

The Player King and Kingly Players: Inverting *Hamlet* in Lee Joon-ik's *King and the Clown* (2005)

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Abstract

Set during the reign of King Yeonsan (1476-1506), *King and the Clown* (*Wang-ui Namja*, dir. Lee Joon-ik, 2005) is an (overlooked) adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that grafts the play onto Korean history and retells the story from the perspective of the traveling players. Employed to help Yeonsan confront and explore his unresolved (Oedipal) issues and to "catch the conscience" (2.2.582) of corrupt officials, the troupe finds itself dangerously embroiled in court politics and asked to stage a number of theatrical "mousetraps" to the point where the interior plays supersede the exterior film. By making the "clowns" the heroes and the plays-within-the-film the main foci, *King and the Clown* threatens to turn Shakespeare's *Hamlet* inside out, structurally and thematically, an inversion that reflects South Korean resistance to western cultural hegemony. This paper will explore the ways in which Lee's carnivalesque film functions to decenter the "original," as well as to blur the lines of distinction between the stage and the screen, the local and the global.¹

Since the turn of the twenty-first century South Korea has emerged as a new center for the production of transnational popular culture, supplanting Japan as cultural hegemon in East Asia and challenging the unidirectional cultural flows from the West. Key to the success of the so-called Korean Wave (or *Hallyu*), the reason behind the highly exportable and globally appealing nature of its products, is the practice of blending local, regional and Western styles, genres, identities and narratives: Korean Wave culture is "in essence all things hybrid" (Kim 2013, 17). Unlike North Korea, which by comparison remains hermetically sealed, South Korea has been exposed to multiple external influences and is accustomed to absorbing and imaginatively appropriating other cultures. John Lie even claims there is no K in K-Pop because of its *mugukjoek* nature (i.e., lack of nationality). The loss of specificity and complex mixing of genres and themes characteristic of contemporary South Korean culture is also apparent in its treatment of Shakespeare, described almost invariably as "hybrid," "intercultural" and "glocal."²

In the last couple of decades there have been several notable Korean stage adaptations of Shakespeare, including the work of directors Oh Tae-suk, Kim Myung-kon, Han Tae-sook and Yang Jung-ung, and many more; indeed, such is the current popularity of Shakespeare in South Korea that it is possible to speak of a "Shakespearean Wave."³ *Hamlet* has proven especially popular in South Korea and in the last twenty years, it has been staged more than any other play either foreign or domestic. (Lee Hyon-u suggests this is due to "fellow-feeling between Hamlet and the Korean people with their painful experience of Japanese colonialism, the Korean War and military dictatorship" (2011, 105)).⁴

Film versions of Shakespeare, on the other hand, with the exception of Lim Won-kook's 2008 "take" on *The Taming of the Shrew, A Frivolous Wife (Nallari Jongbujeon)*, are relatively unheard of and it seems South Korea's thriving film industry has yet to embrace Shakespeare.⁵ Another exception to this is *King and the Clown (Wang-ui Namja)*, a 2005 period drama directed by Lee Joon-ik which has won multiple awards and is one of the country's highest ever grossing films. Set in the fifteenth century and based on the life of the notorious King Yeonsan, a historical figure traumatized by his father's complicity in the murder of his mother, *King and the Clown* is an adaptation or, more accurately, transformation of *Hamlet* that grafts the play onto Korean history and retells the story from the perspective of the itinerant players, whom King Yeonsan employs to confront and resolve his psychological issues and to "catch the conscience" (2.2.582) of corrupt officials.⁶ It thereby dismantles, rearranges and, by making the clowns the heroes and the plays-within-the-film the central focus, ultimately inverts Shakespeare's "original." Perhaps for this reason, coupled with the fact producers resisted using Shakespeare as an overt selling tool — another act of rebellion? — *King and the Clown* has yet to be labeled a "Shakespeare film" (itself a problematic term) even though it is not the first production to draw parallels between Hamlet and King Yeonsan. Lee Yun-taek's *The Problematic Man: Yunsan* is a 1995 stage version of *Hamlet* that also dramatizes the life of King Yeonsan, blending "historical fact" and "Shakespearean fiction," while, more recently, *The Treacherous* (dir. Min Kyu-dong, 2015) explicitly invited comparisons between King Yeonsan and Hamlet (Figure 1). Indeed, King Yeonsan is sometimes dubbed "the Hamlet of Korea" in recognition of the ways in which this historical figure's story resonates with Shakespeare's tragic protagonist.⁷

test While many critics have commented on *King and the Clown's* "Shakespearian dynamic," its "hint(s) of the Bard" and the way in which it "hearkens back as much to Shakespeare and *commedia dell'arte* as to Korea's own cultural traditions," few have come close to recognizing the extent to which *King and the Clown* is in dialectic with *Hamlet* (Lamble, 2007; Smith, 2007).⁸ Even

Keum-sil Kim Yoon and Bruce Williams, who highlight how "*King and the Clown* counterbalances traditional Korean performance with intertextual references to Shakespeare," and David Carter, who describes the film as "Shakespearean in its structure and style" and identified that the "use of the device of a play to reveal the truth about the murder of the king's mother has clear echoes of Hamlet's use of the travelling players," fall short of appreciating the multiple, complex ways *King and the Clown* sustains an intertextual relationship with *Hamlet*.

