

A Comparative Study of Women as found in Korean and English Literatures

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I

Loss of Helen leads the Greeks to the immortal war. Loss of Briseis starts the immortal epic. Even the divine being who kindles the whole affair from above is a small-minded female god whose pastime it is to lead or mislead the amorous passion of helpless mortals. Indeed without women the great epic of *The Iliad* could not have developed even in its incipient form.

Beowulf is different. It can very well be retold in an all-male story. Excluding the few female characters from the narrative would not have presented a critical problem. The absence of Wealtheow's hospitable hostessship, for instance, would not have seriously abated Beowulf's superhuman muscular strength or heroic readiness to fight; while his funeral would have still been a funeral without the abrupt reference to an unidentified woman's wailing woe.

Thus in the only full-length Old English epic women are kept peripheral. With all their broad visibility¹⁾ they do not, like the Homeric women, enter the core of the events. It is true that the involvements of both Helen and Briseis, essentially causative as they are, are

1) Loud references to their attire may be found in ll. 549, 558, 574, 911, 1727-1728. Their love of attire runs in the clan and goes beyond human bounds, for Frigga's only misdemeanor was her stealing of a jewel from the statue of her husband, Odin.

but passive. But in that essentiality of the causativity they foreshadow the great gallery of immortal heroines left by Euripides, women that move in the center of events actively shaping their own and their menfolk's fate. In *Beowulf* which is not a story of the human heart but a story of muscular strength the hearts of women could not be given but a peripheral corner to move in. And it is the mother's heart that occupies that little corner because in this Norse story heavily touched by the Christian pen the most human strokes for the female are reserved for her mother aspect, just as some most human strokes for the male are reserved for his father aspect. The mother aspect of *Wealtheow* does not only supply a human context to all the heroic proceedings, it also deepens the tragic note that overhangs the whole narrative. In all lasting literary works women are the sounders of the human and the tragic notes. This literary function of the women puts all the important female characters of the world literature on intimately understanding terms, and unites the literatures of the world. The following words of *Wealtheow*, that reveal the tragic meaning of the chronic danger which the people of those days had to live with, may not be an excellent piece of artistic performance, but are the intimate voice of the universal mother. They are familiar to all Korean hearts; only, not as the strait-jacketed voice of a queen, but as the more natural voice of a humbler woman.

Rejoice while you may

In lavish bounty, and leave to your kin
 People and kingdom when time shall come,
 Your destined our, to look on death.
 I know the heart of my gracious Hrothulf,
 That he'll safely shelter and shield our sons
 When you leave this world, if he still is living

(927-933)

Befriend my boys with your kindly counsel;
 I will remember, and I will repay.

In your days of glory be good to my sons.

(971-978)

Here the Beowulf poet is touching a chord of tremendous artistic possibility. This mother aspect of the woman as a source of dramatic wealth was tapped by the Greek tragedians, especially Euripides, the greatest of them all, who was a consummate connoisseur of the female heart. Not only Alcestis and Phaedra who die willing martyrs to motherhood but even Clytemnestra and Medea in whom motherhood yields to stronger passions depend for their tragic depth on their mother aspect. But Wealtheow develops no further, either in the narrative where she is found or in later English literature, for the maneuver of the maternal heart is not a salient feature of the English literature. In fact it is very probable that even the mother aspect of Wealtheow is a Christian touch-up. How much of the original pagan material the cleric pen took up into the present Beowulf poem remains a mystery, but in the Eddaic narratives which provide us with a lot of light here, we find no mother image. In these Norse tales women are not as peripheral as they are in the Beowulf poem, but when any of them enters the central system of an event she does so not as the possessor of a woman's heart, but, as a warrior whose warriorship is comparable to that of the toughest of males. So was Brunhild's fierce aversion to cowardice; so was the bitter valour of Signy, whose brother Sigmund and son Fitela Hrothgar's gleeman sings of.²⁾ Even her incestuous relation with Sigmund is not impelled by passion, but carefully planned by a warrior woman's will to fight and win. This will dominates even her maternal instinct. But the huge pain which this suffocation of motherhood must have cost is overlooked by the teller of the tale. And we shall see that it is in this invisible-hearted Signy, and not in effusive Wealtheow, that an aristocratic heroine of old Korean literature would have found her counterpart. But while the invisible heart was an ideal of the Confucian Korea, the naturally vital heart of the Korean woman was always ready to stick out of the Confucian strait-jacket, especially in women of less disciplined

2) 11. 787-804.

classes. Thus contradiction was an inevitable feature of Korean womanhood, and we often find a woman bursting into the center of a stage from the most peripheral corner.

