

Shakespeare the Shaman (Mudang)*

Park, WooSoo

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In his tragedies Shakespeare's vision of drama as a kind of shamanistic ritual and of the dramatist as a shaman is rather limited. In *Hamlet* the titular hero is imposed in spite of himself the role of a shaman to set right his disjointed time and to pacify his father's soul at dis-ease. Hamlet is a failure as a shaman because his ritual is a Pyrrhic victory. *Macbeth* is, on the part of Macbeth, a dramatization of aborted shamanism, especially in the light of the English king as a good shaman-king healing the king's disease by his touching. In Edgar the dramatist as a shaman is much more positively developed, though he is still not perfect at conversion of the human mind. Edgar enacts and directs in his inset drama a shamanistic drama of the literal dispossession and it is successful for the time being. Edgar's inset drama is developed into a whole play in Shakespeare's final plays. Paulina is a successful shaman, or *mudang* in Korean, expelling Leontes's possession. She purges away his optical illusion by means of the ritual drama of the same nature. Prospero is the magician-shaman in his enchanted island of the wooden O.

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I. Shamans in Shakespeare

Shakespeare's occupation with exorcism and purification rituals of witches and magicians, whether in naïve or sophisticated forms, was incessant from his early history plays to the last plays. In part 2 of *Henry 6*, Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, employs a pack of witches and conjurors to perform exorcisms in order to fulfill her aspiration to be the queen of England. In the performance the conjuror Roger Bolingbroke raises a spirit from underground and asks of it the fate of the king Henry and other members of the Privy Council. Though this "performance" is manipulated by the Duke of York and the Duke of Buckingham and watched over by them, "this piece of pains" (1.4.45) is a play within the play, and the spirit raised by the conjuror is a nightly 'shadow', Elizabethan term for a play-actor. The spirit's answer to the conjuror's question of what the king shall become is typical of the witches' and spirits' equivocation: "The Duke yet lives that Henry shall depose,/But him outlive, and die a violent death" (1.4.31-32). Here Shakespeare juxtaposes the performance of exorcism and the performance of plays in terms of theatrical analogy, and the court politics is implied to be involved in both of them in any way. Politics is a sort of play-acting, suggests Shakespeare. Nell's hosting of the exorcism reflects her dark desire and curiosity about her uneasy future fate and this makes her resort to the popular belief in fortune telling. She is the forerunner of General Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

When he feels unsafe about his future, Macbeth visits the witches, the Weird Sisters. Literally the Weird Sisters are the women of fate who prognosticate in equivocal words the fate of their clients. Macbeth wants to hear from the witches words of consolation and 'safety' which can assure him that he is a man of salvation and certainty. Here Macbeth

alludes to the biblical king, Saul, who visits in disguise the witch of Endor when he feels he is in danger of dethronement. Macbeth's Weird Sisters are characteristically dancers and singers, and their cauldron of so variegated ingredients is the pot of folkloristic beliefs and stories: it is the magic jar of mingled yarn, as is the androgynous countenance of the witches. The witches are both real and unreal, earthly and supra-mundane, foul and fair at once. They lie like truth, as is a Shakespearean play. From the ritual performance of the witches Macbeth gets cathartic vigor and self-assurance, even though it betrays him at the last moment. Macbeth is believed to represent the common audience who derives great entertainment from the illusion of performance. If Macbeth is deceived into belief in the truth-like lies, he is the spectator-audience who commit themselves to virtual impersonation and illusion of a play. Deception gives a pleasure, as the Greek word *apate* signifies both meanings. Macbeth's magicians are the performers par excellence who try to transform shadow into a substance of pleasure in the grey zone of a dark night and theatre of a borderland. In the tragedy the witches stand for the minds of the populace that wavers from one sovereign to another as power shifts from one hand to another. Macbeth's tragedy is a story of his getting and losing of that popular support in terms of the witches and the Weird Sisters. The play as a whole is a ritual play of exorcising the Scottish kingdom from its political pollution.