It is my contention that *Hamlet* is an important referent throughout *King and the Clown*, influencing though not determining the film's plot, style, structure, themes and characterization, but like so many Asian Shakespeare films it has "slipped beneath the radar" (Burnett 2010, 120). In particular, *King and the Clown* — a distinctively self-reflexive film about performance — explores Hamlet's fascination with theater and his near-obsession with the players, who take the form of *namsadang* performers (or *gwangdae*).⁹ Their response to his obsession, and feelings of trepidation at being drawn into the world of court intrigue, are given pre-eminence — an indication of the carnivalesque nature of the film and its attempt to decenter Shakespeare's playtext, which, as John Barth and others have pointed out, privileges the perspective of the aristocratic. By making the players the focal characters and by painting an unflattering portrait of King Yeonsan, *King and the Clown* not only strips *Hamlet* of its heroic dimensions but privileges indigenous Korean performance over Western "high" art. Indeed, the film, regarded as an "ambassador for Korean culture and history abroad," has led to a reappraisal of *namsadang* and its six types of acts — *p'ungmul* (farmers' band), *bona* (plate spinning), *salp'an* (acrobatics), *orum* (tightrope walking), *totbegi* (masked dance), *tolmi* (puppet plays) — all of which are colorfully showcased (Hwang 2014, 90). Thus, rather than revealing the passive resistance to Western cultural hegemony which, according to Im Yeeyon, typifies most "Korean Shakespeares," *King and the Clown* keenly promotes Korean folk traditions and, as a sign of resilience against Western hegemony, essentially turns *Hamlet* inside out, structurally and thematically.

He That Plays the King Shall Be Welcome

The film opens with the troupe's two stars, Jang-saeng (Kam Woo-sung), who plays the *sutdongmo* (generically "butch") role, and Gong-gil (Lee Joon-gi), who is a female impersonator and embodies the *yodongmo* ("queen") role, tightrope walking while engaging in bawdy banter — a central part of the *namsadang* repertoire. Gong-gil is performing the part of a shrewish woman and Jang-saeng is "her" would-be tamer. The first lines spoken take the form of an ancient Korean poetic form called *sijo* and, notably, it is only the players who speak in verse, an inversion of Shakespeare's frequent use of poetry and prose to distinguish between the upper and lower classes, respectively.

The mood turns sour, however, when Jang-saeng becomes aware that their manager is negotiating the sale of Gong-gil for sexual services to a male member of the audience. It is well known that *namsadang nori* wandered the countryside generally available as homosexual prostitutes and that "among the itinerant players — the dancers and acrobats and puppet-show people — paederasty, male prostitution, and regular homosexual marriages, sometimes with transvestitism, were common" (Rutt 1961, 112). Yet Jang-saeng takes issue with this transaction, perhaps, it is strongly implied, because of his own, repressed homoerotic feelings for Gong-gil, who, like the skirt-wearing Alfred in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), is subject to frequent sexual exploitation. After a violent altercation that results in the manager's death, Jang-saeng and Gong-gil leave the troupe and head to Hanyang (the contemporary name for Seoul) where they quickly impress and join another company of players with whom they devise a routine that ridicules the tyrannical king and his consort, Jang Nok-su. This routine portrays a grotesque King Yeonsan foolishly enslaved to lust and its popularity attests to *namsadang's* reputation as critical of the ruling elite and appealing to the disenfranchised. However, the king's chief advisor, the film's Polonius, Cheo-sun, happens to attend a performance and orders the troupe be flogged and imprisoned. Jang-saeng then proposes, in a nod to *Arabian Nights*, that they be given the chance to perform before the king to prove they can make him laugh; if they fail, they will face execution. This leads to their first, fateful encounter with King Yeonsan (Jung Jin-young) and their entrance into the world of Hamlet/*Hamlet*.

