Globalizing Fortune on The Early Modern Stage

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For my children, James, Minjoo, and Sunny

In memory of my mother, Katherine Murray Degenhardt
The question of how I came to be in this world may always remain a mystery to me. When I was approximately five months old, I traveled across the world from Seoul, South Korea to New York City, where I was placed into the arms of a new mother and father who had adopted me. I know virtually nothing about the circumstances of my birth and very little about the details of my life in Korea up until the time I was adopted. For as far back as I can remember, I have been told that my birth mother left me on the steps of a police station in Seoul without a trace of my original identity. The only record of my time in Korea that I possessed growing up was a passport-sized photo of a small infant with a white card on her chest listing the name “Hwang Boo Ja” and the number “9563,” presumably my case number. I later learned from well-meaning Korean friends that the name “Boo Ja” was not a real name that any Korean would ever use to name their child— it literally means “rich person” and would be analogous to naming an American child “Wealthy.” Perhaps the name contained hopeful thinking, but it always seemed ironic to me. Similarly, the last name “Hwang” was not a typical Korean last name but rather a name of Chinese origin, possibly reflecting the tendency of Koreans to disavow Korean orphans. Although Korea has exported more than 200,000 babies since it began international adoptions in the 1950s, the Korean government has attempted to conceal this history due to the shame associated with orphanhood and transnational adoption—a topic that I will say more about below.
When I arrived in the US, my parents gave me a new name—carefully chosen to honor both my maternal and paternal grandmothers—and a new family history. My mother lovingly told me of how she took me into the airport restroom to change me into new clothes of my “own” so as to make me feel more comfortable. There are pictures of her holding me up to the mirror in my new American clothes, a pale pink dress with hand-stitched smocking and a Peter-pan collar, most likely chosen with great care and loving anticipation of my arrival. My mother is positively gleeful in the photo. By contrast, my expression—as that of any infant—is relatively unreadable. Wide-eyed and curious, perhaps...not unhappy, but also unsmiling. Maybe a little stunned? Of course, as I regarded my reflection, I was completely oblivious to my new dress, much less to the fact that I’d just been given a whole new life. I’ve never known what became of the clothes I traveled in on the plane. It didn’t seem like a question that I could ever ask. As soon as I arrived in the US, I became a new person, and I tried for the most part not to look back on all the unanswered questions that lingered in my past. It wasn’t terribly hard to do, since there was virtually nothing to look back on. Even as a child, I sensed that there was little point in trying to recover a past that had been erased.

While growing up I wondered sometimes about who my biological mother was and why she would have given me up, but I was mostly immersed in the life I had and the only family I have ever known. Being a transracial adoptee had its challenges (material for another book), but for the most part I accepted what I assumed was my good fortune in receiving this new life and embraced the hand I had been dealt. Recognizing from an early age that I was an outsider and a foreigner in this new country despite my white American family, I did my best to fit in while being constantly reminded of the impossibility of erasing my origins through the indelible difference of my race. While others recognized me as a typical American through my language, name, and manners, they could not help but notice the marks of difference that sat boldly on my face. When people registered temporary incomprehension upon seeing me with my mother—a tall white woman with blondish-red hair and green eyes—I insisted ever-more determinedly upon my Americanness and my place of belonging in my white American family. It wasn’t until my parents both died relatively untimely deaths—each after separate illnesses, about eight years ago—that I began to think again about my Korean origins. But at that time I was busy with a new baby of my own and two other young children, so thoughts about pursuing a “birth search” were easily interrupted and postponed. It was only in this past year as I was in the process of finishing this book on fortune that I decided to request a copy of my file from the Holt Adoption Agency.

