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FEMALE DESIRE, ILLNESS, AND METAMORPHOSIS IN 'LOVESICK SNAKE' NARRATIVES IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY KOREA

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During the seventeenth century, a surge in fictional stories ushered in an era of romance in Korean literature, and lovesickness became a topical motif. The prototype of the lovesick figure is detected in oral stories dealing with the lovesick snake (*sangsa paem*) in which a lovesick woman undergoes metamorphosis into a snake. This icon of the lovesick snake has endured and persisted in written and oral traditions. This research undertakes a careful investigation of this metaphor and its meanings in various textual and cultural contexts and further explores the complex relationship of the politics of female desire, death, and metamorphosis in diverse discourses. This study reveals how the grotesque, repulsive image of serpentine transformation creates a focus on horror, alienation, and victimhood in the representation of female lovesickness. Finally, constructs of the lovesick snake are assessed and reconsidered to expose the relationship between popular discourse and written works, uncovering a literary tendency in androcentric writing practices to associate female lovesickness with sexual and erotic illness.

Keywords: lovesickness, lovesick snake, oral tradition, medical discourse, *yadam,* male literati, female body, androcentric writing, Confucian norms

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates stories of the lovesick snake in the broader discursive context of sixteenth-century Korea before the rise of romance in the seventeenth century and explores complex meanings, both literal and figurative, in representations of the erotic lovesick snake.

Since the early seventeenth century in Korea, there has been an increase in the number of fictional stories whose main plot depicts a hero and heroine strongly bound together by love who struggle to overcome social obstacles to consummate their love. While obstacles to marriage constitute a fundamental element of Korean romance, challenges to marriage itself entangle characters in ever-more impossible love. Such characters often undergo emotional and physical transformation and become helpless, debilitated victims of lovesickness (*sangsa pyŏng* 相思病). For example, in the *Tale of Unyŏng* (*Unyŏng chŏn*), the title character Unyŏng recounts her unbearable sorrow and pain caused by unfulfilled love, and Scholar Kim also falls victim to lovesickness after he encounters Unyŏng at Prince Anp'yŏng's court. The epistolary communication between Unyŏng and Scholar Kim unfolds to reveal an extended metaphor of lovesickness as the frustrated lovers eventually succumb to illness, suggestive of lovesickness.[1]

As lovesickness was coined as a term to refer to mysterious, romantic disorders,[2] fictional takes perpetuated the pitiful image of those who had become lovesick. The following story, however, introduces a portrayal of the lovesick figure in a different form.

> The Yun family of P'ap'yŏng used to live in the capital, but for unknown reasons, the family moved to Koryŏng and then again to Tŏkchae (present-day Talsŏng-gun). To the Yun family was born a boy of outstanding appearance and literary talent. One day, the young boy left home to study to prepare for the civil service examination. On his way to a temple where he would study, he stayed for the night at an inn where a young, unmarried woman lived. As soon as she saw the young man, she fell in love with him. While the young man concentrated on studying, the woman pined away. No medicine could cure her illness. Her parents found out that her sickness was related to the man and spoke with his parents to arrange a marriage for

[1] For the details of the story, see Michael Pettid, *Unyŏng-jŏn: A Love Affair at the Royal Palace of Chosŏn Korea* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2009), 64–112.

[2] In Chinese literature, the experience of lovesickness has similarly been conceived of as the result of an amorous passion so overwhelming and destructive that it possesses characters with a ghostly illness. For details, see Judith Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroin: Ghosts and Gender in Seventh Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 20.

> their sick daughter. However, the Yun family rejected the proposal, and the man expressed no wish to marry her. Eventually, the woman died and became a giant snake. The snake went into the Yun family's house, occupied a spot, and scared away the family members and servants. Even the neighbors deeply hated the snake, and one neighbor volunteered to catch the snake and burn its body. After the neighbor did so, the town suffered frequent fires, the loss of livestock, and a poor harvest. A shaman ritual did not solve the problems, so the Yun family had to move to another village.[3]

The man rejects the woman's desire as unacceptable, but her undying passion results in her reincarnation as a snake. Her vengeful soul and anger produce calamities for the Yun family and affect the entire town. In literary sources, a person unjustly killed often appears as a vengeful ghost who can cause death. This story, however, makes the woman's serpentine metamorphosis the result of unfulfilled desire, so the transformation is seen as sensual, demonic, and catastrophic.

This story is similar to another popular tale, "Heart Fire Coiling Around a Pagoda" (*Simhwa yot'ap* 心火繞塔), about a lovesick man who becomes revengeful and murderous and undergoes a metamorphosis. In the tale, Chigwi, a petty officer from the commoner class, falls in love with Queen Sŏndŏk (fl. 702–737) at first sight. When the queen hears of Chigwi's earnest fervor for her, she summons him to a monastery. Chigwi waits for her at the foot of a pagoda but unfortunately falls asleep. When he learns that the queen left while he slept, his anger turns him into a burning fire.[4] This man in passionate love turns himself into a fire demon, which is suggested to be the consequence of his uncontrollable feelings of self-pity, anger, and grief.

The similar events of these two stories imply that emotional disturbance can result in visible and physical transformations. In Chigwi's story, his display of passion and sincerity eventually gains him sympathy from the queen, who gives him a bracelet and composes a poem to console and appease the annoyed spirit of this new fire demon. In contrast, in the former story, the woman rejected by her beloved returns as a snake whose bitterness and revenge are hard to appease, nor does her passion or dedication bring rewards to her. As this story translates unrequited love into morbidity, resulting in suffering and death, the woman's love

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[3] This is a part of the story titled "P'ap'yŏng Yunssi wa sangsa paem" [The Yun family of P'ap'yŏng and a lovesick snake]. *Kubi munhak taegye* 7–14, <http://gubi.aks.ac.kr/web/TitleList.asp> (18 August 2015). All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

[4] Cho Suhak, ed. *Chaegusŏng* Sui chŏn [Reconstruction of *Sui chŏn*] (Seoul: Kukak charyowŏn, 2001), 32–33. For an English translation, see Frits Vos, "Tales of the Extraordinary: An Inquiry into the Contents, Nature, and Authorship of the *Sui chŏn*," *Korean Studies* 5 (1981): 1–25.

and passion are interpreted as sexual and carnal desire. Specifically, the description of the reincarnated snake coiling on the beloved's body and harassing the love object reinforces the association of female lovesickness with erotic desire. Other versions even present the snake as engaging in overt sensual aggression toward its target which recalls sexual performance and reveals the snake's obsession with its target's genital area. The suggestion of sexual assault reveals a stark contrast with fictional tales presenting lovesickness as the result of intense longing and uncontrollable passion rather than sexual drive.