II

What time did to the Old English literature it did also to old Korean literature. The scanty remnant that time spared seems to tell us that our progenitors about the period of the Three Kingdoms were closer to ancient Greeks than Medieval Anglo-Saxons in their emotional habits. Like the ancient Greeks they eagerly snatched moments of pleasure from their hard struggling life. Not the least part of this pleasure they found in singing and dancing, thus earning the title in the Chinese chronicles, "the people who love to sing and dance".³⁾ Lyrical expressions of amorous passion, that eternal literary theme, seems not to have been unknown to these "decorous people of the East", as the Chinese chronicler called them. In fact the earliest surviving shred of our vernacular literature is a love song, *Yellow Birds*, allegedly composed by Yu-ri, the second King of Ko-gu-ryo, in 17 B.C. in longing for one of his two wives who had left him harassed by the jealousy of the other.

Yellow birds are flying
in pairs;
but in whose company
shall I go home?⁴⁾

For a more profuse expression of this somewhat anti-Confucian and anti-Buddhist human emotion Korean literature is to wait yet a little longer, until the Koryo Dynasty, presumably the latter part of it which is reported to have produced a considerable amount of unashamedly frank love poems, only a small part of which survives. Meanwhile the

3) *Weichi* Vol. 30; *Houhanshu* Vol. 115

4) translated from the Chinese translation of the text found in the *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*.

key note of the literature of Shilla, understandably the best preserved of the literatures of the Three Kingdoms, is religious or Shamanistic, for among these people Buddhism was enjoying peaceful coexistence with the indigenous Shamanism. But among the songs for religious services and Shamanistic incantations are found a few purely lyrical utterances. *Hwesogok*,⁵⁾ *Konghuin*⁶⁾ *Ushikkok*⁷⁾ may belong to this description. The first two of these lyrical pieces are laments and of female authorship, and although these puny, unpremeditated metrical utterances, which, faithful to tradition, perform the hoary female part of deepening the tragic note of the human music, may be only rudimentary lyrics, of more linguistic value than poetic, they are of engrossing interest as the precursors of the scintillating achievement of some Lee Dyasty women.

But before we go on to a reference to one of Shilla's more sophisticated but less interesting literary compositions, one lyric demands our special attention. It is not exactly a love song. Its theme is the solicitude of a wife while her husband is away from home. It is attributed to the wife of a merchant of Chungup,

O moon, rise very high—
Rise high and shine far.

Is my lord at the market now?
Let him not misstep into a mire.

Where rests his heart?
O let no misfortune darken my road.⁸⁾

What the poem shows us is a timid and loving young wife, young enough to suffer, every time her husband is away longer than she

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- 5) Shilla. A.D.32. Only the description, but no text, in *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*.
6) Shilla. A.D. 196. Chinese translation of the text is to be found in *Ko-gum-joo* by Choe Pyo.
7) Shilla. A.D. 458. Only the description, but no text, in *Annal of the Three Kingdoms*.
8) Reading of Pak Byongchae in *A linguistic Study of the Songs of Koryo*, Korean Literature Series, Vol. 4 pp.33-60

expects, from imagination of his heart straying away from her to some improper woman, a mire. So she prays to the moon not only to light his footsteps, but also to light his mind to keep him from moral harm, This vivid picture of wifely solicitude is so faithful to life and the metaphorical formulation of the poem is of such superior touch that it makes us regret that there does not survive some more of the literature of Paekje, for this poem belongs to the scanty legacy of that kingdom, whose superior artists made such invaluable contributions to the achievement of the arts of Shilla.