The Knightian "comedy of the grotesque" in *King Lear* is seamlessly well wrought into the play. The incorporation in the tragedy of Samuel Harsnett's Puritanism-oriented tract, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1604), is now a critical commonplace. As Stephen Greenblatt aptly demonstrates, "Shakespeare in *King Lear* stages not only exorcism but Harsnett *on exorcism*" (Italics original, 116). In *King Lear*, Shakespeare keeps an internal distantiation from the Puritanical

anti-theatrical prejudices against plays as popish impostures. Against Harsnett, Shakespeare posits a positive aspect of exorcism in Edgar's impersonation as a poor Tom and in his stage directing a play of imposture:

As I stood here below, methought his eyes
 Were two full moons: he had a thousand noses,
 Horns welk'd and waved like the enridged sea.
 It was some fiend: therefore, thou happy father,
 Think that the clearest gods, who makes them honors
 Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee. (4.6.69-74)

Here Edgar imposes on himself the role of a priest performing the ritual of exorcism on the possessed person. As Edgar's fraudulent possession is demonstrated to the audience as a survival strategy, his ritual performance is shown fictional and therefore not false pace Harsnett. Here Shakespeare seems to borrow from Sidney's apologia. Gloucester, who is interestingly the later embodiment of the Duke of Gloucester in *Henry VI*, is a susceptible audience who believes he is dispossessed by the ritualistic performance of exorcism. Though the cathartic effect is only temporal with pessimistic Gloucester, all the more it is real since the effect is not believed to last life-long. The theatre is not an immunization shot that guarantees a life-time freedom from pollution. Edgar's improvisation and impersonation is not different in kind, if not in purpose, from the performances of Roger Bolingbroke and Margery Jourdain in *Henry 6* and the witches in *Macbeth*. Edgar's purgation ritual is the ceremony of dispelling pollution of devilish possession and bad humours in complexion. Exorcism in form and function is irretrievably interwoven with a theatrical performance, and the exorcist is the substitute of the playwright in the play. Shakespeare repeats this exorcism in comic parody in *Twelfth's*

Night. Toby Belch and his coterie perform an exorcism on the ‘possessed’ Malvolio, literally meaning a bad will, against the pleasure principle. Exorcism is immanent in variable forms in his plays.

It is true that *King Lear* was heavily influenced by the Harsnett pamphlet in its naming of devils and others.¹⁾ However, Shakespeare’s interest in folkloristic superstitions and beliefs was already deep-rooted even before the publication of Harsnett’s diatribe. Hereby Shakespeare is appealing to the common audience’s popular belief. In addition, he appropriates the popular beliefs in exorcism in his plays in order to vindicate the purgatorial function of drama and playwright as exorcist. If the Puritanical discourses are against the theatre as a school of abuse and a contagious disease, Shakespeare justifies his theatre as a ritual of cleansing any moral and physiological pollution. Furthermore, the exorcist-playwright reflects the common people’s repressed desires and aspirations for a better society and political changes. As Beowulf as the priest-king sacrifices himself in order to keep his society safe from the killing attack of the dragon because the sanctity of its treasure mound is profanely encroached upon, the early modern playwright as a secular exorcist functions as a social safety valve to purify the polluted society. The Greek Furies demanding the purification of a miasmatic soul of blood and defilement are, in Shakespeare’s case, transformed into an exorcist performing a cathartic ritual in a magic circle of the theater. Shakespeare’s

1) Peter Milward explains of Shakespeare’s interest in Harsnett’s book as a personal one. According to Milward, “a major protagonist in the exorcisms, a seminary priest named Robert Dibdale, came from Sgottery near Shakespeare’s home—having left Stratford Grammar School in company with his master Simon Hunt in 1575 for Louvain and Rome. This would have given the dramatist a very personal reason for perusing the book, and for using it in his characterization of Edgar, whose plight is in many respects similar to that of a hunted Edgar” (53.). cf. Peter Milward, “Shakespeare and Elizabethan Exorcism.” *Shakespeare’s Other Dimension*. Ed. Peter Milward. Tokyo: The Renaissance Institute, 1987, 46–57.

“rough magic” is a shadow game, as Theseus says: “The best in this kind are but shadows” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1.209).

The secular function of the playwright as a magician doctor is crystallized in Prospero. Prospero’s enchanted island is a magic island, and in it Prospero continues his pursuit of magic as a kind of experimental science. The play itself is a dream vision fulfilling his aspiration as a master–magician and the island is emblematic of his brain as an experimental laboratory. Prospero’s language of magic combining the elements and thereby bringing forth changes in nature is equivalent to the dramatist’s language of creation like a spell charming his audience. Actually Prospero is an epigone of Edgar the stage director and improviser. Prospero’s enchanting art means the playwright’s power to provoke and enforce his spirits and shadows to his service. His spell charm is expressed in his monopoly of conversation in the island for fourteen years and his repeated demand of Miranda to pay close attention to his talking. To Prospero’s pursuit and exercise of a magic language of absolute power is transferred Sycorax’s magic of domination and manipulation of Ariel as her master is changed from Sycorax to Prospero. Prospero’s study of magic is purported to exorcise his usurper brother Antonio through penitence and convert his polluted soul and together with Caliban’s rebellious mind, into submission. By admitting “this thing of darkness [Caliban] I acknowledge mine” (5.1.311–312), Prospero recognizes his family resemblance with Sycorax and his similarity to her in his function as a witch–turned exorcist. Like the Weird Sisters of androgyny in *Macbeth*, Prospero is feminine–minded in his inception of a magic language of creation. If the exorcist–artist is capable of raising a spirit from the dead and embodying the spirit in a living person and making him/her speak the dead person’s language, usually a language of repression and frustrated desires, s/he is likened to a reproductive mother who multiplies her voice