EROTIC SNAKE

Traditionally, East Asian tradition has positioned the snake as a fearful, mysterious, sacred creature. In animal symbolism, the snake stands as one of the zodiac signs, signifying malevolence along with acumen and divination. Literature presents the snake as an iconic creature, evoking both anxiety and sensuality and symbolizing reproduction, strength, and renewal.[5] The tales of lovesick snakes reflect these views, emphasizing the sensual and immortal aspects of serpentine transformation.

The repetitions and variations of narratives on lovesick snakes reflect the popularity of this notion in the Korean literary tradition. Such stories are found nationwide, but the theme appears to have proliferated most widely during the sixteenth century. The historical figures portrayed in the stories are mostly from the early sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries when Chosŏn suffered massive war trauma after being invaded by Japan. These major figures include Cho Sik (1501–1572), Yi Yulgok (1536–1584), Cho Mok (1524–1606), Hwang Chunnyang (1517–1563), and Im Che (1549–1587). In this era, the Chosŏn government was intent on developing a suitable environment for rice farming and adopted new agriculture technology, including developing mountainous regions starting in the reign of King Sejong. This accelerated development and consequent construction of homes could have caused conflicts with wildlife, leading to the discovery of snakes in homes.[6] It is likely no coincidence to find that records and writings of the period contain an increasing number of anecdotes in

[5] Pak Chongsŏng, "Sasin sŏrhwa ŭi hyŏngsŏng kwa pyŏni" [Construction and variations of serpent worship folktales], *Kungmunhak yŏn'gu* 10 (1991). Quoted in Song Yŏngsuk. "Han-Il sangsa paem sŏrhwa ŭi pigyo yŏn'gu" [Comparative study of the lovesick snake stories of Korea and Japan]. *Ilbon munhwa hakpo* 60 (2014): 291.

[6] Kim Tongjin, "15-16-segi Han'gug'in ŭi ilsang saenghwal kwa paem ŭi yangmyŏngsŏng" [Ambivalence of the snake in Korean's daily life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries], *Yŏksa minsokhak* 41 (2013), 101–140.

which people encounter snakes in homes,[7] of which the royal palace was no exception.[8]

Frequent encounters with snakes seemingly inspired authors and storytellers, however, narratives generally limited the metamorphosis into erotic snakes to low-born and female figures. In this light, the tales of lovesick snakes pose a challenge to understanding the notion of lovesickness in premodern Korea. They also lead to the question of whether any social categories of gender and social status are especially meaningful in the construction of lovesick snake stories and whether the snakes' retaliation and sexual gratification conform to Confucian cultural norms. These stories of lovesick figures might function to measure the gender attitudes toward passionate love and to reveal the notion of sexual desire prevalent in the Chosŏn society.

Based on these observations, this research attempts to offer a gendered reading of these stories and redefine the existence and variations of tales of lovesick snakes in multi-layered discourses. The oral versions of the lovesick snake tales, mostly preserved in modern literary form, rely heavily on information gleaned from the *Han'guk kubi munhak taegye* (Comprehensive collection of Korean oral literature).[9] This article draws on the modern forms of oral sources, which arguably serve as valid, authentic sources of information that shed light on the

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[7] *Mukchae ilgi* [Daily records of Yi Mungŏn] shows that Yi Mungŏn (1494–1567) often found a snake creeping on the fence or coming into his house. For details, see Kim Tongin, ibid., 105–106.

[8] *Sejong sillok* 107:7a [1445.1.27]. Quoted in Kim Tongjin, ibid., 109–110.

[9] I refer to *Han'guk kubi munhak taegye* [Comprehensive collection of Korean oral literature] which offers access to orally transmitted pre-modern texts. In the collection, I found twenty-four pieces dealing with female transformation into a lovesick snake: "Yulgok Sŏnsaeng kwa Wŏl-lyŏng" [Master Yulgok and a regretful spirit], 4–5, 42–46; "Kurŏngi ka toen ch'ŏnyŏ" [A maiden turned into a snake], 6–2, 764–765; "Kang Kamch'an kwa sangsa paem" [Kang Kamgch'an and a lovesick snake], 6–3, 445–446; 7–1, 414–417; "Chugŏ sangsa paem toen anae" [A wife became a lovesick snake], "Okch'ŏn sŏnsaeng kwa sangsa paem" [Master Okch'ŏn and a lovesick snake], 7–6, 656–658; "Cho Wŏlch'ŏn ŭl sallyŏjun T'oegye sŏnsaeng" [Master T'oegye who saved Cho Wŏlch'ŏn], 7–11, 283–286; "Cho Wŏlch'ŏn kwa sangsa paem" [Cho Wŏlch'ŏn and a lovesick snake], 7–11, 740–749; "Cho Wŏlch'ŏn ŭi sangsa paem mullich'in T'oegye sŏnsaeng" [Master T'oegye removed a lovesick snake from Cho's body], 7–13, 72–73; "Sangsa pyŏng ŭro chugŭn ch'ŏnyŏ" [A maiden who died of lovesickness], 7–13, 262–264; "Yi Sunsin changgun kwa sangsa paem" [General Yi Sunsin and a lovesick snake], 7–15, 364–368; "Cho Nammyŏng sŏnsaeng kwa sangsa paem" [Cho Nammyŏng and a lovesick snake], 7–15, 368–371; "Sangsa pyŏng allŭn ch'ŏnyŏ mot sallin Cho Wŏlch'ŏn" [Cho Wŏlch'ŏn could not save a lovesick maiden], 7–18, 324–326; "Sinbu ŭi wŏnhon" [The regret of a bride], 8–2, 264–270; "Nammyŏng kwa sangsa kurŏngi" [Master Nammyŏng and a lovesick snake], 8–3, 684–687; "Nammyŏng sŏnsaeng chŏnsŏl" [The legend of Master Nammyŏng], 8–4, 242–246; "Cho Sik sŏnsaeng kwa sangsa kurŏngi" [Master Cho Sik and a lovesick snake], 8–10, 357–358; "Yi Sunsin changgun kwa sangsa pyŏng kŏllin ch'ŏnyŏ" [General Yi Sunsin and a lovesick maiden], 8–5, 316–318.

