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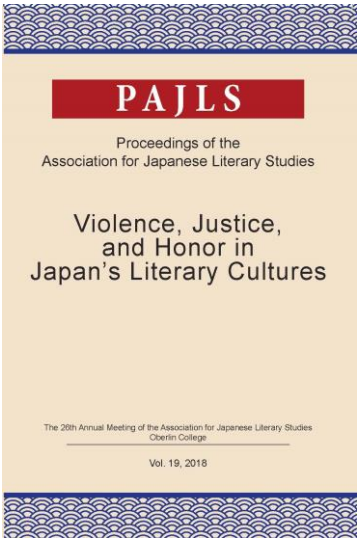

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MYSTERY AND MELODRAMA IN KIM NAE-SŎNG'S "THE OVAL MIRROR"

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Since its inception, mystery fiction (*tantei shōsetsu*) has been considered the exclusive domain of the metropolitan modern. The genre and industrial capitalism have developed in tandem, and the structures and disruptions of the latter, such as the growth and role of cities, emerging threats (perceived or real) to the bourgeois social order, etc., are often reflected in the defensive and paranoid nature of the former. A similar unease can be claimed for the emergence of melodrama in the nineteenth century and its own reaction to the dissolution of social hierarchies, church, and monarch.[2] In Japan as in Europe both genres have proven useful in exploring problems of modernity from the point of view of metropolitan anxieties; rarely addressed, however, has been their utility from the point of view of one of their "others," the colony.[3] Working through the medium of mystery fiction and melodrama, are the answers the same when the gaze is shifted back to the colony by one of its own? The question is not insignificant, as issues inherent in the colonial condition join the crowded field of already-existing concerns outlined above. The situation is further muddled by the successive layers through which colonial writers were forced to pass (such as writing in an imported narrative structure through a second language). It is possible, however, to isolate specific elements that help bring into focus how these genres

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[2] Melodrama here is understood in the sense described by Peter Brooks, who sees it as an imaginative mode emerging in nineteenth-century France that seeks to reestablish a moral universe in the face of the liquidation of tradition following the Revolution of 1789. See Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 15.

[3] While the metropole plays a key role in mystery fiction, it is complemented by two other important sites: the colony and body, the former of which factors in the present discussion. For a look at colonial space in Japanese detective fiction see Sari Kawana, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 14–15. In addition to Kawana's positing of the colony as one of three important sites of mystery might be Marty Roth's contention that mystery fiction *always* operates with an eye toward the colonialist discourse. See *Foul & Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 246.

facilitated a colonial critique of modernity, the development of which lay beyond their control.

In the case of colonial Korea, one of the first to attempt such a critique was the writer Kim Nae-sŏng (1909–1957). Often called Korea's Edogawa Ranpo, Kim is considered the father of Korean mystery fiction; in fact, the entire history of mystery fiction in Korea pivots on his return from Japan in 1936.[4] His debut work "The Oval Mirror" (*Daenkei no kagami*) was published in Japanese in the journal *Profile* (*Purofuiru*) in March 1935. A work detailing the mystery of a murdered wife and a solution copied from metropolitan melodrama, the story is a dialectic of the melodramatic and detective fiction modes. Kim's wielding of both genres allowed him to interrogate both the restorative possibilities that they offered (truth on the part of detective fiction, morality on the part of melodrama) and their role in rationalizing the transfer of violence from metropole to colony. In the end both genres' drive for fulfilment is frustrated by their dialectical other and their mutual failure to achieve closure is reflective of their difficulty in accounting for the ruptures inherent in colonial modernity.

"The Oval Mirror" opens in 1935, with a prize contest offered readers of the magazine *Mystery Man* (*Kaijin*). In celebration of its first successful year, the magazine presents its readers with a puzzle to solve, the prize a sum of five hundred yen. Instead of creating a new puzzle, however, the editor of the magazine re-presents for consideration an infamous unsolved murder committed in Pyongyang in 1928, the so-called Tōei Murder Case. In that case, Tōei, a former opera singer and wife of establishment writer Mō Kentetsu, was found strangled in her bedroom with her own stocking. On her bed lay an open copy of Alexander Dumas fils' *La Dame aux Camélias*, and on the wall next to her sat an oval mirror flanked by two prints in India ink. The entryway to the house adjacent to her room, normally secured each night before the family went to bed, was unlocked. The chief suspects were her husband and her young lover Ryū Kōei, an aspiring poet who was living in the house as Mō's apprentice. The police investigation and subsequent depositions from the two suspects, the Chinese maid, and her daughter failed to yield anything concrete, and they were all let go. The following year the husband commits suicide and Ryū vanishes to eke out a living as a literary critic. With the announcement of