King Yeonsan is immediately entranced by the company and mirrors the depressive Hamlet's enthusiastic embracement of the players: "there did seem in him a kind of joy/ to hear of them" (3.1.20-21). He respects and admires the troupe and particularly welcomes Jang-saeng, "he that plays the king" (2.2.298). King Yeonsan also, for the same reason Hamlet receives the players so warmly, appreciates the irony that they are what they seem to be, namely performers, and thus are "certain entities in a world filled with hypocrites, imposters or . . . individuals wavering in their sense of loyalty" (Homan 1981, 155). But it is the opportunities they provide for introspection and self-knowledge that are particularly welcome, and King Yeonsan proceeds to use them to work through his psychological issues. After watching them mock his relationship with Nok-su (Kang Seong-yeon), the King replays in private the enactments, lampooning his own behavior and thereby appropriating the performance in his double role as author and figural puppet. Recognizing the "potentialities of theatre" (Rosenberg 1992, 418) and perhaps deliberately trying to upset the court he despises, he takes the players in and ensures they are "well bestowed" (2.2.485), much to the disapproval of Cheo-sun, who considers the actors vermin. King Yeonsan, by contrast, seems to desire to join the troupe and earn himself "a fellowship in a cry of players" (3.2.271-72), for during

the next court performance, he enters the stage action and in a Saturnalian reversal of roles bows down to the Player King. He thereby emulates/exaggerates Hamlet's reverence of the First Player and seems willing to cast himself in the part of the clown, perhaps as a means of convincing those around him he is mad (Figure 2).¹⁰ This moment is also reminiscent of the role-reversal scene between Falstaff and King Hal in *Henry IV, Part One* and underlines the generally festive quality of both this film and the "original" *Hamlet*, which has previously lent itself so beautifully to comedies such as *In the Bleak Midwinter* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1995) and *To Be or Not to Be* (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1942).

King and the Clown is attuned to Hamlet's affection for court jesters — Yorick was, after all, his childhood idol — which chimes with historical records that suggest King Yeonsan held a defiant court clown in particular esteem. Further, the film stakes a claim for the importance of clowns, arguably the main attraction in early modern dramaturgy, highlighting their role in critiquing those in power. They are not conceived as free agents, though, but as servants of the very individuals/institutions they satirize, and thus their subversive potential is always curbed. Jangsaeng and Gong-gil soon find themselves enlisted by the conspiratorial Cheo-sun (Polonius), a master strategist, to set a theatrical trap and expose court corruption. The stratagem goes to plan and the "guilty creature sitting at [the] play," an official who sold titles for money, is "struck so to the soul that presently/ [he] proclaimed [his] malefactions" (2.2.552; 54-54). Thereafter, King Yeonsan's admiration for and reliance on the actors increases, and he begins to trust entirely the mimetic function of theater as well as its capacity to prompt himself and others to acts of self-analysis. Thus, in an ensuing scene he invites Gong-gil to his chamber where he stages his own puppet show, a show that depicts/replays a conversation between him and his late father, Seongjong of Joseon (Figure 3).

Taking the form of shadow theater, which nicely captures the gothic atmosphere of *Hamlet's* ghost and graveyard scenes (puppets are historically associated with mediums and the supernatural and often deployed by Korean directors of Shakespeare in "spooky" scenes), the show King Yeonsan directs and stars in emphasizes once again his use of theater as a probing device to his consciousness (*King and the Clown* sublimates Hamlet's soliloquies through intimate performances). The performance also highlights Yeonsan's narcissistic self-absorption — a character trait the film, going against the grain of Anglo-American tradition and deliberately distancing itself from overly sentimental or idealized views of Hamlet, is disapproving of — and his Hamlet-esque conception of humans in general as "puppets dallying" (3.2.247): the Shakespearean topos of *theatrum mundi* is a recurring motif throughout *King and the Clown*. Cutting a diminutive

figure *vis-à-vis* his father, Yeonsan explores past trauma, namely his abusive father's demands that he "forget her [his mother]" — a demand that draws a similar, albeit again inverted, parallel with the Ghost's instruction to "remember me."

King Yeonsan's father's orders culminate in the accusation that "Thou [Yeonsan] art fit to become but a changeling." The theme of royal changeling children, of course, runs through the Shakespearean corpus, including *Henry IV, Part One*, wherein the titular character wishes "some night-tripping fairy had exchanged" (1.1.86) his errant son, Prince Hal, with the valiant Hotspur. Often the phrase is used to express parental disappointment, but it also serves to raise doubts about legitimacy. King Yeonsan/Hamlet, it is fair to say, at times feels like a changeling, a "gipsy" more at home with the traveling players. As Harold Bloom points out, "Hamlet is a changeling, nurtured by Yorick, yet fathered by himself, an actor-playwright from the start" (2003, 9). Replaying the memory of his mother's murder and his father's cruelty prompts the further deterioration of King Yeonsan's sanity and he becomes increasingly unable to distinguish between real life and theatrical performance. The puppet show also serves to increase his commitment to the task of revenge and he is finally spurred to action when the troupe, at the behest of Cheo-sun, stages his mother's poisoning: this Hamlet, despite efforts at self-determinism, literally is a "pipe" that is played upon.

