

Norm and Deviance: Some Considerations on Eroticism in Ancient Korea

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of gender, power, and normative transgression in early medieval Korea through an analysis of historic chronicles (*Samguk sagi*) and anecdotal narratives (*Samguk yusa*). By examining cases involving queens, concubines, and female figures situated at the margins of legitimacy, the study interrogates the symbolic and political construction of gender deviance within the framework of dynastic ideology. Drawing on theoretical approaches from gender history and the anthropology of the gift, the article highlights how sexualized behaviors, jealousy, and bodily anomalies were inscribed into official discourse as mechanisms of exclusion or moral warning. Particular attention is paid to narrative strategies that blur the boundaries between hagiography, exemplarity, and historical record, revealing an underlying tension between patriarchal control and the disruptive agency of women. The study proposes that representations of ‘deviance’ served not only as focal points of moral tension, but also as narrative tools for negotiating dynastic crises and legitimizing succession. Through this lens, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of premodern Korean historiography and the gendered dynamics of its political imagination.

Keywords

body, sexuality, erotism, sexual narrative, ancient Korea

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1. Introduction

This article examines the multifaceted nature of eroticism in ancient Korea, with a particular focus on the Three Kingdoms period, through the lens of historical, literary, and archaeological sources. Drawing on Georges Bataille's theoretical framework, eroticism is approached not as mere sexual instinct, but as a culturally mediated space of prohibition, transgression, and symbolic exchange (Bataille 2017, 17, 187). This notion of eroticism is fundamentally tied to the regulation of sexual instincts, from which taboos such as incest emerge (Bataille 2017, 18, 198). It also links these restrictions to values like chastity and fidelity, which become central to erotic discourse. At the same time, defining the boundaries of human sexuality inevitably entails the possibility of their transgression (Bataille 2017, 50, 647). In this context, values such as chastity, fidelity, and reproductive duty emerge not only as moral imperatives, but also as markers of gendered social order and political stability. By analyzing selected passages from foundational texts such as *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, this study investigates how sexuality was discursively constructed, regulated, and occasionally subverted. Erotic agency, as portrayed in these texts, is profoundly asymmetrical: while male sexuality oscillates between heroic virility, excess, and deviance, female sexuality is framed within a rigid moral dichotomy—chaste or shameless, fertile or failed—closely tied to patriarchal control over the body and its symbolic value. Special attention is given to extraordinary or fantastical elements—including hyperphallic figures, 'wild' sexual unions, magical seductions, and scandals or erotic punishment—that function both as narrative devices and as sites of ideological contestation. These episodes reveal how desire, pleasure, jealousy, and bodily spectacle intersect with questions of power, status, and legitimacy.

Ultimately, the article argues that early Korean erotic discourse cannot be reduced to either Confucian restraint or folkloric indulgence; rather, it emerges as a complex, often contradictory field of representations in which the social, political, and supernatural dimensions of sexuality were deeply intertwined. Given the limited and fragmented nature of extant

materials, this study necessarily focuses on selected episodes and representations rather than attempting an exhaustive account. While acknowledging that ancient Korean society was complex and varied across regions and periods, the present analysis prioritizes thematic coherence over full chronological or geographic coverage. This approach is not meant to flatten such diversity but to highlight certain recurring symbolic patterns within the constraints of available sources. Further research will be needed to refine and expand this inquiry with greater contextual and temporal specificity.

2. Toward a Grammar of Eroticism: Sexual Norms and Symbolism in Early Korea

While no codified system of customs—*no mos maiorum*, so to speak—has survived from ancient Korea, it is nevertheless clear that early Korean societies swiftly developed norms to regulate sexual behavior. Bodily impulses, desires, and sexual instincts were increasingly subordinated to the dictates of morality, custom, and law. Evidence of this regulatory process can be found in *Samguk yusa*, where it is noted that women were educated in “modesty, loyalty, filial piety, and sincerity.” According to the text, the king selected beautiful maidens and designated them as *weonhwa*, organizing them into groups and instilling in them the core values of modesty, loyalty, filial piety, and sincerity—virtues deemed essential for the governance of the realm (Iryeon 2016, 234). An idealized image of society is also presented in the phrase: “people do not steal, leave their doors open, and women are virtuous and not lustful” (婦人貞信不淫) (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 512). Here, the character *eum* (淫), encompassing meanings of “desire” and “excess,” functions as a moral boundary marker, denoting that which lies beyond accepted social norms. In extant visual representations, the human body is typically portrayed in a modest and desexualized manner—fully clothed and devoid of erotic charge. Nudity, by contrast, is symbolically associated with the bestial or the demonic, as illustrated for example by the depictions in the mural from the tomb at Sunheung Eumnae-ri.



Fig. 1. Detail of a creature depicted in the tomb of Yeongju Sunheung Eumnae-ri.
Source: Korea Heritage Service.