File #9563 consisted of 20-odd pages of boilerplate forms with hastily typed and handwritten answers, some in fragmented English and others in Korean letters. The pages are riddled with typos and stained with age. The first document in the file is a “Certificate of Orphanhood,” which lists myself (or my Korean name) as
the head of my own family and designates the adoption agency in Korea as my legal guardian. I later learned that this document was necessary to establish my legal status as an “orphan,” which was stipulated as an immigration requirement by the US. Next to “Father:” and “Mother:” are the words “No record.” This was a form designed to convey an absence of biological roots or possible family ties and, indeed, it did a very good job of doing so. The other forms that followed included a series of medical reports and progress reports. A form entitled “Initial Social History” lists my height (51 cm), weight (3.2 kg), hair color and eye color (brown), and “physical defects” (“None”). Underneath these stats are a series of questions and typewritten answers (faithfully reproduced below with original typos):

“Why was the child placed in the orphanage?”
A: “The child was found by a a passenger on the street, 354 Hapjung-dong, Mopo-gu, Seoul and notified to the police.”

Child’s response at time of placement:
A: “No informatione”

Physical condition at time of admission:
A: “Weak”

Physical History:
A: “A new born baby, who has plumpish body and sleeps well most of her time. Has the yellows and a lot of heat rashes all over.”

Personality, habits, and capabilities:
A: “Seems gentle, but needs further check on development.”

Worker’s evaluation:
A: “Should be provided with good care until she finds a finds a suitable home.”

The new information provided by this form wasn’t especially rich or revelatory, but I was intrigued to learn of a specific address in Seoul where I had been found. And while I was somewhat pained to read about my delicate state of health (“the yellows”!?!), I also took some pride in the knowledge that I had survived such difficult beginnings to go on to thrive as a healthy toddler and child (even winning an award in the fourth grade for doing the most chin-ups, which doesn’t sound like all that much until you consider the fact that I could have easily died on that street in Korea). As I tried to conjure an image of my newborn self abandoned on the city street, I had trouble picturing it. How long was I out there? Who was this “passenger” that found me? Was I just lying there on the street in the blazing sun, or did someone at least put me in a cardboard box? (Either way, that’s no way for a baby to begin her life! No wonder I had a heat rash!). I was hungry for more information, stray details—anything at all—to hold onto. If only there had been a name pinned to my chest, a note, or a family keepsake. The typos and strain of translation only exacerbated my experience of alienation in receiving this fragmentary information.
The answers to my many questions were nowhere to be found, though a follow-up “Child Progress Report” in my file revealed this intriguing tidbit: “Child was placed with the foster home when 10 days old.” I was intrigued to learn that I was placed in a foster home, and also quite interested to know that I was “10 days old” at the time, which gave me some clue as to how old I might have been when I was first found on the street—quite likely just a few days old.

Unfortunately, about two weeks after I received my adoption file, I received a follow-up email from the adoption agency that cast doubt on what little concrete information I was able to glean from my file. The email told me that the information I had previously received was based on US records and that as a matter of course they had attempted to contact their Korean office to obtain any additional records pertaining to my history and to inquire, at my request, about whether a birth search might be possible. The email stated that they were unable to locate enough information to warrant a search. It then added that some of the information in my US file may have been inaccurate: “Please note: There seems to be a typing error in the Initial Social History. The street address is # 364, not #354, of Hapjeong-dong, Mapo district. #364 in Korean address (the old system) is not a street number or building number, but a neighborhood sectional number. This can be quite confusing and makes it even harder for birth searches for older cases. The old address (sectional boundary) changes over time with the growth of population.”

I received this new information with disappointment, realizing as I read it that I had been intending to try to visit the spot where I was told I had been left—if only out of morbid curiosity. Now I saw that this might not be possible. The email also told me that the Korean agency had received a “referral document” from the Mapo police station that listed my name as “unknown” and my age as “about a month old” when I was found. This information unsettled me further. I had learned from my US file that I was placed in a foster home when I was about “10 days old,” so how could I have been “about a month old” when I was found on the street? Which of these is true? Most likely the inconsistency reflects the hurried quality of the forms and perhaps the overworked status of the social workers who filled them out. The sole intention of the forms was to get me adopted, not to provide clues to my past. And yet, the holes, errors, and inconsistencies reminded me of how I may never be able to verify the basic pieces of information that other people take for granted in defining their identities. For example, I have always had my suspicions about the date that I celebrate as my birthday—likely estimated on the basis of a medical exam—and now I had even more reason to question its accuracy.