shared memory and consciousness of past generations. To address the multi-phased construction of the subject, this study also attempts to juxtapose oral versions with written discourses from Chosŏn literati writings and medical texts. The underlying constructions of oral and written literature are not mutually exclusive, and a comparative analysis of these texts will help uncover the narrative patterns of lovesick snake stories and the conceptions of female lovesickness.

These oral sources and written texts from the sixteenth century are examined to demonstrate that the male-centered view, especially in elite literature, successfully assimilates lovesickness into elite cultural norms, reflecting the self-consciousness of male *yangban* vis-à-vis their gender and social status. To expand the parameters of the research and to understand the nebulous qualities of female lovesickness, this article also discusses women's illness as a topic in medical writings because educated men were familiar with medicine, which constantly interacted with elite discourse during the Chosŏn period. This research leads to the argument that the male-centered discourse is inclined to connect male lovesickness to emotional and mental activities and women's love, affection, and desire to sensual, lustful, demonic qualities. This exploration of the various layers of discourse uncovers the lovesick snake stories as a site which reveals the cultural and literary othering, reification, and objectification of lovesickness experienced by the marginalized.

PREVIOUS OBSERVATIONS

Previous studies have treated oral tradition as a credible source for exploring the theme of the lovesick snake, and scholars have investigated, defined, and categorized the lovesick snake stories in folklore. The first scholar to examine the lovesick snake tales in oral literature, Kang Chinok probed the meanings of the bodily transformations of the lovesick snake and argues that gender seems to play an important role in shaping the stories' core messages. Kang shows that unrequited love arises between members of different classes and that the victims of lovesickness are predominantly women of the lower classes: young girls, widows, and married women.[10] For example, in "Kang Kamch'an kwa sangsa paem" (Kam Kangch'an and a lovesick snake), a young woman harbors an unrequited love for Kang Kamch'an (948–1031), a high-ranking official who assumes field command of the military at the time of the third Khitan invasion of 1018. As the

[10] Kang Chinok, "Sangsa paem sŏrhwa ŭi mom pakkugi rŭl t'onghae pon yongmang kwa kyubŏm ŭi munje [The problem of desire and social norms in bodily transformations in tales of the lovesick snake], *Kojŏn munhak yŏn'gu* 18 (2000): 115–146.

daughter of a tavern keeper, she fails to express her feelings. Her yearning, longing, and lack of a means to address Kang eventually result in her demise, though she is later revived. After her death, her parents find a giant snake coiled up in her room and immediately recognize that the snake is none other than the reincarnation of their daughter. The snake does not leave the house, so the father visits Kang and implores him to resolve the situation by placating the snake and helping the young woman's spirit to rest in peace. Kang obliges the request and enters the room, where he strokes the snake's body. The gentle touch of his hand makes the snake transform back into human form. The woman's parents can then provide their daughter with a proper burial.[11]

As this example shows, women more often appear as the victims of lovesickness than men, but male figures rarely treat or cure women's lovesickness. Female desire is treated as culturally inappropriate and illicit, while the male desire is considered natural and acceptable. Kang explains that these narratives provide details showing how and why women rather than men transform into snakes as a consequence of their lovesickness.[12] Female figures in lovesick snake stories either compromise their virtue as love objects or are stigmatized as sexual deviants when they suffer from lovesickness. According to Im Chaehae, oral stories assume that the only remedy for lovesickness is intercourse with the desired person. Ironically, lovesick men are often saved by their beloved women who agree to engage in a sexual relationship, as women are portrayed as more susceptible to giving themselves sexually, even at the risk of losing their chaste status. Conversely, a male admirer could be the critical factor in determining whether a lovesick woman survives or dies. However, the desired man more often than not refuses.[13] Such a contradiction parallels the real-life social practice that emphasized chastity as a feminine rather than masculine ideal during the Chosŏn period.

In certain contexts, women are given the opportunity to fulfill their desire through reincarnation. However, transformation into a snake or ghost remains culturally problematic. Specifically, female revenants tend to be identified with vengeful, harmful spirits. The deaths of unmarried, adolescent women are considered detrimental and dangerous because they evoke the popular belief that female revenants who are not given any consolation or settlement return to the earth as evil spirits. Often, a ritual, posthumous marriage is arranged between a

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11 *Kubi munhak taegye*, 6–3: 445–446.