The more refined literary performance, the court literature or aristocratic literature of Shilla was in classical Chinese, almost the sole literary language, of the upper class Koreans for more than a millenium. The oldest surviving instance of such a poetic composition is found in the *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*⁹⁾ and of female authorship, *Chi-T'ang-taepyong-song* a fashionably styled eulogistic poem dedicated to King Ko-jong, the 4th king of the T'ang Dynasty of China, composed and woven into a piece of brocade by Queen Jinduk of Shilla in 650 A.D. It is a composition of practised skill, and performed its diplomatic function effectively, for it pleased the Chinese king sufficiently to elicit from him special favours. And this diplomatic success was part of her many successful efforts that paved the way for Shilla's integration of the three mutually unamicable states into a single kingdom, which colossal work was to be completed in the reign of the son of her successor.

This early counterpart of Elizabeth I of England never inspired the creative imagination of any writer. Instead she got the following comment from the chronicler.¹⁰⁾

"In the cosmic principle of the negative and the positive the light is hard and the shade is tender, and in human beings the male is high and the female low. Then how can a crone be allowed to leave the women's

9) Vol., 5

10) Kim Pushik, the staunchly Confucian compiler of *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*

quarters of her home to manage the affairs of state? Shilla's enthronement of women speaks of her turbulent state of things, and that such anomaly did not bring ruin upon the state was a chance piece of luck. We should take warning from the mention in *Shu-ching*.¹¹⁾ of 'a hen's informing of the dawn' and that in *I-ching*¹²⁾ of 'the hopping of a boar'."

The anomalous behaviors of the domestic animals are mentioned in the two ancient books as bad omens.

Thus in early Korean literature instead of women portrayed by male authors, glimpses of them are afforded through things of their own authorship. In fact what strikes the Korean students of English literature as somewhat strange is the reticence of women until well on in modern times. The women that these poetic utterances suggest may not be happy creatures, but they wear spirited hearts charged with inborn artistic rhythm. At times this rhythm survived even the direst misery, and our second oldest extant lyric, *Konghuin*, is a song allegedly sung by a boatman's wife while drowning herself to follow her husband who had drowned in an accident. But what kind of mothers did these women make? This is a serious question, for although the answer to it may not decide the quality of our literature, it decides the quality of ourselves.

The *Annals of the Three Kingdoms* which devotes three long chapters to the life and achievements of Kim Yooshin, the greatest soldier of Shilla, gives us a fitting glimpse of his wife, which, although it does not tell us of what attire bedecked her outward appearance, does tell us of what was flowing in her veins. We shall never know completely how much of these mythologico-historical "Annals" is authentic and how much the product of imagination. Nor shall we ever know how faithfully the staunchly Confucian compiler, Kim Pushik, transmits to us the matter of his materials. The ghost soldiers who had been protecting Kim Yooshin but were seen by some

11) note (12)

12) Both *Shu-ching* and *I-ching* are pre-Confucian books. That *Shu-ching* was compiled by Confucius seems no longer to be tenable.

people to leave the great general's house weeping on the eve of his death¹³⁾ certainly leave no margin of dispute as to their fictitiousness, a fascinating piece of fiction though they are. But the picture of his wife carries the imprint of reality. Wonsul, the second son of Kim Yooshin, happened to survive a lost battle through no fault of his own cowardice, but by the insistent advice of his adjutant. On his inglorious return home his father advocated the forfeiture of his life, but by the king's leniency he was spared. To the day of his father's death Wonsul spent his penitent days in the country, never daring to appear in his father's presence. On his father's death, however, he came home to his parental house and entreated for his mother's leniency to let him see her. To this entreaty the mother said:

"A woman is subject to the moral principle of triple obedience.¹⁴⁾ Now that my husband is dead I ought to place myself under the duty of yielding to my sons. But Wonsul failed in his sonship to his father. How can he be a son to me?" Wonsul could not have the heart to go away without seeing his old mother and cried bitterly beating his breast, but all in vain"¹⁵⁾

This absolute sanctification of the husband's will at the expense of the mother's heart may have no parallel in English literature. But images of wifely devotion are by no means strangers to it, especially the Renaissance period supplies us with no small number of them. Disdemona's touching attempt to protect Othello even dying at his hands, her dying words:

"A guiltless death I die."¹⁶⁾
 "Nobody; I myself. Farewell!"¹⁷⁾

remain a haunting compliment to wifehood. And in the following speech of Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*,

13) *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 43

14) First mentioned in *Yi-Li* allegedly compiled by Confucius, Chapter on *Sang-fu*

15) *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*, Vol. 43.