As if this new information wasn’t disappointing enough, the email concluded by discouraging me from attempting to locate my foster family, whose names are listed nowhere in my file: ‘According to current regulations in Korea, the agency is not allowed to search for foster parents who are no longer working with Holt Korea. Since your assessment indicates that your foster mother terminated her service or
has not been in contact for many years, a search for her or anyone in her family will not be possible. I’m sorry that we aren’t able to assist you with your search.”

On the one hand, I felt saddened and angry that the country that had once abandoned me as an infant to an uncertain future was now bolting the door to my past. Of course, I am not the only adoptee to whom this has happened. Historically, Korea has resisted owning up to its major role in the history of transnational adoption, which led to many thousands of Korean babies being raised in white western families. I later learned that thousands of Korean adoptees have received similar cursory accounts of their abandonment, raising suspicions that the accounts are willfully fabricated. My cursory research suggests that the transnational adoption of Korean babies in the second half of the twentieth century amounted to an industry that compelled unwed mothers to relinquish their babies and incentivized the Korean state to deliberately and systematically conceal the original identities of those babies. The fact that I will probably never be able to recover the truth of my past and my biological family history is more than just an accident. And, of course, the fact that so many Korean babies wound up being raised in the U.S. and in other western countries is also no accident of fortune. The irrecoverability of my past has as much to do with the global economic and political dynamics surrounding transnational adoption as it does with the hidden motives of my birth mother.

On the other hand, I have come to feel that it may be easier to accept my fate as a child of fortune than to know the circumstances of my birth and relinquishment. What might I learn if I had full access to my past? Could there be things that I am better off not knowing? Perhaps more to the point, is there something to be gained by not filling in the many empty blanks that occupy the place of my pre-adoption past? Perhaps what these glaring absences have afforded me is not just the opportunity to invent a potentially “better” life for myself: more significantly, they bring the opportunity to imagine my past through a million possibilities, choosing to leave open a profusion of possible paths that extend both backwards and forwards rather than securing the knowledge of just one. As I reflect upon the many obstacles that stand in the way of recovering my Korean identity, I realize that it takes courage to accept a state of unknowing. In the end, it may not be the easier course, but perhaps it is the better one for me.

My mother used to joke that when she and my father submitted their application materials to adopt a baby, my “lucky number” came up and the rest was history. Her speculation is probably not far from the truth. My early lot in life was the result of an adoption process that was comparable to a system of lottery. But does it necessarily follow that the operations of chance that landed me in my mother’s arms hold no meaning? As we know from the history of early modern lotteries, the practice of drawing lots attributed providential meaning to chance. At times I have wondered whether the series of chances that led to my adoption bear any larger meaning that might be called providential? Were the circumstances of my
life “meant to be”? Was I meant to become the person that I am and to live the life that I have lived? Or do the contingencies that shaped my life merely offer a stark illustration of the arbitrariness of all lives?

Early moderns asked themselves similar questions as they confronted the vagaries of fortune that shaped their lives and tried to ascertain their hidden meaning. Faced with a gap between the apparent fluctuations of fortune and the hidden knowledge of divine providence, they embraced the opportunity to make their own meaning out of fortune. In similar ways, we continue to draw upon the imaginative capacities of narrative to comprehend how the unknown mystery of fortune gives shape to a life, filling the gap of unknowability with fiction, conjecture, and hope. The attempts of early modern playwrights to make sense of fortune led to new understandings of human opportunity and agency, as well as to new valuations of risk and value. The models of fortune they put forth on the English stage were often complicit with proto-capitalist economic developments, reflecting how new philosophies of human action emerged as a result of economic developments and gave rise to discourses of seafaring, overseas venturing, and colonialism. But the stage also foregrounded creative opportunities for making meaning out of fortune, at a time when fortune occupied a key place in the larger early modern imaginary because it provided resources for giving meaning to events and radical changes—social, political, cultural—that seemed to exceed normative expectations and narratives.

