden, even in front of me, still a memory of green eyes on fire, of gold melting, a memory not of fire but of what the fire burned. A boy who reminded you of something that constantly eluded you.
(201)

Warden has only recently met his father, as Big Eric just got out of jail after serving his time for child abuse. Only recently did Warden's grandparents let him know the nature of Big Eric's crimes. The boy tries to understand what could have led his father to abuse children, but the attempt to understand fails when he comes across the scores of photos Big Eric has never given up, photos of the children he abused. Warden loses his control and burns not only the pictures but also the house which contains the body of the father he has killed. The burning shows the dynamism of the curse, its ongoing flames.

Warden believes that his acts of destruction have freed himself as well as Fee from the curse of the past, but Fee knows better. "I did this for you," Warden tells Fee, believing that Fee will drive him away from the destruction into a future they will share. Fee is transfixed by the death of Big Eric as he drives the two of them away from the burning house, but he knows that the chain of destruction has not ended:

You want to tell this boy next to you how his father isn't dead. Not the part he wanted to kill. Not as long as you are there. He's hiding inside us now, you want to say, but you drive him away from

the fire instead. (204)

Fee chooses to end the curse by leaving Warden sleeping in a hotel room and returning to his life with Bridey. Fee's thoughts on choosing between the boy and Bridey bring us back to Fee's admiration for the Lady Tammamo in a passage quoted above. He preferred Lady Tammamo to the Greek goddesses because she was faithful to a human who died a natural death; the Greeks always killed off their lovers, he mused. These thoughts resurface as he thinks of choosing between Warden and Bridey:

There is a way he was meant to be with you more than Bridey, except that what you had for each other you have given each other and if there is more for you and Bridey it has nothing to do with what is meant by gods but what is chosen, in the most mortal way. (203)

Fee has made his choice, one that will break the curse that has followed him since the days of Big Eric and the choir. In the last few pages of the novel Fee's thoughts are again on Lady Tammamo and it is clear that it is her existence that has brought him through:

Why did Lady Tammamo take her life instead of living forever? Love ruins monsters. She didn't need the spell of a thousand livers to become human. She just had to love one man. (209)

VII

Bergman explores the irony of Whitman's stated aim, in writing *Calamus*, to give expression to an integrated persona that could be found in his celebration of his love of comrades. "Whitman clearly fails in this aim," Bergman asserts,

for *Calamus* is only marginally more particularized than 'Song of Myself.' As Mark Bauerlein has noted, 'While Whitman longed to exteriorize his self, to signify his desire in a medium that would preserve the ego's primacy and integrity, the opposite occurred. (49: 146)

As noted above, Michael Moon sees Whitman at the center of two movements: as the victim of a "deforming cultural formation" and at the same time "*in the act of imagining*, subverting the formation" (Bergman 50; in Moon, 163; emphasis in Moon). Reading *Edinburgh* through this lens we can see Chee's positive adaption of the traditionally destructive Tamamo no mae figure as an imaginative act which heals the protagonist and sets him on that very course Whitman was denied: the acquisition of self in the eyes of the beloved.

Works Cited

- Bergman, David. *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*. Madison: The U of Wisconsin Press, 1991. Print.
- Chee, Alexander. *Edinburgh*. New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2001. Print.
- . “Korean Enough: Alexander Chee on New Korean American Fiction.” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*. June 14, 2008. Web.
- Ferguson, Ian Stuart. “The Evolution of a Legend—A Comparison of the Character of Tamamo no Mae Portrayed in Muromachi Period *Otogizoshi* and in the Late-Edo Vendetta Tale *Itoguruma kyubi no kitsune* (The Spinning Wheel and the Nine Tailed Fox).” M. A. Thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2012. Print.
- Rediver “Interview with Alexander Chee.” *Rediver: a journal of new literature and art*. 13. 1 (Winter, 2016) Web.
- Sohn, Stephen Hong. “Burning Hides What It Burns: Retrospective Narration and the Protoqueer Asian American Child in Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh*.” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 17.5 (October 2014) 243–271. Print.
- Uther, Hans-Jorg. “The Fox in World Literature: Reflections on a Fictional Animal.” *Asian Folklore Studies* 65 (2006) 133–160. Print.