This particular interior play is the film's longest and most elaborate and it takes the anachronistic form of Peking Opera (*Jingjù*). Jeeyoung Shin reads this as a specific reference to *Farewell My Concubine* (dir. Chen Kaige, 1993), a film about a homosexual relationship in a Chinese opera troupe and one of *King and the Clown*'s other important intertexts: Yi's film is in many ways an exemplar of "multicultural mutant Koreanness."¹¹ The use of Peking Opera in this pivotal scene, which leads to three deaths at King Yeonsan's hand, also signifies an attempt to draw attention to South Korea's shared cultural heritage with China, with whom substantial efforts were being made to build a stronger economic relationship in 2005. It might even be suggested that *King and the Clown* bears some comparison with Feng Xiaogang's *wuxia* or martial arts film, *The Banquet* (2006) — a lavish and critically-acclaimed adaptation of *Hamlet* that also features numerous "inset" theatrical performances and the use of the mask as a central motif. Some of the tensions in *King and the Clown*, therefore, might be described as *intracultural* as much as *intercultural*; that is, clashes can be detected not just between East and West but between South Korea and its former colonial master, Japan. Shakespeare has, in fact, previously been deployed to stress the cultural differences in language, culture and politics between Korea and Japan, and one of the most conspicuous ways in which this has been achieved is through "Korean Shakespeares" complete and deliberate disassociation with Akira Kurosawa.¹²

The use of Peking Opera further signifies an attempt to link *namsadang nori* with a more elite and better-known art form. As Kathy Foley points out, several theater companies in South Korea have wed selected *namsadang* to elevated court arts with which it has no historical link in order to transform commoner arts into "courtly consort" art. It could be claimed that *King and the Clown* uses Shakespeare for similar purposes, for even though producers did not explicitly use Shakespeare to market the film, his presence gives it an up-market gloss, increases its appeal to international viewers, and helps familiarize them with the relatively unknown *namsadang*. As Patrice Pavis succinctly puts it, "Shakespeare is now a machine . . . to reveal other cultures" (1993, 287) and in Korea especially Shakespeare has been seized as "an opportunity to parade traditional Koreanesque arts" (Im 2008, 261). Certainly, the way in which King Yeonsan, who is initially contemptuous of popular entertainments and shares Hamlet's disdain for "the general," grows to appreciate *namsadang* performance encourages the viewer likewise to re-evaluate it as an art form. He is the inner spectator with whom the cinema spectator cannot help but identify, after all.

King and the Clown's central play-within-the-film, its equivalent to *The Murder of Gonzago*, unleashes a rage in King Yeonsan that terrifies those around him, especially the actors whose identities he conflates with the parts they play. The sight of Gong-gil as his mother being forced to drink poison intensifies his affection for the young, androgynous actor and spurs him to lash out violently at those the play suggests are responsible for the crime: his father's consorts. Here, then, as with the so-called Mousetrap, Yeonsan/Hamlet assumes theater mirrors the "real" world and provides him the evidence and emotional provocation needed to take action. He stabs without haste the two women, triggers his grandmother's fatal heart attack, and embraces Gong-gil's body with the passion and despair he would have if the actor actually was his mother. Indeed, given it is common to stage the Mousetrap, i.e. the original play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, in the form of a Shamanistic *gut* ritual in Korea, one could view this scene as dramatizing the return of King Yeonsan's mother through the medium of Gong-gil.¹³

Throughout *King and the Clown* King Yeonsan displays symptoms of the Oedipus complex and during intimate moments with Nok-su he pretends to be a "baby" wanting "milk from mama's breasts" in what might also be a reference to Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987). At another point, he crawls beneath Nok-su's skirts to rest his head in her lap, a moment symbiotically related to Hamlet's public emasculation of himself with Ophelia (Act 3 Scene 2). Similar to Lee Yun-taek's *The Problematic Man*, wherein Nok-su clutches Yeonsan's head to her breast and says, "here is your home: being a small pigeon breast, it can give a crying baby milk and a cosy nest," Nok-su's role in *King and the Clown* is that of mother/lover, Gertrude/Ophelia, as indeed is Gong-

gil's when he replaces Nok-su in King Yeonsan's affections. Thus, rather than engaging directly and primarily with Shakespeare's playtext, the producers of *King and the Clown*, twice removed from the "original," engage with a complex web of intervening adaptations.

Wearing a headdress resplendent with flowers (Figure 4), Gong-gil is the archetypal *kkonminam* (flower boy) — an effeminate man currently *en vogue* in South Korea and across East Asia. The flowers, which are not consistent with Peking Opera costume, provide an explicit visual link to Ophelia, whom Gong-gil resembles in that he is the film's main love interest and an object of excessive gazing. (Incidentally, the film's sexual ambivalence and capitalization of "soft masculinity" has been the chief source of scholarly attention rather than its connections with *Hamlet* and exploration of the Oedipus complex). Gong-gil is also, like Ophelia, the innocent cause of all the film's calamities, and in another gesture to Shakespeare, he attempts suicide before being discovered in a pool of his blood. *King and the Clown* thereby inverts gender roles as well as class positions in this topsy-turvy version of *Hamlet*.

