European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies

Vol.9, No.1, pp.51-61, 2021

Published by ECRTD- UK

Print ISSN: 2055-0138(Print), Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

DEAD SHAKESPEARE UNDEAD IN CONTEMPORARY KOREAN FILMS

Dong-ha Seo
Department of English, Korea Military Academy,
Hwarang-ro
Seoul, Seoul 01805
South Korea

ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the way Shakespeare is alluded to contemporary Korean films, especially The Man Standing Next (2020), to argue that indirect adaptation of, or hommage to, Shakespeare's texts and characters is often used to speak of film interpretations as well as a means of political responses to the present day. Despite an apparent booming of Shakespearean stage production in Korea, Shakespeare films have attracted relatively little interests from Korean screenwriters, producers, and directors. Recent allusions to Shakespeare made by the Korean film industry draws our attentions to some aspects of Korea Shakespeare films which have not been much discussed in the past. As seen from cases of Korean films like Parasite and Kingdom, we encounter Shakespeare, or read Shakespearean theme of 'hunger' from Korean story format in Korean settings. They signal the potential booming of Korean film adaptations of Shakespeare in near future.*

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare film, Korean film, The Man Standing Next, Hunger, K-Zombie

INTRODUCTION

Since the first Shakespeare film of *King John* appeared in 1899 with a desire of publicizing Beerbohm Tree's theatrical production and increasing its audience, Shakespeare on film, has been a major subject of Shakespeare studies. Shakespeare on film, establishing "itself as an area in its own right with little or no heed of the wider context of studies in adaptations," now "becomes film on Shakespeare" (Cartmell and Whelehan 2010, 28). As for their educational and academic status, Mark Thornton Burnett succinctly states that "Shakespeare films have assumed canonical position" (2013, 1). Furthermore, as Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens observe, Shakespeare films not only mean direct adaptations based on the play text or recording of stage productions, but also contain re-workings of Shakespeare's life or works with localized styles or creative interpretations for contemporary needs (Bickley and Stevens 2013, 102).

This trend is most prominent in Asia whose social and cultural conditions boldly attempt to revitalize a cinematic Shakespeare. This has been possible through Asian-themed adaptations, for example Xiaogang Feng's *The Banquet* (2006), Chee Kong Cheah's *Chicken Rice War* (2000), Ing Kanjanavanit's *Shakespeare Must Die* (2012), that "show how the Bard is the

medium or conduit through which the political discussions, gendered disputes, cultural vexations and social imperatives of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Asia might best be conveyed and communicated" (Burnett 2013, 153). Indeed, these films' "bold and imaginative interpretations of Shakespeare's plays" are generated by their "unique visual, kinetic energy, aural and musical landscape, and – often but not always – contemporary political significance" (Huang 227). Under these circumstances, Asian adaptations of a cinematic Shakespeare, as Greg Colón puts in, "is likely to be the next, if not the final, frontier for Shakespeare on film Scholarship" (recited in Burnett 2013, 2).

Unfortunately, Korea seems to stand aside from the mainstream trend. Since Korean critic Young-lim Han's assertion that "[until] now, Shakespeare has never been put on film in Korea," Shakespeare films have been yet neither well established in Korea nor properly attempted (Han 2006, 47). Burnett's list which contains only two Korean Shakespeare films out of 77 titles is also indicative of little interest in making a cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare in Korean film industry:

1. *The Frivolous Wife* (Directed by Lim, Won-kuk, 2008) based on *The Taming of the Shrew*
2. *Old Boy* (Directed by Park, Chan-wook, 2002) based on *Titus Andronicus* (Burnett 2013, 240:242)

Of course, there are at least noticeable attempts to draw our attention to a question about whether there is any film that claims direct adaptation of Shakespeare's plays. Of them are *Pig and Shakespeare* (2007) and *Shakespeare and Company* (2017). Both of them are an experimental film and attempt themselves with Shakespeare. However, the former is a 22-minute long film and the latter is a 17-minute long one, and Shakespeare is used as a mere passing reference. Therefore, I do not exaggerate when I say that despite of 'Shakespeare Renaissance' in Korean theatre, Korean Shakespeare has failed to find its way into film adaptation. In case of my teaching, the momentary reference has made to a film entitled, *Curtain Call* (2016)—a story about a theater troop that tries to put on an authentic rendition of the Shakespeare play *Hamlet*.