12 Kang Chinok, ibid., 125, 129.

13 Im Chaehae, "Minsok munhwa e kalmuridoen sŏng kwa sarang ŭi kallaebyŏl insik" [Sex and love represented in folk culture], *Silch'ŏn minsokhak yŏn'gu* 8 (2006): 19.

dead woman and a living man to prevent the dead woman's resentment or lingering affection from resulting in social problems or crime.[14]

A woman's reappearance as a lovesick snake does not always signal bad luck. The reincarnated woman can become an agent who brings a male character success in battle. In one story, Yi Sunsin 李舜臣 (1545–1598), an admiral of the Chosŏn navy, gains victory in battle with help from a lovesick snake. Popular stories often valorize Yi's heroic qualities, but this tale venerates his humble character and humane attitude toward women. According to the story, Yi is participating in military service at an outpost and takes a bath during steamy, hot weather. A daughter of a local official happens to witness his bath and becomes fixated on him. She grows weary and devastated, so her father asks Yi to visit his daughter. Yi promises to do so, but by the time he arrives, the woman is already dead. Yi walks into her room, undresses, and caresses her dead body, which then changes into a snake. The snake wraps itself around Yi's body, seemingly having fulfilled its desire. Some stories thereafter relate Yi's union with the dead woman to his success on the battlefield as the lovesick snake helps him overturn Japanese vessels at sea.[15] Alternatively, the dead woman becomes a ghost informing Yi of the strategies needed to win battles and calling upon the gods to protect his military forces.[16]

The opposite results occur when the male figure does not respond to the lovesick woman, who later seeks retribution. For instance, consider stories surrounding Sin Rip 申砬 (1546–1592), a gifted, competent general who gained a reputation in campaigns against the Manchu. He was promoted to commander-in-chief[17] and dispatched to Ch'ŏngju to confront the Japanese forces in 1592 (*Imjin waeran*). He devised a plan to fight a battle on an open field called T'angŭm Terrace, but the field was dotted with flooded rice paddies, and the plan turned out to be disastrous for his cavalry. All his units were defeated, and he committed suicide. Like the official record, the oral stories maintain that his competence as a military hero fell far short of expectations, but the stories also explain Sin Rip's failure from a different perspective. In one story, Sin Rip lodges in a remote village where he finds a young widow, who expresses her desire to spend a night with him to fulfill her mother-in-law's wish that she bear a son for the family. Sin

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[14] The Chosŏn state exhibited anxiety concerning the deaths of unmarried women. Marriage was a major concern for the Chosŏn state, especially in cases of women without heirs. See Chŏng Chiyŏng, "Chosŏn sidae honin changnyŏch'aek kwa toksin yŏsŏng" [Chosŏn marriage politics and unmarried women], *Han'guk yŏsŏnghak* 20:3 (2004): 7.

[15] *Kubi munhak taegye*, 7–15: 364–368.

[16] *Kubi munhak taegye,* 8–5: 316–318.

[17] *Sŏnjo sillok* 26:1a [1592.4.17].

Rip rejects her request, and the young widow, ashamed of the situation, kills herself. After that incident, Sin Rip is incessantly haunted by an evil spirit believed to be the woman, and his army suffers defeat. The lovesick ghost causes the man's failure or death.[18]

Interpretations of these stories generally focus on gender issues, but some scholars examine other social practices. These analyses do not deny the prominence of gender but attempt to read the stories as social satire or political allegory. Specifically, the variations in plot endings reveal varying degrees of political messages. Kim Yongdŏk shows that rebirth as a snake symbolizes sexuality and obsessions which exceed finite and mortal boundaries; this symbolism is a response to the social conditions of the lower classes. Such transformations reflect the familiar assumption that the evil person abusing another's love and affection deserves a penalty and expose a rising desire in the popular consciousness to subvert the existing system and norms.[19] Similarly, Chŏng Ŭnsŏn considers both gender disparities and class distinctions to be the fundamental drivers of the plot. In her analysis, most love objects are historical male figures from higher social classes. The men who accept lovesick women's advances become war heroes on the battlefield; those who refuse to accept or appease lovesick women are haunted or molested by unknown spiritual forces due to their stubbornness. The polemic relationship of the lovesick woman and the man who rejects her can be viewed as a political allegory in which noblemen are blamed for their neglect of women and others viewed as of less significance.[20] Also, these stories also imply the ability of an individual whose desire is not contained at the personal level but reaches into the public realm to have an impact on a historical event.

Conclusively, these studies support the view that oral stories broadly reflect popular demands for positive regard and approval of desire while criticizing the established social and cultural systems. At the same time, stories centered on lovesick women raise more complicated problems of interpretation because they posit a heterodox belief that legitimates female sexuality. In other words, the

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[18] In addition, a recent study shows that more men than women attempt to retaliate against the love object who rejected a man's advances, an inclination which reflects the violence of denied male desire inflicted on female bodies. See Song Yŏngsuk, "Han-Il sangsa paem sŏrhwa ŭi pigyo yŏn'gu" [Comparative study of the lovesick snake stories of Korea and Japan], *Ilbon munhwa hakpo* 60 (2014): 289–313.

[19] Kim Yongdŏk, "Sangsa paem sŏrhwa kujo punsŏk kwa ŭimi yŏn'gu" [A study of the structure and meanings of lovesick snake folk stories], *Han'guk ŏnŏ munhwa* 18 (2000): 351–381.

[20] Chŏng Ŭnsŏn, *Sangsa sŏrhwa ŭi insik ch'ŭngwi wa kyŏyukchŏk ŭiŭi* [The multiple levels of consciousness and educational effects of folk stories dealing with lovesickness], M.A. Thesis, Konkuk University, 2001. 74–79.

stories are not only demarcated by the implications of female lovesickness as a consequence of erotic drive but also suggest the compromising of gender norms and promote the denigration of women's bodies.

ASSESSMENT OF LOVESICKNESS

In the literary tradition, oral stories dealing with sixteenth-century figures present lovesickness as arising from erotic desire by showing that the lovesick snake (or female ghost) seeks carnal satisfaction. However, such views run counter to the general description of lovesickness in medical discourses ranging from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.[21] Medical treatises largely describe lovesickness in terms of physical symptoms which result from ceaseless yearning and brooding. Excessive worrying and thinking can hurt the heart (*usu saryŏ chŭk sangsim* 憂愁思慮則傷心). If bad energy (*sagi* 邪氣) invades the psyche, an individual's mental condition becomes unstable.

> Too much worry and thinking cause damage to the heart. When the heart is damaged, one feels easily tired. The head and face turn red. The buttocks also feel numb, and pain can well up in the heart. One might also feel overburdened or have a fever. The pulse in connection to the stomach becomes less palpable.[22]

Specifically, the symptoms of *sangsa pyŏng*—a term that appears in various medical texts, literally indicating an illness of rejected or unrequited love—and its causes are often identified as obsessive thoughts and pensiveness which can weaken the body and make the flow of vital energy stagnate.