"All the World's Large Stage is the Clowns' Stage"

As stated, it is the effect of King Yeonsan's behavior and actions on Gong-gil and Jang-saeng with which *King and the Clown* is chiefly concerned, for like many Korean versions of Shakespeare since the new millennium the film interprets Shakespeare from the perspective of minor characters (M. Lee 2009, 131). For example, Seok Seong-ye's *A Story of Two Soldiers* (2014) is a reinterpretation of *Hamlet* from the perspective of Bernardo and Marcellus; in Jung Ung-Yang's *Midsummer Night's Dream* Puck and Bottom are the play's foci and occupy center stage; and Han Tae-sook's *Lady Macbeth* (1998-2000), as the title suggests, puts the protagonist's ill-fated wife at the heart of the play; thus, "Lady Macbeth's inner world on the stage vividly represents the outer world of the original text" (H. Lee 2008, 278). Clowns, in particular, have featured prominently in a number of stage adaptations of Shakespeare in South Korea: for instance, in *King Uru: A Fantasia of Life and Coexistence* (2000-2004), a musical version of *King Lear* directed by Kim Myung-gon for the National Theater of Korea, clowns enact the prologue and, adapting Jacques' monologue from *As You Like It*, claim "all the world's large stage is the clowns' stage." Meanwhile, in director Kim Jung-ok's *Hamlet* (1993) clowns enter onstage and announce they will show *Hamlet* for themselves before proceeding to perform all the roles and lead the whole action; thus Lee Hyon-u declares, "this *Hamlet* is the clown's show" (2011, 107).¹⁴ This trend, which appears to have largely escaped notice, is indicative of the populist, tongue-in-cheek nature of "Korean Shakespeares" and, more specifically, the rise of the *minjung* ("common people's") movement and

a culture of dissidence in South Korea. After decades of oppression, South Koreans responded by attempting to invert traditional power structures — gender roles are regularly reversed in "Korean Shakespeares" as well — and create a culture that gives voice to the disenfranchised. Bakhtinian in nature, the *minjung* movement evoked folk traditions in particular to re-awaken the consciousness of the masses and embraced the bawdy and obscene humor of *namsadang* as a means of challenging traditional hierarchies.

King and the Clown pulses with *minjung* energy in confronting the dominant and subverting established hierarchies. Not only does it champion "the clowns" — who possess the inner essence and self-knowledge King Yeonsan/Hamlet ultimately lacks — and rejoices in the dethroning of a tyrannical king, but on an extra-textual level it rebels against a play that is positioned at the very apex of the Western canon. It is Gong-gil and Jang-saeng with whom we are encouraged to empathize; they are the tragic heroes and it is their plight that forms the film's central concern. Drawn into King Yeonsan's twisted world, the two performers become increasingly trapped and at risk of losing their lives. When Gong-gil is conferred with a rank as a sign of the king's favor the ministers are so enraged they organize a hunting game in which the actors are the prey. Dressed and pursued as animals, the players, with the King's permission, are exploited for the amusement of the rich. The hunting game, which could be interpreted as a critique of Hamlet's description of actors as forming a "cry" or pack of hounds (3.2.72), results in the death of one of the troupe, the loveable and bawdily named Six Dix, and serves to increase Jang-saeng's desire to flee the palace. Gong-gil, enamored with the king and flattered by his attention, is reluctant to go with his old companion, however, and a rift forms between them. In his anger, Jang-saeng stages a tightrope act outside the palace and taking advantage of the jester's licence to expose corruption, openly accuses King Yeonsan of sodomy and other "foul things." His punishment is to have both eyes seared with hot irons in a scene that clearly echoes *King Lear*, another one of Shakespeare's plays that offers a probing examination of fools.

Distraught at his friend's blinding, Gong-gil recounts the touching story of their relationship to the king in the form of puppetry, explaining how Jang-saeng has always looked after him as well as taken the blame for crimes he's committed (Figure 5). For the first time, a play-within-the-film becomes explicitly a player's vehicle of self-exploration and Gong-gil is afforded the kind of introspection usually reserved only for King Yeonsan/Hamlet. Granted an interior life and the authority to turn that life into an outward show, Gong-gil usurps the king's prerogative of occupying multiple subject positions at once: director, commentator and character. From this point onwards, the film loses its proximity to *Hamlet* and the focus is squarely on Gong-gil and Jang-saeng who unite in the final scene to perform their last ever double act. In it, they lament their

fate and give full expression to their "han," a culture-specific form of suffering that is evident in many Korean films, usually at the climax of the story. In addition to "han-venting," an activity considered psychologically therapeutic and politically subversive, the duo celebrate minstrelsy and the carnivalesque overturning of hierarchy: "blind to high and low," Gong-gil says to Jang-saeng, "you have turned this world [and the play *Hamlet*] upside-down." The latter responds by altering Jacques' famous "All the world's a stage" speech, claiming "kingly is he who struts for a while, then exits in style . . . together again, we shall royally this blessed earth roam."