The wall paintings of Geoguryeo, which constitute the most extensive and sophisticated iconographic corpus of ancient Korea, are notably devoid of explicit erotic imagery or overt sexual themes—especially when compared to the mural traditions of classical antiquity, such as those of Greece or Etruria, where explicit scenes of sensuality, nudity, and even intercourse were common in funerary and domestic contexts. In Geoguryeo tomb art, representations of the human body are typically idealized, clothed, and framed within ritualistic, mythological, or martial settings, reflecting a worldview in which sexuality was either symbolically sublimated or rigorously confined within socially sanctioned forms. A rare, albeit indirect, exception can be found in the dynamic compositions of the Tomb of the Wrestlers, where partially nude male figures are depicted in combat. In this context, nudity does not function erotically per se but rather serves to emphasize physical strength, virility, and heroic masculinity. The exposed body becomes a visual metaphor for power and dominance, aligning more closely with martial valor than with sensual pleasure. This restrained



Fig. 2. Detail of the wrestling scene in the Tomb of the Wrestlers, depicting two partially nude male figures engaged in ritual combat.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

visual regime suggests that, in the culture of Geoguryeo, eroticism—if present at all—was not expressed through direct iconographic means but instead remained embedded in symbolic registers or filtered through allegorical or moral frameworks. It also reinforces the broader tendency in early Korean visual culture to subordinate the body to ideals of social order, virtue, and cosmological harmony.

In recent years, archaeological excavations across the Korean peninsula have brought to light a variety of sex-related representations that suggest the ritualized deployment of erotic symbolism in ancient societies. While these artifacts are striking, they do not collectively constitute a structured or coherent tradition of erotic imagery. Two particularly notable finds—a wooden phallus and an earthenware one—were discovered at the Anapji site in Gyeongju, the former capital of Silla. These objects are widely interpreted as having served a ritual or protective function, possibly linked to fertility cults or the symbolic safeguarding of sacred or political space.



Fig. 3. Wooden phallus from Gyeongju.

Source: Gyeongju National Museum, Weolseong 1038.



Fig. 4. Earthenware phallus from Gyeongju.

Source: Gyeongju National Museum, Anapji 1157.

Even more remarkable is a phallic-shaped *mokgan*—a wooden tablet typically used for administrative or ritual purposes—excavated from the site of Neungsan-ri in Buyeo, one of Baekje’s final capitals. Unlike standard *mokgan*, this example appears to have been deliberately carved in the form of a phallus, suggesting a symbolic intention beyond bureaucratic use. It could be interpreted as a talismanic or apotropaic object, possibly linked to shamanic practices or boundary rituals aimed at warding off evil forces and invoking fertility or protective energies. Its distinctive shape and its discovery in a peripheral context support its likely role within the ritual culture of late Baekje.

Complementary evidence can be found in the Bangudae petroglyphs of Ulsan, which, while primarily depicting animals and hunting scenes, include anthropomorphic figures that may reflect fertility symbolism. Similarly, clay figurines from the Silla period—such as those uncovered in Tomb No. 30 at Gyerim-no—depict male and female fig-



Fig. 5. Wooden phallus from Buyeo.
Source: Buyeo National Museum, Buyeo 8293.



Fig. 6. Male and female clay figurines engaged in an intimate pose excavated in Suncheon, Jeollanam-do. Source: National Gyeongju Museum, Gwangju 841.

ures with overt sexual features, some in explicitly sexual poses (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe 1998, 1). These figurines are typically interpreted as apotropaic or fertility charms, intended to protect the deceased or promote abundance in the afterlife. Despite the diversity and symbolic richness of these artifacts—from petroglyphs and figurines to carved wooden talismans—they remain isolated examples rather than components of a systematic erotic tradition. Collectively, they reflect a ritual-symbolic engagement with sexuality, deeply embedded in cosmological, shamanic, and protective frameworks that are suggestive yet remain only partially understood.

Visual arts such as painting and sculpture in ancient Korea offer only a limited iconographic repertoire related to sexuality, insufficient to provide an unfiltered cross-section of the erotic imagination of the peninsula's early inhabitants. For this reason, the present study focuses primarily on literary sources. In particular, a comparison between *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* reveals significant differences in tone and narrative

treatment of bodily and sexual elements. *Samguk sagi*, compiled by Kim Bu-sik, adopts a restrained, annalistic style, offering terse and dignified portrayals of rulers. For example, in reference to Maripgan Jijeung (r. 437?-514), it merely notes his imposing physique and extraordinary courage (王體鴻大, 膽力過人) (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 106). In contrast, *Samguk yusa*, compiled by the monk Iryeon in the late 13th century, introduces an extravagant and eroticized elaboration: Jijeung is said to have a penis four spans long—so large, in fact, that he could not find a sexual partner (Iryeon 2016, 67). The situation is resolved only when he encounters the feces of an extraordinarily tall woman, through which he infers compatibility. This anecdote, though fantastical and grotesque, reveals Iryeon's inclination toward vivid corporeal detail and a fascination with the extraordinary, offering a window into a more imaginative and sensually charged mode of historiography.