> The old saying goes that lovesickness is a disease that makes a man careless of the outside world. This happens when a man harbors emotion for a woman. He might seriously engage in the relationship but then unexpectedly face separation and cannot stop himself from excessive pondering. Consequently, the man suffers from insomnia and often forgets to

[21] Medical writings consulted in this research include treatises from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century: Kwŏn Ch'ae et al., *Hyangyak chipsŏngbang* 鄕藥齊生集 [Comprehensive compilation of Korean medicine, 1433], *Ŭibang yuch'wi* 醫方類聚 [Classified compilation of medical prescriptions, 1445], and Hŏ Chun, *Tongŭi pogam* 東醫寶鑑 [Precious mirror of Eastern medicine, 1610].

[22] Hŏ Chun, *Tongŭi pogam*, trans. Cho Hŏnyŏng, et al. (Yŏgangch'ulp'ansa, 2001), 300–302.

> eat. His figure becomes visibly worn-out and drained. If not treated, his condition will become critical.[23]

This medical conclusion emphasizes the association between lovesickness and feelings. The term *sangsa pyŏng* is not merely a form of desire or unrequited love; it is a consequence of mental problems, not erotic passion.

In a literal sense, *sangsa pyŏng* can be further defined as a sickness derived from incessant pensiveness. The terminology for "thoughts" or "pensiveness" is contained within the sinograph "思" (K. *sa,* C. *si*). In its most common expression, the graph originally meant "to think," which also denotes thought, meditation, and speculation. As a philosophical term, it connotes a sense of "rational reflection," which often extends to "practical concern or deliberation with a view to action."[24] As the *Analects* (2:15) emphasizes, "The Master said, 'He who learns but does not think (思) is lost.' He who thinks (思) but does not learn is in great danger."[25] The various meanings of this sinograph demonstrate that its figurative use extends the innate meaning of any form of concentrated mental activity to an emotional process, such as cherishing memories and remembering with longing. Even as the definition of human emotion as precisely "longing" was coined in popular perception, the sinograph was also registered as one of the major human emotions in Confucian classics, such as the *Book of Rites* (*Li ji* 禮記), and in medical discourse.[26]

According to Zhang Jingyue (c. 1563–1640), a medical expert of Ming China, the five emotions of pensiveness (思), grief (憂), fear (恐), joy (喜), and anger (怒) are connected with the five viscera of the heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys.

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[23] *Ŭibang yuch'wi* 201:49b4–6

[24] Alison H. Black, *Man and Nature in the Philosophical Thought of Wang Fu-Chih* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989. 194–202.

[25] Arthur Waley trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). 91.

[26] The *Suwen* (Basic questions) refers to the theory of emotion and identifies the five major emotions as grief (憂), fear (恐), pensiveness (思), joy (喜), and anger (怒). While Confucian scholars continuously attempted to reconsider the Confucian principles in their understanding of emotions, medical experts also played an important role in narrowing the gap between Confucian philosophy and medical knowledge. As the theory of seven inherent emotions arose during the Song period, the major emotional qualities came to refer to the five emotions addressed in *The Inner Canon*. Categories of major emotions suggested later include sorrow (悲) and fright (驚), creating the total of seven major emotions adopted and complemented by Chen Yan 陳言 (1131–1189), who wrote *Sanyin jiyi bingzheng fanglun* 三因極一病證方論. As Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) strengthened this classification scheme, the five emotions were included in orthodox theory and further discussed in relationship to the five viscera proposed by Zhang Jingyue 張景岳 (1583–1640). Please refer to An Sangu. "Ch'ilchŏng haksŏl ch'onsŏk" [Analysis of the theory of the seven emotions]. *Che 3-ŭihak* 1 (1996): 43–44.

Therefore, the excess or lack of one emotion is detrimental to the corresponding viscera: anger is injurious to the liver, extravagant joy to the heart, extreme pensiveness to the spleen, extreme grief to the lungs, and extreme fear to the kidneys.[27] These emotions are described as essential, equivalent qualities of human nature. Even when certain emotions are not encouraged and others repressed, an overabundance of one emotion which might cause illness is considered to be of great importance. The active suppression or elimination of these emotions is critical because unchecked emotions can lead to evil.

MEDICAL VIEWS OF FEMALE MALADY

Chosŏn medical writings assume that excessive pensiveness is the primary cause of lovesickness, and Chosŏn writers hold that the intensive speculation and excessive mental stimulation which accompany lovesickness can damage the heart and that lovesickness harms the flow of vital energy, making it stagnant with extreme pensiveness.[28] Based on these theories, it is believed that the experience of lovesickness has a psychic explanation and that erotic lovesickness is common among women. Specifically, women who cannot fulfill their sexual needs in the bedchamber are vulnerable to so-called *kwabu pyŏng* (widow's sickness).

> The old medicine did not specifically mention widow's illness. It was only briefly addressed in the biographies of Cang Gong (倉公) and Chu Cheng (褚澄). Because widows and nuns are not married for life, *yin* flourishes, while *yang* depletes. Even though they have erotic desire, it cannot be fulfilled. Therefore, they fall ill with widow's sickness.[29]

The symptoms are similar to those of malaria, including fever and shivering, as a consequence of the imbalance between *yin* and *yang*.[30]

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[27] Ilza Veith, trans. *Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen: The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 118–120.

[28] For the dichotomy of male and female lovesickness and the etiologies and symptoms of lovesickness, see Janet Y. Lee, *Reinterpreting Lovesickness in Late Chosŏn Literature*, PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2015, 95–134.

[29] *Hyangyak chipsŏngbang*, trans. Yu Hyodong (P'yŏngyang: P'yŏngyang kwahak paekkwa sajŏn ch'ulp'ansa, 1986), 4:46.