Jang-saeng's words are both subversive and prophetic: he possesses the wisdom Eastern and Western religions and philosophies often attribute to the blind. Delivered at the very moment troops raid the palace to overthrow the unsuspecting King Yeonsan (he is so engrossed in the performance he fails to notice the commotion outside), they reinforce the film's populist message by using Shakespeare as a foil. Thus, rather than, as Yoon and Williams suggest, highlighting the "coming together" of "Shakespeare and Lee . . . in their celebration of the popular," this moment punctures the elitist values Shakespeare stands for as the Bard "epitomizes forces against which popular culture is pitted in the struggle for authority" (Lanier 2002, 55).

By rewriting Jacques' "universal" observation about the human condition, the film exposes the ways in which Shakespeare does not speak for everyone, especially lowly figures like the *gwangdae*. The film also grants the clowns the authorial agency denied them in Shakespeare's "original" as Gong-gil and Jang-saeng are able to defy Hamlet's command to "let those that play [the] clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (3.2.38-9). Instead, they are given the wit and freedom to appropriate one of Shakespeare's most famous meta-dramatic speeches in a politically empowering fashion. Moreover, by meshing Jacques' words with Macbeth's — there is an obvious homology between the latter's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy and Jang-saeng's final lines too — the *namsadang* performers playfully fragment Shakespeare and meld the high with the low, the tragic and the comedic. Gong-gil and Jang-saeng, representatives perhaps of South Korean popular culture, are transgressive, anti-textual agents, rebelling against the rule of the Western author.

The players' last, highly-emotive play-within-the-film, which no doubt precedes their untimely deaths, orientates the film further and further away from *Hamlet*, a play they have essentially hijacked. And while Shakespeare continues to operate as a referent, he is just one of several signifiers and his presence, like the Hamlet figures, increasingly diminishes: what remains could even be regarded as "the heaps of fragments" postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson once described. In the film's final sequence or epilogue, all the (now deceased) members of the troupe are reunited, Jang-saeng has regained his sight and the company are, as he predicted, triumphantly roaming the

earth, free completely from Hamlet/King Yeonsan. The film has thus come full circle — suggesting perhaps that these individuals are caught in a never-ending cycle of oppression — and the ending, Yoon and Williams argue, recalls American director Norman René's *Longtime Companion* (1989), a film in which a group of gay actors, many of whom succumb to AIDS, return from the dead in the closing sequence (2005, 220). This emphasizes again the extent to which Korean movies draw on heterogeneous, intercultural sources, as well as the way in which "Shakespeare functions as a vanishing mediator when disseminated transnationally on film" (Burt 2010, 89).

The Play's the Thing

The decentring/deconstruction of Shakespeare in *King and the Clown* is also apparent in the way the interior plays supersede the exterior film. Rebellious against the governing structural principles of Shakespearean drama which generally dictate that the play-within-the-play remains distinct from and secondary to the main action, *King and the Clown* deconstructs any fixed hierarchy between the inner plays and the outer film. In fact, as the film progresses it is clear the internal plays are taking precedence over the outer film. Again, this typifies many stage Korean adaptations of Shakespeare, for instance, Kukseo Ki's *Hamlet I* (1981) contained multiple plays-within-the-play to the point where the play resembled a rehearsal (M. Lee 2009, 135). The reasons behind this are manifold; most obviously, it is aimed to give the players who supplant Hamlet more and more of the spotlight. Whereas at the start of the film it is the reaction of characters to the inset performances that is of primary interest, later attention shifts to the actors' thoughts and feelings during these performances. Thus, near the end of the film there are fewer shot-reverse-shots and the internal performances gradually seem less stylized and more naturalistic. This has the effect of dissolving the boundaries between film and theater and renders the camera frame into a kind of proscenium arch.

The blurring of the two media, of course, is not uncommon in "Shakespeare films," East and West, and is perhaps inevitable given the theatrical roots of these films. But while in most of these films the residual traces of theatricality suggest that theater is still the preferred medium for Shakespeare adaptations, in *King and the Clown* the progression from film to theater suggests a nostalgic and rather nationalistic preference for *namsadang* and indigenous theater traditions over Shakespeare. Initially, like many non-Western adaptations of Shakespeare, *King and the Clown* seems to treat the play-within-the-film as simply an opportunity to exhibit native theater modes and it is no coincidence that all six of the *namsadang*'s separate acts are put on display; indeed, Shakespeare has ironically provided the means for recovering lost traditions in Korea (Im 2008, 261).