16) *Othello* V, ii, 122

17) *ibid.* 124.

but now lead on;
 In mee is no delay; with thee to goe,
 Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
 Is to go hence unwilling; thou to mee
 Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,
 Who for my wilful crime art banisht hence.

(BK XII 11.615~619)

the Puritan ideal of wifely virtue considerably overlaps with the Confucian ideal. But in the devotion of these two women we find something more personal that we do not find in the cold decorum of Lady Kim: hers is a devotion to husbanddom, and theirs a more personal devotion to specific men. Yet is their devotion completely free from moral consideration? The following words of Emilia, Iago's wife, answer this question.

"'Tis proper I obey him, but not now."¹⁸⁾

We see that Obedience was part of wifely duty not only in Confucian Korea.

Later Lady Kim Yooshin, the paragon of wifely obedience, shaves her hair, puts on coarse hempen clothes, and becomes a Buddhist nun, which step is to be followed by so many wives surviving their husbands., showing the perfect compatibility of the two systems of ideas, Confucianism and Buddhism. It means that after a long selfless life in behalf of the house of her husband, she wants at last to have a look at her own soul. An epitaph for a Koryo Dynasy woman¹⁹⁾ gives us the picture of a woman cast in the same mold of mentality. "After a life of Confucian virtue she left her household duties with the servants and concubines to devote the rest of her life to Buddhism."²⁰⁾ Only she would not have been able to become a nun, for a law had been promulgated in 1017 forbidding women to become nuns.

18) *Othello* V, ii, 196.

19) Lady In, wife of Kim Won, minister to King Kojong

20) *Dong-guk-lee-sang-guk-jip* by Lee Kyoobo, Vol. 35.

III

While the Korean Confucians were dichotomizing Korean women for the purpose of dehumanized simplification of them into mother-women and pleasure-women, Geoffrey Chaucer was engaged in groping about the tortuous maze of the female psychology to humanize the first woman in English literature that was more than just a type. For with all the remnant of the hackneyed crust of courtly love which his Criseyde could not shake off completely, she was much nearer than her predecessors to a natural human individual painted in her own natural colour. We know her faults to be the faults of a helpless mortal woman, and as such her beauty and delicate feminine ways do not lose their fascination, in spite of her unknowability, her failure in the womanly virtue, and her probable incapacity for deep feeling.

Another notable thing about this woman is that she is not a woman of the Anglo-Saxon background. Chaucer recreated her from Boccaccio. We know that the Arthurian heroine, Queen Guinevere, too, is a borrowing from abroad, for, although King Arthur may or may not be a British king, his wife languishing under her guilty passion for Lancelot cannot be a woman of the stock of Brunhild and Wealtheow, but belongs to the family of Helen and Lesbia. We can say the same thing of Iseult. In fact the earliest Arthurian romances that the English writers knew were not Celtic sources but were the poems of Chretien de Troyes, the great French writer of romances. Then the courtly love stories of the Middle English Period that brought colorfulness into the monochromatic English literature prospered not on native women but on heroines of foreign tradition, just as three centuries later the writer of the first courtly love story in Korean literature wove his bright love scenes with Chinese women, for at least in their outward show the women of Kim Manjung's *A Cloud Dream of the Nine* are Chinese.

About the time Chaucer's love story was being written love seems to have been a popular lyrical theme among certain people of Koryo.

A number of love lyrics surviving the suppression of the sterner Lee Dynasty Confucians are mostly somewhat too direct expressions of intense amorous longing, some of them almost justifying the Lee Dynasty suppressors in their overly bold sensuality. These songs having been transmitted orally until they were given written form after the invention of "hangul", Korean phonetic signs, their authors are mostly unknown. But who are the composers of these songs that are so out of keeping with the image of the Confucian Koreans? To try to answer this question we must know something of the peculiar social structure of those days.