I offer these reflections as a preface to the book that follows, even though they are in a very different spirit and voice, as a way of underscoring how alive, how significant, and how unexpected the importance of our academic work can be to our private biographies. Everyone has a different relationship to fortune, but fortune has a relationship to everyone, and the mystery of this relation was a central preoccupation of those who wrote for the early modern stage.
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The path to writing this book has involved many twists of fortune—including a variety of setbacks, blessings, and unexpected opportunities—all of which have led to the pages that you are now reading. At the same time, the fortunes that helped to produce this book represent more than a series of contingencies along a single path; rather, they represent the convergences of many paths, creating sparks and combustions whose potentiality is much greater than the sum of their parts. As Francis Bacon said, “The way of fortune is like the Milky Way in the sky; which is a number of small stars, not seen asunder, but giving light together.” While modest in its singular scope and influence, this book comes to life by virtue of its connection to the light of many others who have crossed my path. I have many people to thank for helping to light my way.

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While my mother did not live to see the completion of this book, her encouragement and love are present in everything I undertake and have helped to see me through the fulfillment of this journey. I dedicate this book to her memory, which lives with and inside of me every day. I am grateful, too, for the enduring love of my mother’s close friends, Cheryl Kennedy and Nancy Rollins. And I honor the memory of my father, whose kindness and unconditional love stay with me.

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Introduction

Fortune’s Early Modern Turn

From Pagan Goddess to Proto-Capitalist Economics

An emblem with the motto “Fato, non fortuna” featured in Geffrey Whitney’s 1586 Choice of Emblemes dramatically inverts the supreme power ascribed to fortune in the pervasive medieval iconography of fortune's wheel (see Figure 0.1).¹ As conventionally pictured in numerous medieval manuscripts (Figure 0.2), the blindfolded goddess Fortuna exerts indiscriminate but unimpeachable control over her human subjects, who are helplessly affixed to a wheel that she alone spins.² Within the earlier traditions of ancient Rome, Fortuna had a diffuse legacy and was associated with multiple cults and functions.³ The more uniformly threatening form she takes in the Middle Ages was largely influenced by Boethius, who described how Fortuna turns her wheel “with domineering hand,” subjecting “once fearful kings” to “her ruthless will.”⁴ By contrast, Whitney’s late-sixteenth-century emblem features Whitney’s patron, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, receiving direct aid from a providential hand in the sky and triumphantly resting on top of fortune's wheel, while the figure of Fortuna is crushed in the center of the wheel, caught under Leicester’s feet. The motto, “By god's will, not by fortune,” and accompanying verse, which insists that “Fortune nothinge can / But onelie
God defendes the mighties seates,” rejects fortune as a pagan entity and affirms Leicester’s own Calvinist understanding of the powerlessness of fortune against the all-encompassing sway of God’s providence.

Despite a common assumption among critics that fortune was subsumed by a new Calvinist idea of divine providence in early modern England, the power of fortune continued to be widely affirmed in visual and literary texts of the period, where it came to embody new forms and functions.⁵ Indeed, Whitney’s