[30] I find this notion similar to modern western discourse. According to Dawson, early modern scholars and physicians in the west associated lovesickness with a physiological illness and treated it as a uterine disease, particularly in the female body. Derived from female lovesickness were hysteria, hormonal trouble, and uterine dysfunction. Lesel Dawson, *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Ancient people believed it was most important to distinguish the primary elements of the patient when treating illness. Consequently, they treated vital energy (氣) in male patients and blood (血) in female patients. If blood flows to the uterus, it increases harmony between *yin* and *yang*. However, if blood is concentrated, *yin* and *yang* are in conflict.[31] This treatment approach suggests that "essence (精) is important for men; blood (血) is important for women. When essence flourishes in a man, he will long for women. When blood flourishes in a woman, she will be impregnated."[32]

Even as medical writings distinguish female blood from male blood and find that it endows women with special significance as maternal bodies designed for the function of reproduction, they develop a distinct diagnosis of female love-sickness and argue that erotic lovesickness occurs more frequently in women. According to *Hyangyak chipsŏngbang* (Comprehensive compilation of Korean medicine), maiden's illness or widow's sickness is attributed to excessive pensive-ness and worrying, as suggested for lovesickness. This widow's sickness can also affect the spleen, similarly to lovesickness in general. The *Tongŭi pogam* (Precious mirror of Eastern medicine) shares this notion and describes the "widow's disease," which it calls the "maiden's illness" (*sillyŏ pyŏng* 室女病).

According to this theory, when a single woman has concerns or thoughts in general, her heart is damaged, her blood drains, and her face becomes devoid of color. Menstruation ceases, resulting in temporary menopause. In addition, the vital energy of the heart is weakened, so it cannot assist the spleen, whose vital energy lessens, making digestion difficult. The lungs are also vulnerable to a weakened spleen. The patient can suffer coughing, which drains the vital energy of the kidney and liver, leaving the patient feeling lethargic and heavy-limbed. Hot-temperedness is yet another symptom. A woman's hair also loses its shine and becomes dry and lusterless.[33] Likewise, the medical texts suggest that this illness is likely to afflict two particular groups of people: maidens and widows. Maidens are susceptible to the symptoms of overabundant *yin* and deficient *yang* because they are responsible for carrying out menial tasks, are subordinated within the hierarchical structure of authority, and are restricted from encountering men

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31 *Hyangyak chipsŏngbang*, 4:47.

32 I refer to the text of *Tongŭi pogam* translated into modern Korean. Please find the details in *Tongŭi pogam*, trans. Cho Hŏnyŏng et al. (Seoul: Yŏgang ch'ulp'ansa, 2001), 2507.

33 Chŏng Chich'ŏn, *Chosŏn sidae wang tŭl ŭn ŏt'ŏke pyŏng ŭl koch'yŏssŭlkka* (Seoul: Chungang saeng-hwalsa, 2007), 47–48.

socially. Widows are supposed to remain chaste for the sake of their dead husbands and to restrain their sexuality.[34]

Korean medical writers seemingly intensify the qualities of the *yin–yang* opposition when discussing the relationship of widow's sickness to the flow of blood and the association of *sangsa pyŏng* with vital energy. Blood is a key element in women's reproductive functions, and their bodies are responsible for the continuation of the family line. According to the *Precious mirror of Eastern medicine*, women are more vulnerable to this illness because they have a higher sex drive:

> Women's diseases are ten times harder to cure, and married women usually have a stronger sexual desire than men do. Also, women are more prone to illness because they are easily affected by jealousy, worry, anger, aversion, or love while dealing with childcare. They frequently indulge themselves in various emotions but simultaneously they are stubborn. For these reasons, their illnesses are deep rooted.[35]

Therefore, avoiding the effects of illness on blood is considered critical for women's health. Reflecting the developing notion of male and female differences, these interpretations reveal that lovesickness as a mental phenomenon addresses the qualities of maleness, while widow's sickness is described as originating from repressed sexual desire. The special interest in these marginalized women reflects male anxiety, particularly the fear that a large number of sexually frustrated women without mates could upset the cosmic harmony of *yin* and *yang*. The medical writers point out that these women are continuously frustrated because their sexual desires are contained and rarely fulfilled under social control. These writers also affirm the view that widow's sickness is caused by frustrated erotic desire, more natural among women, and suggests the "four ingredients infusion" (*samult'ang* 四物湯) as a cure for widow's sickness or sexual obsession.[36]

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[34] Similarly, Zhang Jiebin (c.1563–1640), a Chinese expert on the *Inner Canon*, argued that excessive feeling can injure the spleen. His writings suggest that maidens and widows often suffer symptoms caused by excessive emotion and injured spleens. He also identifies unsuccessful examination candidates as potentially vulnerable to these symptoms. His grouping of maidens, widows, and unsuccessful male examination candidates stresses the association of lovesickness with repressed desire. See Zhang Jiebin, *Jingyu quanshu* (Shanghai: Shanghai xiju chubanshe, 1959), 357–358; Zeitlin, ibid., 22.

[35] *Tongŭi pogam,* 2510.

[36] According to Hŏ' Chun's *Precious Mirror of Eastern Medicine*, the four ingredients of angelica root—(*tanggwi* 當歸), cnidii rhizoma (*ch'ŏn'gung* 川芎), foxglove (*sukchi* 熟地), and peony (*chagyak* 芍藥)—were known to stabilize and strengthen the female reproductive system. For the details, please see *Tongŭi pogam*, 2586.

Importantly, the notion that women have a stronger sexual drive than men differs from the common understanding in contemporary culture that men are more sexually driven than women and that virility signifies maleness. However, in the case of women's illness caused by passion, the subject's desire is juxtaposed against the public voice in the medical discourse that does not allow any personal or individual expression of women's feelings about their symptoms.