We do not know exactly when Confucianism was introduced into Korea. We know just as little about when the dichotomy of Korean women started. But we know this much, that since the dichotomy was the result of too much order and not too little, it cannot have emerged until Confucianism achieved considerable authority. This is no place to go at length into the process of this dichotomy, but an attempt at even a very rough tracing of it will throw some light on the character of the dichotomized women. The Korean version of the Confucian order controlled women so thoroughly that they became strict virtue-vessels. In no society can males adapt themselves completely to an entire population of virtue-vessel women. Pleasure loving Korean males needed their pleasure partners.

For this need the creation of a new order of women was not necessary. With some slight alteration existing facilities answered the purpose. These were the kisaengs. On the origin of kisaengs opinions vary. One opinion is that they derive themselves from the "wonhwa" of Shilla, the predecessor of the hwarang. Another is that when, in the beginning of the Koryo Dynasty, a branch of the descendants of Paekje's ruined people were placed in various towns as governmental slaves, some of their girls with good looks were taught skill in singing and dancing and served as governmental entertainers, thus becoming the forerunners of Korean kisaengs.²¹⁾ The kisaengs were for royal

21) Lee Nunghwa, *Haehwa-sa* (A History of Korean Kisaengs)

and governmental use at first, but to their duty of entertainment at royal banquets and entertainment of governmental guests, especially foreign missions, were added that of taking care of the personal pleasure of not only the king, but an ever enlarging category of males.

As to the precise social status of these early female entertainers as a class authentic information is not available, but tales told of some *kisaengs* of the middle and the close of the Koryo Dynasty suggest the plausibility of the second theory of their origin. For they seem always to have been a deplorably defenceless race, never forming part of the respectable, or regular, people. They came from various backgrounds. They ranged from orphaned or otherwise ruined girls of regular birth to girls with good looks but of irregular birth or low condition. These luckless women were trained from childhood in singing, dancing, handling of musical instruments, manners, coquetry, and a hundred other arts needed to take care of men's pleasure, often including the higher arts of poetic composition, painting, and calligraphy, to please men of finer taste. These women were used exclusively for pleasure, but were denied respectable married life, and as soon as their youth faded their artistic skill became of little value.

"Being left a flowerless twig,
you are no longer a girl of fifteen.
What a pity that you can still sing and dance!
Why did not your skill go with your bloom?"²²⁾

Some of them sang songs of their own making, and their theme was frequently love, because love was part of their profession, or even duty. Their expression was rather direct, because being lowly enough to cater, more often than not, to men's baser desires they had no need of feigning virtue which was irrelevant to them. Some of these women achieved literary proficiency. One of them is a great name, not only the greatest Korean woman poet of all periods, but also one of the greatest handlers of the *shijo* form. She is a Lee Dynasty

22) by Lee Kyoo-bo (1168-1241)

Kisaeng, Hwang Chini(earlier part of 16 C). But with all her profound vision, exuberant wit, and practised handling of images, we miss in her the feminine delicacy of a natural woman, found even in a woman who failed in the womanly virtue like Chaucer's Criseyde. It is because she is a mutilated woman.

Meanwhile their more fortunate sisters, the mother women, were managing their motherhood not only with success, but also with genuine enjoyment. They attempted in a hundred creative ways to make that motherhood more palatable to their children. The following shijo is by the mother of Jung Mongju(1337-1392), the Confucian scholar of the close of the Koryo Dynasty who earned his immortal place in history by his double merit of great scholarship and courageous fidelity to his principles.

"Go not eagret among the wrangling ravens:
angry ravens are jealous of your white feathers,
and may stain them that the blue seawaves have washed clean."

Faithful to his mother's advice he kept aloof from the power hunters of his days, and willingly paid with his life for his integrity. Tradition has it that his saintly blood shed in this way still stains the stone bridge where the foul deed was committed. They managed their households so enjoyably that the simple joy they fed their children during their childhood did not cease to work its fascination on their hearts in their afterlife, as shown in the following poem.

"The village far away
shut in by a thousand mountains—
that is my home
ever haunting my dreams.

