What is P'ansori?: A Genre Comparison with English Renaissance Drama

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No immediate connection can be made between English Renaissance drama and nineteenth century Korean p'ansori if we look for the same physical aspects of theater in them. Belonging to completely different traditions of theater, they cannot be simply grouped together as parts of the same genre, especially when they are the products of two traditional societies that are so remote from each other in time and culture. The primary concern of this paper is, therefore, not to demonstrate an identity in form and structure between English Renaissance drama and Korean p'ansori. Rather, it is to show how two different societies going through similar social and historical processes, produced art forms which are similar in their social functions.

Although English Renaissance drama and nineteenth century Korean p'ansori bear no traces of mutual influence or similar theatrical features, there are several reasons why they can be compared. First, the societies of Renaissance England and nineteenth
century Korea share many significant socio-historical traits, so that we may argue the notion of cultural parallelism as a theoretical ground for this comparison. These periods in the histories of England and Korea were a significant watershed between the medieval and the modern periods, as both societies went through many notable changes in political institutions, economic structures, religious doctrines, and ethical systems.

The ideologies of hierarchical class distinction and patriarchy were, for instance, just two of the medieval principles which were undergoing a serious breakdown at these times of transition because of pressure from new forces of growing capitalism and individualism. In the midst of many economic upheavals, the respective societies witnessed the rise of new middle classes like the landed gentry in England and the commoner landlord class in Korea. The capitalist system also drove many aristocrats to economic destruction, as many unfortunate nobles were forced to sell their lands and titles to maintain their feudal households. Because of the economic disasters of their lords and masters, the peasants and servants were also driven into the streets, with nothing in hand, just to become beggars and thieves.

As a result, social stability, based upon the medieval institution of the aristocracy, was greatly disturbed and threatened as an increasing number of wealthy non-noble people moved up the ladder or the class hierarchy by gaining lands, titles, and political positions and emerged as a new source of power. Moreover, as a result of this economic and social instability, the two societies also experienced many conflicts in ethics, philosophy, and religion. There were significant controversies in both societies over theological doctrines, governmental principles, gender roles, educational systems, and civil rights. In short, resemblances in economic circumstances, class structure, and social problems are apparent in Renaissance England and nineteenth century Korea.