THE EROTIC SNAKE REVISITED IN LITERATI WRITINGS

Returning to fictional stories, this section presents an attempt to reconnect the representation of lovesick snakes to the reading of literati writings which constitute part of elite literature. As discussed, medical treatises tend to associate female maladies with bodily and sexual etiologies and to separate male sufferers from sexually driven symptoms. The lovesick woman, in particular, is presented as prone to sexual temptation, and after death, her identity manifests itself as a sexually addicted snake or ghost which haunts the male character. The association of lovesickness with a sensual snake or haunting ghost furthers the marginalization of female desire, fulfilling male fantasies which position women as objects of male desire. At the same time, the serpentine image of the lovesick woman exposes male fears and anxieties over her uncontrollable sexual desire. Such male fantasies and anxieties are reflected in the early literary anthologies of male literati, indicating that the gendered portrayal of female lovesickness is salient factor in not only folk literature but also elite discourse. A tale in *Yongjae ch'onghwa* (Literary miscellany of Sŏng Hyŏn) reveals this shared view of the treatment of female lovesickness.

> It was a time when Minister Hong had not yet achieved his reputation. On his way home, the rain was pouring down so hard that he took shelter in a small cave, where there lived a Buddhist nun of seventeen or eighteen years old who had an outstanding appearance. The minister asked her, "Why are you sitting here alone?" "I am living here with two other nuns who went down to the village to get food," said the nun. The minister spent the night with the nun and promised that he would return and take her to his home. From that time, the nun waited for the minister every day and became ill in her heart. Eventually, she died. Meanwhile, the minister was appointed governor of the southern region. One day, he found a tiny lizard creeping toward his blanket. He picked it up and threw it outside, and his servant killed it. The following day, the minister saw a small snake meandering into

> his room. The same event happened the next day. The minister came to wonder whether the appearance of the snake was related to the nun but continued to kill the snake. However, whenever he and his servants killed it, the snake not only came back but became bigger. The minister summoned all the soldiers under his jurisdiction and had them guard his house. Every time the soldiers found the snake, they killed it, but strangely, the snake never dropped out of sight. Thereafter, the minister put the snake in a jar, placed the jar in his room at night, and carried it with him during the daytime. The minister became weakened day by day and perished in the end.[37]

The text is ambiguous and obscure about the motives of the female figure who engages in sex with the minister and violates the rule of celibacy for nuns. However, it is evident that her posthumous revenge stems from her thwarted love as the minister abandons and forgets her. Generally, on the narrative level, female anguish and suffering are contextually undermined. The story emphasizes the minister's uncanny, baffling, supernatural encounter with a snake that grows to be enormous and terribly powerful. Unlike the oral tradition, this story concentrates on the perspective of the male figure, omits the details of his reckless advances toward the single nun, and ignores the male betrayal to highlight the mystical aspect of the giant snake. When moral judgment is deployed, the male figure is portrayed as the victim of revenge.

A somewhat heightened awareness of the lovesick woman and her anxiety is found in another story in the same anthology. In "Scholar An," a widower who lost his wife at a young age hears that a minister in the East Gate has a servant girl of only sixteen or seventeen who is beautiful and wealthy. All attempts to woo her only result in rejection, but when the widower pretends lovesickness, she accepts him. The romance between An and the servant girl results in a happy wedding, but soon afterwards, his frivolous behavior drives his wife to commit suicide.

> The following day, the woman hung herself in the other room. An was not aware of it and saw a young girl, saying, "Mistress is coming." Student An ran to the door, putting his shoes on back to front in a hurry. Then, the girl said, "Mistress is dead." . . . He ran to the woman's house and saw her dead body. He covered the body with clothes and blankets, choked with emotion, and wailed bitterly. All the neighbors heard him wailing and mourned very bitterly. … When An walked home alone near Palace Sugang, he saw a well-dressed woman with her hair up. She walked as if to pass him by but also

[37] Sŏng Hyŏn, *Yongjae ch'onghwa* [Literary miscellany of Sŏng Hyŏn], vol. 4, http://db.itkc.or.kr (accessed 8-15-2015).

> seemed to wait for him. When An followed her, he noticed that her cough and sighs were similar to those of his wife. This frightened An and caused him to scream and run away. .. A month later, he gave his wife a burial, and then he also died.[38]

Although both these stories hint at social and emotional motives for suicide, the real reasons for the women's deaths remain obscure because the stories lack any notes or poems revealing their interiority. Also absent is any description of female pain and suffering, and the plots focus solely on the male protagonists being haunted by spirits believed to have ultimately led them to their deaths.

The male-centered discourse of lovesickness not only neglects female experiences; it also tends to employ a lovesick woman as a literary ploy to establish the moral superiority of the featured male. In *Sŏngho sasŏl* (Literary miscellany of Sŏng Hyŏn), Hwang Chunnyang (1517–1563) is victimized by a lovesick woman, who is one of his retainer's wives.

> Hwang Chunnyang had a commanding appearance. When he was serving as magistrate of Sŏngju Prefecture, one of his retainers had a wife who accidently saw Hwang through a crack in a door. From that moment, she harbored a hidden love for him and eventually died of lovesickness. One day while Hwang was sitting in his office, he saw a female ghost in a white dress approach him. The ghost continuously called to him. Harassed by the ghost night and day, he soon became sick and died. Even on his deathbed, he lay with his hands folded, sometimes waving them as if trying to push someone out of the room, continually murmuring, "Confucius says that there should be a distinction between men and women." Even on his sickbed, his behavior displayed his unyielding principles.[39]

Here, the woman appears to Hwang to satisfy her sexual hunger, and his denial results in his death. However, the central theme of the story is praise of the male figure who does not succumb to the sexual demands of the female ghost.

This gendered notion points to the differences in the etiology and treatment of male and female lovesickness. However, the association of lovesickness with sexuality is not applied exclusively to women. In various stories, lovesick figures appear among various social groups, including widows, nuns, male servants, and Buddhist monks.

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[38] Sŏng Hyŏn, *Yongjae ch'onghwa* [Literary miscellany of Sŏng Hyŏn], vol. 5, http://db.itkc.or.kr (accessed 8-15-2015).