[Figure 1. Film poster of *Curtain Call* (2016)]

As being classified as comedy, the film is often viewed as a B grade one:

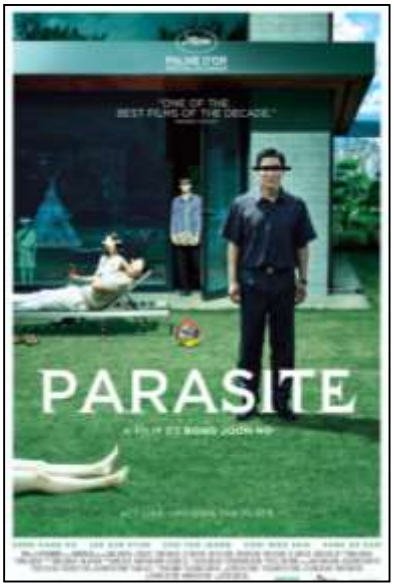
> Everything from the set-up, the situations, to the performances, to the jokes, clearly suggests that the movie should not be taken seriously…The way *Curtain Call* is at times either about the troupe, the farce, or the great dignity of acting really threw me off. The movie probably could've tackled two of these ideas with a decent degree of competence but going after all three at once just muddled everything. In the end several scattered strong concepts and set-pieces aren't enough to save *Curtain Call* from mediocrity, mainly because they don't tie together properly. (Schwaltz 2020)

Nevertheless, the modest popular success of *Curtain Call* demonstrates to what extent Shakespeare has been popularized among the Korean masses. Moreover, this bold attempt to make a tragicomedy is possible, because of the fact that the majority of actors and actress from the film have extensive experiences in the professional theatre as performers of Shakespeare's drama. What is significant is that the good seed of Korean Shakespeare film has been thrown on Korean soil and yet simply remains unblossomed. Although the film depends on the power of Shakespeare in performance rather than creating of Korean Shakespeare, I believe that it is all matter of time to find creative experiment with Shakespeare films in Korean film industry.

II

But recently I have noticed the important change in the ways in which Korean actors, film critics and commentators evoke Shakespeare. Instead of adapting Shakespeare in film with local language, actors and critics tend to deliberately pay homage to Shakespeare's influences or equate a certain genre of Korean films with Shakespearean component. For example, while making a comment on the film's director Korean actor Jeong-woo Ha says, "Ki-duk Kim is Shakespeare of Korea," claiming that the director's shaping influence have significantly touched Korean popular culture and film business (Choi 2016). Director Joon-ik Lee defines

his film *Anarchist from Colony* (2017) as "a Shakespearean tragedy in which fools are able to mock wisely the king and those in power" and welcomes cinematic interplay with previous film adaptations just as Shakespeare's plays are frequently adapted (Lee 2017). And Jae-il, Jung a music director of *Parasite*, describes a life of a music artist with Macbeth's soliloquy: " Life's but a walking shadow, a poor play / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage", calling his role is "an empty play but to do something to overcome the tenuousness of human life" (Lee 2020).



[Figure 2. Film poster of *Parasite* (2019)]

It is not unusual to find that Shakespeare's name and his genres are used to gain the credibility as a distinctive figure or genre. But what is unusual is that recent Korean films like Joon-ho Bong's *Parasite* (2019) have been appreciated by critics as having 'Shakespearean' attributes without any connection with Shakespeare:

> Described by its creator as "a comedy without clowns, a tragedy without villains", *Parasite* is more Shakespearean than Hitchockian – a tale of two families from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, told with the trademark genre-fluidity that has seen Bong's back catalogue slip seamlessly from murder mystery, via monster movie, to dystopian future-fantasy and beyond. (Kermode 2020)

The replacement of its own language or genre by Shakespeare is now singled out as a trend amongst the Korean film community. The plot of *Parasite* has chilling and spine-tingling suspense, reminding us of Hitchcock's film-making style, but the ways the characters are portrayed are, according to Matthew Kermode, dictated by Shakespearean style. Creative adaptation of the original source is central to Shakespearean style. But what the critic emphasizes in *Parasite* is that not only the fluidity of genre is significant to the director but also the meaning of social class as an important theme. Matthew Biberman rightly observes

that "it is no longer acceptable to mingle comedy and tragedy, life and death, murder and sex as Shakespeare does. The hardening of modern notions of social class as an internalized system is governing our behavior lies behind these changes" (Bierman 2017, 17). Given that the social class and its conflict in a material sense is now translated into psychological conflict represented in a form of thriller, this serves well as an important element in the film's success.

In this seminar presentation, I would like to focus on the application of Shakespeare's life and works to one of recent Korean films, *The Man Standing Next* (2020), in order to argue that although Shakespeare on Korean screen remains at a burgeoning level in the present moment, it may find its distinctive place in the near future.