[4] Choi Ae-soon, "Iron kwa ch'angjakŭi choŭng, t'amjŏng sosŏlga Kim Naesŏngŭi kaldŭng," in Yi Yŏng-mi, et al., *Kim Nae-sŏng yŏngu* (Seoul: Somyŏng Ch'ulp'an, 2011), 64. Kim is credited with introducing to Korea the *honkaku* (orthodox)-*henkaku* (unorthodox) concepts, then current in Japan, into the genre that had simply been known as *t'amjŏng sosŏl* (Jp. *tantei shōsetsu*, "detective fiction") which designated European-influenced detective fiction.

the magazine contest, Ryū reappears as an applicant, wins the prize, and at a party celebrating his victory a shattered mirror jogs a crucial bit of information from his memory, leading him to finally realize who the killer is.

With Mō's imposing residence as its setting for the crime, the story flirts with that most traditional expression of mystery fiction, the trope of the locked room, though from the beginning Kim plays with the convention, as the status of the entryway presents what might best be labelled as an "unlocked room" mystery. This initial tweak of convention is the first of many, and the physical lock notwithstanding, enclosure as a metaphor persists throughout the work. An early indicator of its importance in understanding the case is melodramatic, being the fact that the murdered woman was reading *La Dame aux Camélias*. The story of a consumptive courtesan of France's July Monarchy and her fatal foray into a romantic relationship is crucial in understanding the position of the murder victim. Tōei's role in the Mō household, for example, a trapped existence in which she plays modern bourgeois housewife, echoes Camille's role as a kept woman of a revolving segment of French nobility, as does her engagement in an illicit affair, driven by romantic love, which factors greatly in her death.

More importantly, though, Tōei's likeness to mid-nineteenth-century French courtesans owes much to public perception, for she by all accounts fits the description of a Modern Girl, or New Woman.[5] She is educated (or at least literate), her affinity for romance novels is apparent, and from what information the reader is given concerning her marriage it is disruptive to tradition. Despite her role of bourgeois housewife, for example, she has left Mō childless, and her scheme to bring her lover into the house under false pretenses signals a problematic lack of interest in the concept of "good wife, wise mother."[6] Also, her former profession is key, for she was

[5] For the link between courtesans (of all levels) and modernity in the Japanese public consciousness see Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 88. On the particularities of the Modern Girl in Korea see Hyaeweol Choi, *New Women in Colonial Korea: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2013), 3, and Yeon Shim Chung, "The Modern Girl as a Contested Symbol in Colonial Korea," in *Visualizing Beauty: Gender and Ideology in Modern East Asia*, edited by Aida Yuen Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 80.

[6] "Good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*), a slogan used by the Japanese Ministry of Education in the Meiji Period, was implemented in Korea as *hyŭnmo yangch'ŏ*. The view of the Modern Girl as an aberration from an idyllic norm was of course a worldwide phenomenon, and could be likened here to the distance in Western detective fiction from female criminality to what would have been considered

an entertainer, the perceived sexual promiscuity and self-indulgence of which served for the contemporary reading public as an indicator of liberal free will, itself another disturbing hallmark of modernity. Such signposting, seen within the context of the contemporary social backlash against and vilification of the Modern Girl character type, served to provide readers with a possible motive, if not justification, for her killing.

That her background did indeed factor in her death is confirmed later in the work when the narrative settles on Ryū Kōei. Having been exonerated from the crime but not public suspicion, he has spent the last several years brooding over Tōei's death, but with the announcement of the contest now has a chance to clear his name. And although his personal involvement with the case puts him in a privileged position, his inside knowledge amounts to little by the time he pens his entry. After several unsuccessful weeks of trying to come up with a plausible solution and needing to clear his head, he plunges into the cold Pyongyang night. As he strolls along the Taedong River he encounters a night shoot of Ozaki Kōyō's *Gold Demon* (*Konjiki yasha*), where the filming is of the scene at Atami between Hazama Kan'ichi and Shigisawa Miya. Substituting the icy Taedong riverbank for the plum blossoms of Atami, the localization is endeavoring to capture the full emotion of the exchange, as the Kaiser mustache-sporting director repeatedly castigates the star couple for their lack of effort, calling for multiple takes of Kan'ichi's infamous kick until he is satisfied:

> Soon *Konjiki yasha* entered the climactic scene in which Kan'ichi, now become the gold demon, faces the silver moon and, while bewailing her fickleness, gives a sharp kick to the clutching Miya's waist before calling her an adulteress and disappearing toward the far hills. The scene where he says, "Your care for me ends tonight" went smoothly, and no sooner had she asked "what will you do if I go to him" than Kan'ichi, his face filled with rage, threw her off of him, and saying "so you intend to marry him," raised his right foot and mimicked kicking her.
> Thereupon the Kaiser yelled, "no no, kick her harder. That's no good. Do it again."
> . . .

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proper Victorian womanhood, a distance that in both cases seemed at its most pronounced in times of change in cultural representation and status of women. See Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 85.

> They repeated the scene and were again scolded.
> When they bungled it a second time the Kaiser blew his top. He tore into them. "Do you really think you are a star with that? I'm sorry, I don't need a star who has to do the scene three times, look like you are kicking her with real feeling. What is this, a play?"
> Kan'ichi's pride was greatly wounded. "Of course, it's a play. And you're not a director of movies but a director of murder, right?"
> "What, a director of murder?!"[7]

As he witnesses this scene, Ryū is able to envision a plausible scenario for the murder as committed by the husband Mō, which he subsequently pens as a melodrama entitled "Dramatic Appeal." In it, Mō enters Tōei's room on the night of the murder to ask for her help in reading a play he is working on. Engrossed in *La Dame aux Camélias* she is reluctant to go along, but eventually relents. As they play out their respective roles it becomes apparent that Mō's play is a thinly-disguised accusation of infidelity. What follows is the solution (complete with stage directions), in which the similarities with *Gold Demon* should be apparent. After a brief but tense dance around the implications of Mō's choice of name for his supplicant (which, not coincidentally, rhymes with Ryū Kōei, signifying in effect both Ryū and himself) the melodramatic half of the story begins to approach what Brooks has labeled the "moral occult," that is, the heart of melodrama:[8]

> **Mō**: *(Slowly turns toward her. His vacant eyes pass over the stocking hanging on the clothes rack before stopping on her face. Again his eyes move, staring at the ceiling above the rack. As if disappointed, they continue back, and while putting his right hand on the rack it as if to support himself he spins around toward her)* I must not destroy your happiness. I don't even care if my own happiness is destroyed . . . Of course, that might be fine for you *(his natural voice completely vanishes, becomes a step higher)*, but why? Why did you love me? Why did you make a

[7] Yokoi Tsukasa, ed., *Kimu Neson tantei shōsetsusen* (Tokyo: Ronsōsha, 2014), 17–18. All translations by the author.
[8] Brooks describes the moral occult as "not a metaphysical system," but rather "the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth . . . a sphere of being where our most basic desires and interdictions lie . . . the realm of meaning and value. The melodramatic in large measure exists to locate and to articulate [this] moral occult." Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 5.

> mockery of me? Please tell me the reason. *(His expression and movements take on a frightful actuality. They have already left the bounds of the play. They are real)*
> **Tōei**: (*Receiving perhaps the kernel of a suggestion, appears to hesitate for an instant in the face of his seriousness. However, this is the time to show what she can do, and while pointing to the door in a clever action, says in an even louder voice*) Mr. Ryū, please leave. Do you not care even if I call someone? (*The next instant, completely changes attitude, becomes very coquettish and gives the following speech in a laugh*) Ha ha ha . . . you're a fool (*Spins around and turns her back on him, sneering*)
> **Mō**: What?! (*He blurts out, and no sooner does he seize the stocking hanging from the rack than he springs on her from the back like a flying bird, strangling her delicate neck with all his might. Her right hand, holding the manuscript, writhes in the air. Her body collapses onto his. He puts her on the floor, straddles her and strangles her for an additional five or six minutes. He then silently gets up, carefully grabbing the manuscript from her hand. Quietly he leaves the bedroom, goes to the entryway and opens it*)[9]