into many issues. Here Shakespeare is a myriad-minded exorcist of improvisation and impersonations of characters. As Peter Milward argues, Shakespeare “seems to have taken more serious account of miracles in their positive sense of healing the sick”(53) from the time of composing *King Lear* on. However, it cannot be denied that Shakespeare’s personal interest as a dramatist in exorcism and magic was kept up from the very beginning of his professional career.

II. Shakespeare in Shamans

Shakespeare as an exorcist–artist encounters the Korean idea and customs of a shaman, and the fact provides some possibility of his naturalization in Korea. In Korean a shaman is a dancing *mudang*, mediating the upper world, the middle world, and the lower world. S/he is a priest, a medicine–(wo)man, and an exorcist–prophet. The Koreans have believed themselves to be the descendants of Tan–gun, the mythological founder of the ancient Choson. Tan–gun is a cognate with the Mongolian word, *tengri*, which means the sky. Hence Tan–gun means the sky–worshipping priest–king of a clan society, that is, a shaman (Ryu 15–20). According to the Russian anthropologist, S.M. Shirokogoroff, shamanism presupposes animism among the Tungus tribes including the Koreans:

The primary characteristics of shamanism consists in the recognition on the part of some persons of their ability to possess spirits whenever they desire to do so, and, by the aid of these spirits, using particular methods unknown to other men, to know the phenomena of a supernatural order. ... The influence of the shaman is as powerful as his abilities are great. ... It is safe to assume that the cause of the origin of shamanism lies in the unconscious wish of the tribe to prevent

the harmful spreading of these [nervous and psychical] maladies [common among the Tungus]. ... at the time of nervous depression, the shaman falls under the influence of his own spirits and becomes their instrument. ... The shaman and shamanism ... have for their principal concern the hygienic and preventive quality par excellence. (Shirokogoroff 364-66)

Shirokogoroff here emphasizes on the spiritual possession of a shaman capable of calling up a spirit whenever s/he wants and of transferring the spirit to another person in ecstasy. Spiritual possession of and by a shaman is a kind of collective purification ritual of a contagious religious danger in a tribal life. In possession the shaman becomes depersonalized, and experiences hallucination, telecommunication, revelatory dreams and prophecy. In these symptoms of “sinbyong” or “god-sickness” which is a “culture-bound depersonalization syndrome” (Kendall 37), the shaman mediates the dead and the quick, the upper world and the lower world, the sacred and the secular. God-sickness is a symptom of pollution and profanation on the level of either a clan society as a whole or its respective members. In fact this difference in order is insignificant because in the traditional tribal society the constituent is inseparable from the containing society. In god-sickness the shaman is a scapegoat for the social health, offered to the gods as a substitute. In the process of shamanizing, or in Korean “mudang-kut” the shaman performs in song and dance a healing ritual of any pollution and works through psychological conflicts of the afflicted person or client. The shaman believes that every human soul is a part of a great living network of the cosmos and everything in nature has a vital spirit. Therefore it is believed that when a constituent of the cosmos is polluted in sin and crime, the whole system is affected in a negative way and thereof needs a purification ritual in order to set it up wholesome again. Shamanism based on animism is the

embodiment of the ecological imagination in its syncretistic ways of thinking and perception.

When Shakespeare is read in the light of the Siberian and oriental shamanism, his plays are supposed to have a great advantage of being enjoyed as a critique of the instrumental reason which has been conducive, especially in the period of Western colonialism, to the exploitation of nature and domination of the Others in the disguised name of enlightenment. Prospero's "rough magic" needs an abjuration because its working is impossible without the help of both Ariel and Caliban. They are the subjected members of his body, both private and politic. Shakespeare's last plays dramatize sea-sufferings of the polluted souls in a tempest of time as a baptismal purification, and show the final reunion of separated members in music of a recovered harmony. The last tragicomedies are the plays of mediation as the sign of hyphen is the emblem of the hymeneal mediation of the plays.