[Figure 3. Film poster of *The Man Standing Next* (2020)]

The Man Standing Next, based on a non-fiction book called "chief of Namsan" which contains the Korean intelligence agency leading up to the assassination of President Chung-hee Park dramatizes the inner circle of the South Korean president. This fictional reconstruction of the 40 days before President Park's assassination on Oct. 26, 1979 has recently been selected to compete for the Best International Feature Film for the 93rd Academy Awards. This film indeed exemplifies Agata Lulkowska's assessment of the recent success of Korean films: they are "deeply embedded in the Korean experience" and their attempts to explore "the dark side of human experience…often mixing dark humor with elements of extreme violence, sumptuous cinematography and high production values" (Lulkowska 2020).

Despite its international recognition, one might wonder as to the degree my thinking about and this Korean film is related to Shakespeare in film. First, it should be noted that what the film concentrates on is competitive jealousy, an act of betrayal and a deep resentment between the two rivals within Park's inner circle that Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* is experiencing. It is not coincidence that a name of 'Iago' is used in the beginning of the film. There a mysterious figure code-named 'Iago' after the villain in *Othello* symbolizes President's Park's secret agent

to handle information and money. Given that a director and screenwriter Min-Ho Woo has frequently used various parodies and homage in his films such as *The Drug King* (2018), *Inside Men* (2015), and *The Spies* (2012), the use of fictional element of Iago is considered as his attempt to pay his homage to Shakespeare. There should be other reasons for the director's tribute to Shakespeare, as many film critics expect that "beyond the use name of 'Iago,' there's definitely something tragically Shakespearean" about the story (Darling 2020).

What does it then mean to say "Shakespearean" here? Is it used in the same or similar sense for the film *Parasite*? The quote below helps us understand to what extent the term "Shakespearean" is used by Korean actors and Korean film critics:

> The cinematic plot of *The Man Standing Next* is built without a dramatic device. It is the actors' acting alone that contains the uneasy emotions of real people. This point resembles Shakespeare's tragedy, which is often seen as an elaborate psychological drama where the characters' self-consciousness is excessive and anxious at the edge of the peak of power. In this situation, only the matter of dying and living is left as an option. In this way, Director Woo creates a subtle psychological drama which may lay a claim to Shakespeare. (Lee 2020)

For the critic, what is central to Shakespeare's drama is the complexity of psychological dynamics and inability to reconcile the character themselves to their situations. In fact, as real and seeming acts of betrayal continues throughout the play, the main theme of the film culminates in a scene where President Park and Mr. Gyu-Pyeong Kim the Director of Korea CIA collides with one another over an issue of President's refusal of stepping down from the office and handing over political power to a democratic society. At a banquet scene where Mr. Kim assassinates the President, he says that "Mr. President, take a broad outlook in the politics," and shots him fatally. As for this aspect of the political battle for power, a film critic Anthony Kao writes about the film that it "exploits this murkiness [of politics] to reinterpret Kim through the lens of a Shakespearean tragic hero, as a flawed man suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous political fortune" (Kao 2020). Kao reads that *The Man Standing Next* uses elements of Shakespearean tragedy to interpret Korean President Park's assassination. As for the political significance of the event, President Park's assassination, may be said to parallel Caesar's assassination, has served as a political rallying point to the development of a modern democratic Korea. While many have used the event to express on a contemporary political situation, most of them created stereotypes, reducing everything about him and a group of people around him to tyrants or moral monsters. For example, Yoon-taek Lee adapted Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1992), using elements of the assassination of President Park:

> MACBETH Oh, if I could finish this age of anxiety with a single bullet, I would stake my life. (recited in Lee 2016, 229)

Lee's characterization of Macbeth as a bald headed army general reminds us of the figure of Doo-hwan Chun who seized the power after President Park's death. But unlike the original in his adaptation of *Macbeth* Banquo also involves an assassination attempt, implying that there is no promised justice but a mere "dog-fighting" (Lee 2016, 230). Woo's 2020 film with the

allusion of *Othello* or the atmosphere of *Macbeth* rather tackles the deep inside of human psyche and portrays the impact of a certain feeling—I mean 'hunger'—on the characters' actions.

In this regard, *The Man Standing Next* not only belongs to a distinctive Korean film, but also echoes Shakespearean situations. The president in the film is assassinated, because he usurps power. But I think the director intends to make a film not about who is a real leader but about what makes that decision. The motive of retelling of President Park's assassination on screen comes from the director's fascination with a feeling of hunger.