The plays-within-the-film additionally serve as intercultural bridges, facilitating cross-cultural encounter. As Fischer and Greiner state, "the play-within-a-play can serve as an organisational agency to assist structuring encounters of different cultures [and] has been an important factor as a structure of mediation between European and non-European theatrical traditions" (2007, xiv). Couched in the familiar (read, Western) vocabulary of film, the *namsadang* performances appear less alien or archaic to the audience than if they were standalone. Instead, they are woven into the fabric of a recognizable medium (film), genre (historical drama) and plotline (*Hamlet*) and thereby made more accessible and less marginal. However, such is the extent to which the inset plays are integrated with the main action that the inner plays become primary while the outer film (and by extension Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) is merely the framing device. Thus, as *King and the Clown* progresses the plays-within-the-film take on another, more subversive function, that is, to further decenter the narrative structure of Shakespeare's "original." It is tempting to read this as a counter-hegemonic move as well as proof that foreign Shakespeare does *not* always reflect unequal power relationships with non-Western culture taking second place to Anglophone culture. In *King and the Clown* the opposite might be said to occur; for sure, South Koreans do not tend to regard Shakespeare as the representative cultural authority of the West or as "the empire's army that conquered them" (Moran 2009, 202), and their approach/attitude to Shakespeare has rarely shown the kind of reverence found in many postcolonial societies.

The intercultural encounter between *namsadang* and Shakespeare in *King and the Clown* could be characterized as confrontational, then, and this would accord with the generally anti-authority nature of the film: King Yeonsan is literally and the Bard is figuratively dethroned. More specifically, *King and the Clown* challenges Shakespeare's privileged status and refuses to treat *Hamlet* as a grand narrative that determines the film's structure, plot and themes. The Korean wave phenomenon in general can be viewed as "a counterweight to western cultural influence . . . a periphery's talking back to the central west, a sign of resilience of the subaltern or a rebellion by Asian people" (Kim 2013, 15). Yet the relationship the film shares with Shakespeare cannot be conceived in binary terms nor does the film enact a straightforward rebellion against a Western text: there are too many other cultural referents for this to be the case and, as Dara Kaye points out, global Shakespeare increasingly reflects a "circulatory ecosystem," with influences intersecting and exchanging between East and West. Ultimately, *King and the Clown* deconstructs *any* fixed hierarchy, blurring the lines dividing local and global, theater and film, interior and exterior, courtiers and clowns, Hamlet and King Yeonsan.

Moreover, the fact the "clowns," Jang-saeng and Gong-gil, are elevated above the other characters through their use of Shakespearean language — they are the only characters to speak in

verse, remember, and to recite familiar, albeit rejigged, lines from Shakespeare's plays — suggests that despite adopting a subversive stance towards *Hamlet* and high culture in general, *King and the Clown*, perhaps unwittingly, on some levels pays homage to Shakespeare and the values he represents. It is by speaking "Shakespeare" that the lowly characters' intelligence, lovability and "depth" are demonstrated, and they manage to garner the sympathy and respect of the audience whose recognition of these lines is essential. The film therefore relies on Shakespeare and on audience appreciation thereof to elevate the status of the poor players who have supposedly "turned this world upside-down." Perhaps this is reflective of the general, oft-commented on paradox behind all efforts to "write back" to the center and overturn the status quo through rewriting a cultural giant like Shakespeare. Perhaps, then, the subversive potential of the filmmakers, like the "clowns" themselves, is always limited and they are doomed, on some levels at least, to reaffirm the very order they oppose.

Conclusion

King and the Clown is in many ways highly Shakespearean in spirit despite its seeming irreverence and lack of fidelity to the original; "fidelity," after all, has become an outdated maybe redundant way of measuring what counts as "authentic" or "inauthentic," "hegemonic" or "subversive," and indeed "foreign" and "non-foreign" in the new millennium.¹⁵ This is especially the case in regards to cultural products that are as heterogeneous in make-up as twenty-first century Korean films wherein hierarchies are replaced by a concept of mixing genres and drawing upon a range of global, local and regional sources. Paradoxically, it is this aspect of *King and the Clown* that could be said to be quintessentially Shakespearean, for as Jeffrey Knapp puts it, one of the most distinguishing features of Shakespeare was his talent for "mixing comedy and tragedy, the historic and the imagined, kings and clowns, prescriptions and improvisation, authorship and acting" (2009, 90). In other words, by not being "faithful" to any one text and by rebelling against strict generic conventions, *King and the Clown* actually shares Shakespeare's *modus operandi*. *Hamlet*, one must bear in mind, is a play that not only mixes coarse comedy with high tragedy, folk with classical sources, but appropriates a number of local and *foreign* signifiers: Hamlet-like legends are so widely found (for example in Italy, Spain, Byzantium and Arabia) that some have speculated that the "hero-as-fool" is Indo-European in origin. Shakespeare's chief source, however, is likely to have been the Scandinavian story of Amleth or Amlóði (Norse for "mad") written in the twelfth century by Saxo Grammaticus, although accounts of Hamlet can also be found in the Icelandic *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* (c. 1400). Consequently, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is as much a hybrid cultural product

as *King and the Clown* so to consider the relationship between the "original" and the adaptation in binaristic terms such as faithful or unfaithful, authentic or inauthentic, is arguably futile.