If it is admitted that one of the working principles of a literary language is the analogical imagination of mediation, Shakespeare's analogical imagination mediates man with nature (and the supernatural) in a great spiritual system of a delicate balance and relationship. Shamanism as a medialogy and also as a version of animism preempts a modern development of anti-rationalistic spiritualism:

One of the most noticeable cultural developments in the Western culture in the past 30 years has been the rise of an anti-rationalistic alternative culture that embraces the New Age movement, complementary machine, and forms of holistic spiritualism, and which links these to the broader anarchist and animal rights movements. For an apparently rising number of people the Enlightenment itself should be dismissed as an illusory detour into hyper-rationality. For such people, the

cosmic connectedness voiced in Elizabethan drama and poetry offers a sociable spirituality already packaged within a rich supply of artistic works that are central to Western culture. (Egan 30)

Egan's holistic spiritualism is demonstrated in Shakespeare's case in his dramatic role of a shaman dealing with the language of relation. The shaman's magic language gives a voice to the repressed silence, usually comprised of marginal women, slaves, the uprooted and deprived, and the restless dead. In the ecstatic conversation and telecommunication with these people the shaman cures of their afflicted soul and resentment, and in the process performs the ritual of purification and restoration of a social order. Shakespeare is the shaman in his ritual performance.

Coda

Shakespeare's shamanistic plays are practically holistic in blurring the demarcation between the real and the supernatural, the upper world and the lower world, the onstage and the offstage, the living and the dead, the body and the soul. One of the fascinating aspects of shamanizing or *mudang-kut* is that in the process of dis-possessing, it puts the audience in possession and thereby in a collective catharsis in spiritual communion with the embodied shadows and spirits. The performance of a Shakespearean play demands of its spectators the translation and transportation of their souls to the staged shadows: the ecstatic movement of the soul makes a change in complexional humours and that seismic change results in joyful balance and restoration of soul and body. The playwright as a shaman mediates and pacifies restless and erring spirits in a ritual of purification, with the language of invocation and spells. The shaman expels pollution (*miasma*) of the body politic and private, and in

venting through its ritual language of hallucination and telecommunication, purifies the spleen of resentment and frustration on the part of the possessed and the (possessed) audience. This wish-fulfillment of and reconciliation with the repressed explain why the shaman of many voices and ventriloquism comes of the socially silenced women, especially of the lower class women in traditional Korea, and why Shakespeare's witches and conjurers are mostly of the masculine women or feminine men. The Shakespearean shaman as a shadow and actor-playwright is de-sexed in possession and dis-possession, and thereby is myriad-minded and many-voiced. As a medium, the shaman or *mudang* mediates the actor-playwright with the audience in the magic circle of the wooden O. And the pleasure of shadowy illusion gives us the ecstatic translation and transformation. Here Shakespeare joins the Korean ritual performance of purification.

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Abstract

Shakespeare the Shaman (Mudang)

Park, WooSoo

Shakespeare inherits the legacy of religious drama in enacting on stage the ritual of purifying the demonic possession, physical disorders and diseases, and socio-cultural pollutions. In his commercial theatre Shakespeare as a shaman (*mansin* or *mudang* in Korean) impersonates himself into his therapeutic characters such as Edgar, Helena, Paulina, Cerimon, and Prospero. If a shaman is the mediator between the dead and the quick, the past and the present, the heaven and the earth, the sacred and the secular, Shakespeare's drama is a medialogy linking the transcendental and the mundane, good and evil, and the feminine and the masculine. In a shamanistic ritual of purgation and expelling of pollution (*miasma*), the shaman enables the spiritually possessed to recall and re-live the repressed past in his/her imaginary and imaginative impersonations. By means of this ritual of imaginary impersonation the person at issue can be transported out of his/her possessively bound self and world. The ecstasy of shamanistic ritual is a drama of imaginary enlargement of the soul both for the disordered person and the audience seeking for some entertainment.

Key Words: Shakespeare, mudang (shaman), pollution, ritual, medialogy
셰익스피어, 무당(샤만), 오염, 의식, 매개학

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이름: 박우수

소속: 한국외국어대학교

주소: (130-791) 서울특별시 동대문구 이문로 107 한국외대 영어대학 영문학과

연락처: wspark@hufs.ac.kr