[Figure 4. Assassination scene in *The Man Standing Next* (2020)]

The director says, "I was intrigued by the expansion of cinematic gaze with cinematic imagination" and "I wanted to dramatize inner selves of my characters…I think those in power are not different from us. Emotions (such as greed for power) is a universal one that all we posses. Emotional reactions to others are different based on our different perspectives" (Woo 2020a). But a unique aspect of conjuring up the ghost of Chung-hee Park on screen is dramatizing hunger, the other face of greed. The president is dead by the end of the film, and yet the protagonist Kim (and the spectators) feels hungry not because of his uncertainty about what consequence of his action will bring, but because the emotion of dissatisfaction, a feeling of hunger after the murder of the president. What he feels is psychological disturbance rather than harmony. This fits well with Stephen Greenblatt's recent work on the complex mechanisms of tyranny in Shakespeare's Tragedy in which various group of people make "anxious calculations under unbearable pressure and [take] fateful decisions, conditioned by emotional current beyond their rational control" (Greenblatt 2018, 69). When President Park scolds him for being hypocritical by saying: "you are my willing executioner who even killed your old friend," he draws a pistol and shots the president saying "I will make a corpse of you too!" As "the power of [Shakespeare's] great theater to bring these dilemmas to life" (Greenblatt 2018, 69), the entire last scene of *The Man Standing Next*, especially his words spoken aloud with facial expressions and bodily action, shows that the protagonist Kim's situation resembles really that of Macbeth.

> I had else been perfect,
> Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
> As broad and general as the casting air,
> But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in
> To saucy doubts and fears. (3.4.22-36)

It is difficult to picture his inner feelings at such moment of a truthful reckoning of the reality. But with this film, the film director establishes his style to draw out the inner feelings of the characters through mise-en-scène (especially his handling of setting is noteworthy in which the assassination of the president takes place at his private reception room and the protagonist portrayed by actor Byung-hun Lee falls accidentally on the floor covered with blood and his hands are now smearing the blood). The protagonist's unintentional wetting of his hands with the blood is eerily similar to the scene of Caesar's killing. However, any such bloodshed cannot revive the spirit of the revolution and satiate the protagonist's hunger for the justice. We see a close-up of Mr. Kim's wet socks soaked with President Park's blood in its final closing scene—I believe the film's centerpiece—which affects its audience profoundly. I think that this scene shows psychological conflict felt by Mr. Kim in the agony of moment after his murder of the president and that it really overlaps with that of Brutus who wants to be a "sacrificer" not a "butcher" (2.1.166). It helps us understand the reason why this scene became one of most memorable and important scenes in the film. In Woo's words, "in parallel editing, this final scene is woven together with an earlier scene where the former KCIA's desperately ran across the countryside to escape from the killers, wearing only socks (without shoes) like a decalcomania" (Woo 2020b). The meaning of these two scenes is evident that two characters are seen as one by spectators, representing the blurring between 'sacrificer' and 'butcher.' This blurring made by the camera's focus—a visual equivalent to Macbeth's soliloquy: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (5.5.24-25)—points in turn touches the emotion of unsatisfied hunger for justice or anxiety arising from fear of betrayal. Leaving with a unsatisfying hunger, we as spectators further want to summons the dead in our films.

III

Looking at the emotion of hunger in psychological terms can help us understand the recent successes of Korean zombie films. The writer of *Kingdom* series on Netflix Eun-hee Kimsays, "I wanted the zombies to be pitted, because the plaque spread because of their hunger. Even after they are dead, their hunger remains. That's why they're faster than other zombies. They have to be faster than the others to get even an ounce of blood" (Kim 2020, 10).

[Figure 5. Film post of Kingdom Season 2 (2020)]

Typically in these films of the so-called "K-zombies," I think our interest in feelings of hunger reflected in the zombie not only physical but also psychological have changed the way we see the political world. The zombie defined as a living dead like the ghost of Caesar arises from dead and threaten us to see "the manifest image of some obscure part of our own imagination" (Pielak 2018, 56). Thus, films like *Kingdom,* having contributed to the recent popularity of this kind of genre, tell primarily from the protagonist's perspective in which the zombie can be equated at a variety of points with the spectator.

Ellen Spolsky's notion of "cognitive hunger" in Shakespeare's drama provides insight into my reading of K-Zombie popularity. Spolsky observes that the destruction of Catholic icons in early modern England was not compensated for only by reading the English Bible, and that under these circumstances Shakespeare adapted the Italian "grotesque style," offering theatrical spectacle and the acceptance of "human unknowing" (Spolsky 2007, 129). Zombies, using the ideas of the dead undead and the image of grotesque body, hold a mirror up to nature of the world in which we live, so that we can see ourselves reflected. This is the reason why most recent Korean films with tragic and grotesque scenes successfully challenge narrative conventions and are therefore called "Shakespearean."