The twin moons lighting
Han-song-jung;
a fresh breeze wafting
to Kyung-po-dae;
the eagrets now flying,

now sitting on the sand,
 the fishing boats surfing
 ever going and coming—

Ah! when shall I tread again
 the road by these sights
 to sit by my mother's side
 sewing a rainbow-striped coat?"

The author of this poem is no sniveling female tending to infantile regression, but a woman of sophisticated classic training and a trained artist, whose paintings rank among the masterpieces of Lee Dynasty. Besides she was a great mother herself that brought up her son into a towering scholar and a towering statesman. For her son, Lee Yi(1536-1584), a leader of the philosophical formulation of Confucianism that characterized the Neo-Confucian studies of the mid-Lee Dynasty, was at the same time a profoundly original statesman, whose insight, so say historians would have saved Korea the devastating invasion of Hideyoshi from whose blow she has never completely recovered, if only the king had been sensible enough to listen to him. (In fact behind most of the great men of Korea we find great mothers. And their inconspicuous maternal care was often repaid with considerably conspicuous show of filial affection. Lady Shin's poem quoted just above is an instance. The theme of the other of her two surviving poems, too, is her mother. A more celebrated case is that of Kim Manjung, the writer of *Kuunmong* (*A Couln Dream of the Nine*). He wrote the story to please his mother who had a fancy for Chinese romances. But for his filial enthusiasm a romance would have stayed where it had been, that is, definitely below his scholarly attention. And without *Kuunmong* he may never have written *Sasinamjungki* (*The Wanderings of Lady Sa*), thus depriving Korea of the two finest flowers of her romance literature.

As the Lee dynasty authorities attempted successfully to purify Confucianism off its former Buddhist and Shamanistic contamination and consolidate its force as the absolute guiding principle of Korean people,

its hold on women who could afford virtue grew ever stronger, and women who could not afford virtue completely did what they could to partake of its glorifying aura. Women were expected neither to stir out of doors nor to meet males who were not close relatives. Information, whether bookish or otherwise, that was irrelevant to their household duties were forbidden them. Above all they were forbidden expression of emotion.²³⁾ These women whom Rousseau would have called "fools that have fallen in love with their slavery" were indeed in love with their virtue, and wore the Confucian bond with genuine good humor. It is enlightening to compare the two heroines, Una of Spenser's *Faery Queen* and Princess Nanyang of *A Cloud Dream of the Nine*, who is a Korean woman in spirit although disguised as a Chinese.

These two women have more in common than any other two women from the two literatures, English and Korean. They are both men's dream women drawn to men's heart's desire. They are both Kings' daughters of consummate beauty and virtue, Nanyang the quintessence of Confucian female virtue, Una that of the Christian ideal. The two women show us that what the two ideals seek in womanhood are not at great variance after all. But princess Nanyang has one thing which we miss in Una, a cheerful sense of humor. What bestows thoroughly clean grace to *A Cloud Dream of the Nine*, a story of a merest lady's man, is the cleansing effect of her capacity to see the funniness in Yang Soyoo's incapacity to resist an attractive woman. There is nothing furtive or sordid about this story which has plenty of sex in it. And when Nanyang and Yang's other women get together to make fun of their man's amorous lust by disguising Nanyang's handmaid as a ghost, and find out, to their hearty fun, that Yang would not decline even a confessed ghost so long as it is a pretty ghost, the reader, too, cannot help enjoying a good laugh. We know of Deianira, wife of Herakles, who regarded her husband's lust for Iole only as disease, and could

23) Lee Dukmoo's *Sasojul*, Chapter on Womanly Manners.

show the elegant dignity not to be mean to her. But no story tells us that Deianira found in the situation a cause for fun.

In the last Quarter of the 16th century, and to be more precise, just at the time the short-lived genius, Sir Philip Sidney, was portraying in his dark eyed Stella about the first woman in English literature with a tinge of intellectual charm, a dark eyed woman of unusual physical charm was producing her own portraits in a hidden nook of the women's quarters of a high-born Korean family. She was even a shorter-lived genius, Hu Nansul-hun(1563-1589), the only full-size poetess from the mother-women camp. But the Lee Dynasty women demand a new long chapter.