Despite its speculative nature, this solution is enough to convince the editor of *Mystery Man* magazine, and Ryū is selected for the prize. It is then, during the party celebrating his victory, that a *kisaeng* (female entertainer) accidentally drops a mirror, leading him to recall that the oval mirror hanging in Tōei's room had been broken the morning of the murder by Tōei herself. This means that the description of the crime scene provided by the magazine, which mentioned the mirror specifically, was therefore not based on the official police report of the scene but from the memory of the magazine's editor, who must be Mō himself, for no one but the husband would have known about the mirror hanging in the couple's bedchamber. Mō was out at the time the mirror was smashed and so assumed that it was hanging where it had always been.

Thus the mystery element reasserts itself with Ryū's realization, and it is fair to mention that the historical characterization of "The Oval Mirror" as a *honkaku* (orthodox) *tantei shōsetsu* rests solely with this lone instance of ratiocination.[10] And indeed, on the surface Kim has wrapped

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[9] Yokoi, *Kimu Neson tantei shōsetsusen*, 22–23. Emphasis in the original.
[10] Choi Ae-soon, "Iron wa ch'angjak ŭi choŭng, t'amjŏng sosŏlga Kim Nae-sŏng ŭi kaldŭng," 71.

up the story, with a semblance of closure offered through knowledge of the killer's identity. However, the dialectic remains unresolved, and in fact, throughout the work neither side has been able to fully realize itself. This is not because mystery and melodrama are irreconcilable as modes; on the contrary, as genres they are tightly interwoven, so much so that some have seen mystery fiction as simply a branch of the melodramatic tree.[11] Instead, it is because their end goals are unattainable in a colonial context: on one hand, the moral polarities so sharply defined in metropolitan melodrama remain nebulous, with the characters able to weave in and out of them, playing with their signification as the mystery aspect demands. On the mystery side, the absence of truth forces the story to settle with an imaginative solution ripped straight from Kōyō's melodrama. The case is in effect unsolvable, for its "solution" only poses more questions, such as why Mō would, under the guise of a magazine editor, initiate such a potentially dangerous contest in the first place. The story closes on Ryū and a detective pondering such a question:

> "It is strange to me as well. Either it was planned from the beginning, or else he really did . . . intend on killing himself but somehow could not bring himself to die, and then while in hiding as a living corpse, wanted to ask people of the world once more about the crime he had committed. In doing that, as long as the real killer, he himself, is alive, he is playing a very dangerous game. And I believe he edited "Mystery Man" under the guise of Ō Ryūmu, but I have never met him. I feel as if I should like to meet him to see what kind of disguise he is hiding under, but it is probably better not to..."
>
> At that moment, the telephone on the desk gave a noisy ring.
>
> "Yes, this is Inspector K... Is this Judge S? You looked it up...and? [No mirror]... just two ink paintings... No, thank you very much. Good bye."
>
> In the fireplace, the coal burned in high spirits. Outside the window the shadows of the poplar trees had grown about three feet. The December streets into which the sun made to sink—

[11] An example would be T. S. Eliot, who remarked, "Those who have lived before such terms as 'high-brow fiction', 'thrillers' and 'detective fiction' were invented realize that melodrama is perennial and that the craving for it is perennial and must be satisfied. If we cannot get this satisfaction out of what the publishers present as 'literature,' then we will read—with less and less pretense of concealment—what we call 'thrillers.'" T. S. Eliot, "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," *Selected Essays 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 373.

would they again sponsor some crime against humanity?[12]

The fact that Mō is the murderer is quickly lost in a consideration of his new role as magazine editor, and the tendency for the characters to constantly shift roles is an important component of the suspicion shown in "The Oval Mirror" toward roles and identities. Tōei, for example, goes from entertainer to chaste housewife of an arranged marriage to an expression of infidelity; her unease with these roles is constant, but is most pronounced when Mō asks her to assume the role of adulteress during the midnight reading that precedes her death, and her discomfort comes when she discovers that she is playing none other than herself. The actor and actress playing Kan'ichi and Miya break with their roles repeatedly to accuse the director of metaphorical murder. Ryū's initial foray into the Mō household did not come without reservations, as he was hesitant to clothe himself deceptively as Mō's apprentice and mask his relationship with Tōei, especially considering his intent to resume his previous role as her lover. Finally, Mō goes from a murderer embodying the failure of Enlightenment metanarratives to editor of a magazine emblematic of those same narratives. And this unease suffered by the characters is justified, because the assumption of one's "true" role in the story inevitably leads to disaster—Tōei portrays herself in her husband's drama and is promptly killed, Ryū resumes his role as Tōei's lover and almost suffers the same fate, and Mō's conflation of his wife's past with her present facilitates his metamorphosis from respectable writer to cold-blooded murderer.