[39] Yi Ik, "Hwang Kŭmgye," *Sŏngho sasŏl* [Personal records of Yi Ik], vol. 15, http://db.itkc.or.kr (accessed 8-15-2015).

> At the time when An, my father-in-law, was appointed magistrate at Puyŏ Imch'ŏn, he invited a Buddhist monk from Pogwang Monastery for a casual conversation. The monk said that he was in a relationship with a woman and paid her secret visits every night. One day, the monk died suddenly but was reborn as a lovesick snake (*sangsa paem*) because he missed the woman greatly. As a lovesick snake, the monk snuck into the woman's chamber. He decided to remain in her room, so he hid in a jar during the daytime and came out at night, coiling around her waist and breast. His penis-like wen attached to his tail let him make love as delicately and pleasantly as in the past. Magistrate An heard of this weird love affair and summoned the woman with the jar containing the snake. An called out the monk's name and scolded him, "I understand the reason you have become a lovesick snake, but how can this behavior be appropriate for a monk?!" The snake shoved its head out of the jar and then disappeared.[40]

In this passage, the monk is seemingly possessed by a ceaseless interest in sex. His reincarnation as a snake can be ascribed as a negative outcome of *karma*, but it ironically helps him satisfy his obsessive longing for sexual intercourse. Both the lovesick woman and the sexually vigorous Buddhist monk who continues to visit his beloved as a snake even after his death together represent marginal groups of society.

These depictions of a nun, servant, and monk comprising the periphery of Chosŏn society reveal that the differences between a lovesick person and his or her beloved are not determined merely by gender constructions or based simply on the opposition of maleness and femaleness. Gender itself is a more fluid, complex concept when considering the interplay between cultural norms and tradition. Chinese scholars have acknowledged the difficulty of understanding the concept of gender in pre-modern discourse: "One of the defining features of premodern Chinese gender discourse was the absence of the male/female dichotomy. … *Yin* and *yang* is not male/female because its connotations cover a much wider and different symbolic field."[41] Along with the dyad of man and woman, the dichotomy between *junzi* (gentleman) and *xiaoren* (small [petty] person) is also highly prevalent, as illustrated in the following passage from the classical canon: "The Master said, women and people of low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance, they resent it."[42] This passage implies that Confucian-based gender segregation might have encouraged social and collective hostility to women's role

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[40] Sŏng Hyŏn, *Yongjae ch'onghwa*, vol. 5, http://db.itkc.or.kr (accessed 8-15-2015).
[41] Song Geng, *The Fragile Scholar* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 14–15.
[42] *Analects* 17:25. Arthur Waley, ibid., 216–217.

and dignity[43] but was not completely based on misogynist attitudes. Distinctions and segregation were more intimately connected with the notion of moral superiority and the significance of self-cultivation than mere sexual differences between man and woman. Thus, the category of the Confucian gentleman not only represents maleness but also indicates cultural and moral separation from the petty personal qualities of self-interest, greed, superficiality, and materialism.

Applying this theory to the lovesick snake tales permits an understanding of their portrayals of nuns, widows, female servants, male slaves, and Buddhist monks. In literati writings, the passion and love of these figures are ridiculed or distorted, and the figures themselves are considered morally inferior and culturally problematic. If members of the literati class took the opportunity to render and construe male lovesickness as a symptom of melancholy, they failed to address the complexity of the feelings, pain, experiences, and symptoms of illiterate members of society, mostly commoners and women who had been silenced or marginalized. Instead, male literati presented, witnessed, and inscribed the concerns of the marginalized to redefine the roots of sexual desire as a source of lovesickness.

CONCLUSION

In the literary construction of the lovesick snake, female figures are bound up in culturally and socially derived variables, beliefs, and practices. Literati writings, including medical writings and literary collections, frequently associate female love and death with foreignness and distance female characters from more subtle and mental symptoms of lovesickness. The male-centered view in the literati writings exploits the voices of the marginal, and similarly, the medical texts tend to offer binary assessments of lovesickness as resulting from either emotional frustration or sexual obsession. This binary view is relevant to the popular practice of self-nurturing (*yangsaeng* 養生), regarded as being of primary importance in healthcare and self-cultivation in the late Chosŏn period. In the production of medical writings, court doctors and experts were major contributors, but scholars, including scholar-doctors (*yuŭi* 儒醫), were also called upon to treat disorders and contributed accounts of etiologies and theories. Literati scholars based their studies, practices, and treatments of health and sickness on their own experiments

[43] Many studies have investigated the issue of Confucian norms and their influence on female roles and ideals and contend that premodern women had scope for moral cultivation and social participation, while modern scholars have intensified the association of gender segregation with Confucianism. See Chenyang Li, "Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?" in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* (Peru, Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 2000), 2–5.

or experiences of self-healing and treating illness.[44] Their personal notes and records of real-life experiences and encounters became the materials for writing, resulting in a self-referential approach to medicine. Male elites could identify simultaneously as physicians and patients by becoming the subjects and objects of medical diagnosis and prescription.

In contrast, male writers treat female lovesickness as second-hand knowledge or even interpret it as a one-dimensional malady. With reproduction considered to be the primary function of female bodies, female lovesickness is reduced to sexual frustration. The elite and popular discourses alike maintain that undying passion compels dead women to revisit the human world in search of their beloveds, but their transformations render the lovesick snake and the female ghost social outcasts. Moreover, the representation of lovesick female figures as avenging souls and sexually driven creatures betrays the persistence of gender asymmetries and social differences. Those who come to desire someone who is of a higher status find no channel for their ambition or desires due to the disparity in social status. Deprived of the social venues and solutions men can use to assuage their grievances, the lovesick women portrayed in the stories are conceived of as being different and outlandish.

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[44] See Yi Chinsu, "Chosŏn yangsaeng sasang ŭi sŏngnip e kwanhan sŏngch'al" [A study of the establishment of the theory of *yangsaeng* during the Chosŏn period], *Sŏktang nonch'ong* 12 (1986): 41–68.

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