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⁵ The paucity of studies focused on the concept of fortune in early modern England seems to reflect the critical view that fortune’s cultural authority waned after the Reformation. One notable exception is Michael Witmore’s *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Accidents in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). As Witmore shows, early modern “accidents” were often associated with the operations of fortune; his book traces an intellectual history of accidents from Aristotelian philosophy through Baconian natural philosophy, with special emphasis on the use of accidents as narrative devices and conduits for hidden knowledge. The only book-length study of fortune and English drama is Frederick Kiefer, *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1983), which discusses fortune as a source of adversity and mutability in English tragedy. Erin Kathleen Kelly’s dissertation offers a rich and wide-ranging discussion of how fortune provided a means for navigating contingent knowledge and different ways of knowing; see “Fortune’s ever-changing face” in *Early Modern Literature and Thought* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2015). See also Eirik Sommerfelt Steinhoff’s “The Sense of Chance in the English Renaissance” for a thought-provoking study of the concept of chance (from Petrarch to Pascal) and its influence on English poetics (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012).
A collection of emblems offers evidence of another sixteenth-century discourse in which Fortune not only reigns supreme but also invites human beings to seize upon the opportunities she presents to pursue their own interests (see Figure 0.3).⁶ Crucially, this figure of Fortune presides over the sea, where rather than turn her wheel upon land, she uses it to ride upon waves in the company of merchant ships. Whitney’s emblem stems from a broad continental tradition dating

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⁶ Whitney n 1 181. Here and throughout this book, Fortune is capitalized when referring to an embodied figure, and not capitalized when referring to the more general concept of fortune.
back until at least the mid fifteenth century in which the visual convention of the wheel of fortune gives way to a seafaring motif.⁷ The impresa of the Florentine merchant Giovanni Rucellai offers an early example of what would become a pervasive theme: the naked figure of Fortune holding up a sail and serving as

the boat’s mast (Figure 0.4). Unlike the wheel of fortune, which human passengers are helpless to control, the sailing motif offers an opportunity to navigate the wind and waves to influence one’s course. A Florentine engraving from around the same time further extends the connection between fortune and opportunity by featuring Giovanni di Paolo Rucellai’s son, Bernardo, in the place of the mast (Figure 0.5). Rucellai’s son has recently married into the Medici family, and it is his wife, Piero Medici’s daughter, Nannini, who sits in the helm of the boat. As the image suggests, in boarding the Medici ship of fortune Barnardo Rucellai has successfully seized an opportunity presented by fortune in the form of an advantageous marriage. The erotic display of his nearly naked body inverts the typical gendering of fortune as female, while Nannini occupies the position of the helmsman. Numerous subsequent variations on this motif suggested that fortune must be properly steered by virtue or wisdom. In Figure 0.6, a woodcut printer’s mark (Venice, 1595), Fortune assumes the role of the ship’s mast while a female figure wearing a crown and holding a scepter sits in the stern. The words “Regina Virtus” [Virtuous Queen] appear on the gunwale, suggesting that a virtuous monarch directs the opportunities opened up by fortune. Other images emphasized the ways that Fortune could lead one astray of virtue. In Figure 0.7, an emblem by Jean-Jacques Boissard dated 1595, Fortune sails past Wisdom with her eyes set on her, while Wisdom intentionally sits with her back to the sea, resisting its opportunities and uncertain fortunes. The Latin inscription translates, “Wisdom is independent of fortune.”

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8 Roberto Rossellino, Armorial relief, Impresa of Giovanni Rucellai, Palazzo Rucellai (Florence, c.1450).
9 Florentine engraving, c.1460–70.
10 For a discussion of this image, see Aby Warburg, The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity (Los Angeles: Getty Institute, 1999): 242.
11 Woodcut printer’s mark of Domenico and Pietro de’Franceschi, in Orazio Toscanella, Discorsi cinque (Venice, 1575).
12 Jean Jacques Boissard, Emblemes, (Metz, 1595).
The chest and riches featured in Boissard’s emblem and the passing of merchant ships in similar emblems reflect the commercial opportunities associated with seafaring. The motto to Whitney’s emblem (Figure 0.3), “In occasionem,” invokes a related iconographical tradition, that of the figure of Occasio, who personifies opportunity and is typically depicted with a long forelock and bald head in back. Occasio was the Latin name for the Greek mythological character of Caerus, or Kairos, who became Fortuna’s lover.13 Seaborne conflations of the figures of Fortuna and Occasio were frequently reproduced in the period in English as well as in