Ultimately, *King and the Clown* treats *Hamlet* with carnivalesque irreverence and reveals a desire to destabilize (Western) authority by turning Shakespeare's play upside down, structurally and thematically. It simultaneously hones in on the elements of carnival already embedded in Shakespeare's great tragedy but frequently overlooked in mainstream films. More than anything, though, *King and the Clown* prompts us to question further what exactly constitutes a "Shakespeare film" in an era when cultural products are increasingly informed by a wide range of different, multicultural sources and when allusions to Shakespeare — direct or indirect, intentional or otherwise — are actually allusions to other *adaptations* of Shakespeare, in this case adaptations that have bound inextricably the identities of Hamlet with the historical King Yeonsan.

Notes

1. I am thankful to Lee Hyon-u, whose knowledge of Shakespeare in Korea is unsurpassed, for both introducing me to this film and fueling my interest in this fascinating subject. I am also immensely grateful to Stephen Epstein for providing me with thoughtful and invaluable feedback on an earlier version of this article.
2. Refer, for instance, to Lee 2009.
3. According to Kim Yun-cheol, artistic director at the National Theater Company of Korea (NTCK), Shakespeare was the "keyword" in theaters around the country between 2014 and 2017 (see Limb 2014). Included in the NTCK's plans were adaptations of *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar* and a musical entitled *Singing Shylock*. Meanwhile, the Korea National Opera (KNO) presented Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Otello* and Charles-François Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* at the Seoul Arts Center. It is difficult to explain fully the immense popularity of Shakespeare in South Korea: Yeeyon Im suggests it is because more than half of the populace are Christians, but more importantly because the country is a "cultural orphan," cut off from a "mother culture" (2008). I personally think it can be attributed to the general fetishism and commodification of British high culture prevalent in the southern half of the Korean peninsula, in addition to the South Korean desire for modernization and, more recently, globalization.
4. For a survey of *Hamlet* in Korea from 1921 onwards, see Kim 2008.
5. Some regard *Oldboy*, Chan-wook Park's 2003 cult film, as a loose retelling of *Titus Andronicus* due its themes of revenge, honor, madness and mutilation: a severed hand is delivered to the central character's motel at one point and at the end of the movie he cuts out his own tongue to spare his daughter pain.

6. All Shakespeare quotations follow *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 2.1.253. References are to act, scene, and lines.
7. The relationship between Yeonsan and Hamlet is discussed in detail in Lee 1995.
8. The first quotation is taken from comments made by the Jury at the 5th Cape Town World Cinema Festival (CTWCF). See also David Lambie 2007 and Smith 2007.
9. *Namsadang Nori*, literally the "all-male vagabond clown theater," is a multi-faceted performance tradition first practiced by troupes of traveling entertainers in the Silla period (57 BCE - 935 ACE). Egalitarian in nature, the tradition was rooted in local life and drew on history, folklore and current affairs as source material. It also comprised a number of performance styles including tightrope walking, plate spinning and puppet play giving it a "circus" feel.
10. David Wiles draws attention to how "like the clown in the public theatres, Hamlet sings as soon as the [Mousetrap] is over — and probably also dances to the physically expressive 'Thus runs the world away' (3.2.68)" (1987, 58).
11. Phrase coined by Chuyun Oh quoted in Kuwahara 2014. Another significant intertext is the film *Sopyonje* (dir. Im Kwon-taek, 1993) which also focuses on itinerant singers and even features a blinding scene.
12. See Moran 2009.
13. A *gut* is a Korean Shamanistic ritual wherein a medium — usually a lower-class female — enters into communication with the spirit world often in order to restore harmony between the dead and the living. Most performances of *Hamlet* in South Korea over the last twenty years have staged rituals like the *gut* and thus show some elements of Shamanism (see H. Lee 2011).
14. In director Lee Youn-taek's *Hamlet* the two clowns that play the gravediggers usher actors onto the stage and offer ongoing commentary on the action, encouraging the audience to view the play and central characters from their perspective throughout.
15. The fidelity question is one hotly debated in Adaptation studies in general and Shakespeare studies in particular. See, for instance, Kidnie 2009; Crowl 2014; and Lanier 2014.

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