Neither melodrama nor mystery fiction offer an answer, and in the end there is no return to the status quo, simply the subdued contemplation of the case quoted above. Readers expecting the crime to be elucidated in terms of the scientific rationalism that informed the genre of mystery fiction are left sorely disappointed, as the solution, which to the end remains speculative, is the product of melodramatic intercession.[13] This is in fact the essential contradiction in the story, that the moral polarity sought by the melodrama is unreachable due to the requirements of the mystery and vice versa. In *Gold Demon* Miya's given reason for leaving Kan'ichi is her pursuit of mammon, understood quite clearly as evil. Mō's play never reaches that so-called moral occult, but is stunted by an impetuous murder; there is no fleshing out of the implications, he simply

[12] Yokoi, *Kimu Neson tantei shōsetsusen*, 27–8.
[13] For the primacy of scientific rationalism and its role in characterizing detective fiction as modern see Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime, and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), x.

kills her. For Kim the attainment of both moral explanations characteristic of melodrama and truth on the part of mystery fiction is impossible, and the very fact that the crime occurs within a modernized segment of society in imitation of a metropolitan text is a reminder that "modernity" itself has much left to do. The ultimate reveal of Mō as the killer mocks both genres by highlighting the very instability of their guarantees. And thus, the real casualty of "The Oval Mirror" is not the wife but the certitude of modern genres, to which colonial writers need not apply. We do learn who the killer is, but the story abruptly ends; nothing has been resolved, crime will continue, whether perpetrated by Mō or someone else. Indeed, the crime is less the fact that he murdered his wife than that he assumed a slew of alternate identities and ran a prize contest in order to do so.

These contradictions aside, the success of the story led to some confusion among critics as to how an aspiring writer from the colonies had mastered so well the modern, metropolitan medium of mystery fiction. In a roundtable discussion of "The Oval Mirror" in a subsequent issue of *Profile*, one of the reviewers was surprised to find that its author was Korean, and had difficulty accepting the fact that a "foreigner" had produced such a superb piece of mystery fiction. He was quickly reminded that technically Kim was not a foreigner, and his charming mistake elicited a hearty laugh all around.[14] His surprise stemmed from an understanding of mystery fiction as a product of modernity which, as understood by the participants in the roundtable, was something that colonial Korea has yet to possess.[15]

After his return to Korea, Kim would never again write in Japanese. In 1938 "The Oval Mirror" was adapted into Korean, and in an almost sign of defiance references to *Gold Demon* were expunged in favor of its Korean adaptation, *Changhanmong*, which, coincidentally, is the earliest example of Korean melodrama.[16] However, what "The Oval Mirror" accomplishes is to expose the fallacy of mystery fiction and melodrama as the privileged domain of the metropolitan modern. The story shares the larger view both genres have of modernity as murky and suspect, but goes further to illustrate the contingency of their values (moral certitude in

[14] Ri Kenshi, "Kim Neson to iu yuganda kagami," *Gendai shisō*, vol. 23 no. 2, 1995, 75–102.
[15] Hong Yun-Pyo, "T'amjŏng sosŏlga kwa sikmin chijŏk aident'it'i: Kim Nae-sŏng ŭi Ilbonŏ sosŏl ŭl chungsim ŭro," *Asia munhwa yŏn'gu*, vol. 23, 2011, 201–2.
[16] Jinsoo An, "Screening the Redemption: Christianity in Korean Melodrama," *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, edited by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 65.

melodrama, truth and justice in mystery fiction) in a colonial context. It shows how, in such a context, metropolitan-derived ideals can be warped, and when coupled with the effacement of identity and the blurring of one's role resulting from the imitation of metropolitan texts can end up justifying a level of violence at odds with their original intent. In this sense "The Oval Mirror" offers a prescient allegory of the transfer of violence from metropole to colony, the legacy of which would linger long after the formal end of empire in 1945.

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