13 As James L. Kinneavy notes, in the Greek tradition Kairos was an ephebe—a young man undergoing military training—and his symbolism of opportunity was connected to a specific masculine life stage. As Kinneavy discusses, kairos was also an important rhetorical concept that captured the virtues of proper timing and measure, including “the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved.” See Kinneavy, “Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric,” in Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning, ed. Jean Dietz Moss (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 84.
Fig. 0.6 Woodcut printer’s mark of Domenico and Pietro de’ Franceschi, in Orazio Toscanella, Discorsi cinque (Venice, 1575). By permission of the University of Chicago.

Fig. 0.7 Jean Jacques Boissard, Emblemes (Metz, 1595). By permission of the Bibliothèque Mazarine.
Fig. 0.8 Gabriel Rollenhagen, “Ne Tenea: May I not be held,” *Nucleus emblematum selectissimorum*, Book I, no. 4 (Cologne, 1611), 33. By permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

continental emblem books and other printed texts, where they were rendered as one sexualized female body. Gabriel Rollenhagen’s emblem of Fortune/Occasio (1611) emphasizes the moral urgency of seizing an opportunity before it passes (Figure 0.8).1⁴ Rollenhagen’s images served as the source for George Wither’s *English Collection of Emblemes* (1635), which featured a similar figure holding a sail like the mast of a ship, accompanied by the motto “Vncertaine, Fortunes Favors, bee, And, as the Moone, so changeth Shee” (Figure 0.9).1⁵ While Wither’s motto may seem to harken back to Boethius’ warnings about the dangers

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1⁴ Gabriel Rollenhagen, “Ne Tenea: May I not be held,” *Nucleus emblematum selectissimorum*, Book I, no. 4 (Cologne, 1611), 33. The Latin motto reads, *Ne tenear, postica cavet pars, vertice raso; Caesariem qui scit prendere fronte, sapit* (“So that I may not be held back, the back of my head is shaved; wise is the one who knows he must grab the hair at my forehead”). Echoing the possibility of missed opportunity, a merchant ship threatens to pass by in the background. The emblem offers a stark contrast to Figure 0.7, where Wisdom staunchly refuses to even turn her head to look as Fortune and her cargo of commercial riches sail by. Both Rollenhagen’s image and Whitney’s depiction of Fortuna/Occasio (Figure 0.3) were adapted from the Italian Andrea Alciato’s *Emblematum libellus* (Paris, 1534). Whitney’s *1586 Choice of Emblemes* was the first to introduce the figure to English print.

of being seduced and betrayed by Fortune’s inconstancy, the conflated figure of Fortuna and Occasio more typically conveyed the notion of a beneficial opportunity that should not be allowed to pass. Her naked body and long forelock solicit human engagement and call out to be seized. At the same time, she is no passive victim, but rather a potent and exacting force that can powerfully ally itself with human will. As the verse below Whitney’s image of Fortuna/Occasio (Figure 0.3) explains, she holds a knife in her hand so “that men maie knowe I cut on euerie side, / And when I come, I armies can deuide.” Her forelock and “head behind all balde” also suggest the pressure of time for seizing her opportunities as she comes toward you, for if she passes by, you cannot grasp her from behind because her head is too slippery. As further underscored by Whitney’s verse, the emblem seeks to “warne all peoplenottostaye,/Butatthefirsteoccasiontoimbrace,/And when shee comes, to meete her by the waye.” Its injunction to embrace fortune—here presented as a moral imperative—offers a stark contrast to that of Boethius and the subsequent medieval tradition that instructed people to avoid engaging with Fortuna at all costs and to shun her earthly and material seductions, which offered “nothing worth pursuing and no trace of intrinsic good.”

16 Boethius, n 4, 40.