It is pleasing to know that Korean films attract the attentions of a wider public including international audiences. I think, as I have explored, this comes from Korean films' fascination with emotional and psychological state of hunger, represented by a zombie's biting. It well fits with our present state and circumstances which keep us summoning Shakespeare's help to tell our disturbing world. Shakespeare might have wished to live a peaceful posthumous life as the epitaph on his tomb reads: "Blest be the man that spares these stones, /And curst be he that moves my bones." But we as spectators often meet dead Shakespeare from television series like *Blackadder*, *Doctor Who* and *The Simpsons,* or from film screen like *Shakespeare in Love* and *All is True*. We Korean spectators have not realized our desire to see him on our own screen that is still lingering in our hearts. So, Shakespeare is dead in the field of Korean Shakespeare films and yet he remains undead.

REFERENCES

Bickley, Pamela and Jenny Stevens. (2013) *Essential Shakespeare: The Arden Guide to Text and Interpretation*. London: Bloomsbury.

Biberman, Matthew. (2017) *Shakespeare. Adaptation, Psychoanalysis: Better and New*. London; New York: Routledge.

Burnett. Mark Thornton (2013) *Shakespeare and World Cinema*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Cartmell Deborah and Imelda Whelehan. (2010) *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Choi, Ju-ri. (2016) "*The Net*". October 8, 2016. https://www.sedaily.com/NewsVIew/1L2M5VPWES.

Darling, Carl. (2020) "'*Man Standing Next*' a powerhouse Korean thriller". *Preview*. February, 9, 2020. https://preview.houstonchronicle.com/movies-tv/man-standing-next-a-powerhouse-korean-15042784.

Greenblatt, Stephen. (2018) *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Han, Young-lim. (2006) "Korean Shakespeare: The Anxiety of Being Invisible". *Shakespeare Without English*. Sukanta Chaudhuri and Chee Seng Lim. Eds. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersely, pp. 46-66.

Huang, Alexa. (2017) "Shakespeare on Film in Asia". *The Shakespearean World*. Jill L. Levenson and Robert Ormsby. Eds. London: Routledge, pp. 225-240.

Kao Anthony . (2020) "*The Man Standing Next*". *CINEMA ESCAPIST*. January 17, 2020. https://www.cinemaescapist.com/2020/01/review-man-standing-next-korean-movie/.

Kim, Eun-hee. (2020) "Kingdom' tackles power, greed". March 24, 2020. *Korea JoongAng Daily*, p.10.

Kermode, Mark. (2020) "*Parasite* review – a gasp-inducing masterpiece". *The Guardian*. February 10, 2020.https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/feb/09/parasite-review-bong-joon-ho-tragicomic-masterpiece

Lee, Hwang-seok. "Recovery History Through Fiction". *MS Today*. February, 17. 2020. https://www.mstoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=16039.

Lee, Hyun-u. (2016) *Shakespeare Renaissance in Korea*. Seoul: Dongin.

Lee, Jae-hoon. (2020) "Interview with Jae-il, Jung a music director of *Parasite*". *Newsis*. February 2, 2020. https://newsis.com/view/?id=NISX20200201_0000905130&cID=10601&pID=10600.

Lulkowska, Agatha. (2020) "An Oscar for Parasite? The global rise of South Korean film". *The Conversation*. January, 18, 2020. https://theconversation.com/an-oscar-for-parasite-the-global-rise-of-south-korean-film-128595.

Min-ho Woo. (2020a) "Interview". January 21, 2020. *dongA.com*. https://www.donga.com/news/Culture/article/all/20200121/99333720/1.

- - -. (2020b) "Interview". January 22, 2020. *KBS*.b http://vertical.kbs.co.kr/index.html?source=scoop&sname=story&stype=magazine&contents_id=70000000333495.

Pielak, Chase.(2018) *The Collected Sonnets of William Shakespeare, Zombie*. Jefferson: McFlarland & Company.

Schwaltz, William. (2020). "*Curtain Call* (2016)". *HANCINEMA*. February 15, 2020.

https://www.hancinema.net/hancinema-s-film-review-curtain-call-138740.html.

Spolsky, Ellen. (2007) *Word vs Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare's England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sun-Phil Lee. (2017) "*Anarchist from Colony*". *Ohmynews*. July 1, 2017. http://star.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/OhmyStar/at_pg_w.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002338519