Elsewhere in *Samguk yusa*, erotic imagery is employed in both metaphorical and playful ways. In one account, a character remarks, “If a male organ enters a female organ, it will surely perish” (Iryeon 2016, 67) framing sexuality in terms of fatal consequence and mythical warning. Another vivid example concerns the monk Wonhyo, who, upon seeing bees and butterflies flitting among flowers, is overcome by desire and walks the streets of Gyeongju singing: “Who will lend me an axe that has lost its handle? I wish to cut down a heaven-supporting pillar” (Iryeon 2016, 106). The song is a thinly veiled sexual metaphor. Later, he encounters a woman washing her menstrual cloth beneath a bridge. In jest, he asks, “May I have a sip of the cool water?” She replies boldly, “Of course, come and drink,” and scoops some of the soiled water into a half-moon-shaped gourd, pressing it to his lips. Wonhyo drinks deeply and continues on his way, quenching his thirst with water from the mountain stream. The narrative combines humor, eroticism, and ritual impurity in ways that blur the boundaries between desire, taboo, and enlightenment.

In addition to the inherent challenges of interpreting anomalous or symbolic passages such as those previously discussed, the attempt to reconstruct the erotic sphere in early Korean history encounters further methodological obstacles. Most significantly, due to the scarcity and

fragmentary nature of the available sources, it is impossible to undertake a detailed or comprehensive analysis of erotic practices specific to the individual polities of the Three Kingdoms period. Nevertheless, it remains essential to attempt a general discursive reconstruction of sexuality and its representations. Evidence suggests that significant regional differences likely existed in sexual customs. For instance, polygamy among rulers was permitted in Baekje and Goguryeo, while in Silla it appears to have been prohibited.¹ These divergences may reflect broader ideological, political, and religious distinctions among the kingdoms. Further complicating the analysis is the issue of authorship and perspective. The historians responsible for compiling our principal sources—such as *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*—were male, and in the case of Iryeon, a Buddhist monk. As such, they lacked access to the intimate and private lives of the individuals they describe, particularly women. Moreover, there is no evidence that women contributed directly to the composition of these texts. Thus, any attempt to approach women's everyday experiences or their subjective perception of sexuality must necessarily pass through the prism of the male gaze. This results in an inevitably phallogocentric discourse, in which female sexuality is often reduced to a moral dichotomy: a woman is either virtuous and chaste or shameless and corrupt (Girod 2013, 4501). The androcentric perspective of *Samguk sagi* is made particularly explicit in a misogynistic aside by Kim Bu-sik, who expresses astonishment that the Kingdom of Silla did not fall into ruin despite being ruled by a female sovereign, Queen Seondeok (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 121). Gender asymmetry is thus a defining feature of how erotic behavior was represented and likely regulated in early Korea. Free men may have been allowed to engage in sexual relations with concubines, and kings were

¹ The status of women was considerably lower in Baekje; as Ju Bodon notes, the *Baekje Annals* and funerary inscriptions do not mention the personal names of queens. This suggests that women—even royal consorts—lacked individual identity, being defined primarily as daughters and later as wives. By contrast, the *Silla Annals* do record the names of queens, and monogamy was the prevailing system. The accession of three female rulers in Silla—the second such case in East Asia after Japan—though contested, indicates that women's status was relatively higher there than in the other Korean kingdoms. (Ju 2010, 35-56).

accompanied by different partners without moral reproach (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 512). Upon the death of his wife, a man could remarry (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 343); by contrast, widow remarriage was considered inappropriate for a woman of virtue.

“A virtuous widow may never take another man, and a loyal minister may never serve another dynasty” (Iryeon 2016, 155).

This aphorism encapsulates the ideological framework that confined female desire within strict moral boundaries while simultaneously legitimizing male sexual liberty. A paradigmatic example of female virtue in early Korean literature is the wife of Kim Je-sang, who, after her husband was deported to Japan, remained steadfastly facing the sea in the direction of his exile, mourning in sorrow until her death (Iryeon 2016, 50). Within the moral framework of the time, women were granted virtually no margin for transgression. In an effort to codify and exalt the ideal of chastity, historical sources recount stories of women who had sexual relations with only one man in their lifetime—figures reminiscent of the Roman *uniuirae*, idealized as models of ancient moral rectitude. One particularly notable case is that of a beautiful woman from Baekje, the wife of Domi, who may be regarded as a Korean analogue to Lucretia, the quintessential Roman heroine. After the death of her husband, she was summoned to become the concubine of the king (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 475). Refusing to submit, she resisted the monarch’s advances, thus embodying the ideal of chastity not merely as abstention from sexual activity, but as a moral integrity grounded in fidelity and honor. Chastity (*castitas*), in this context, is presented as a core ethical value that defines a woman’s virtue. It transcends mere sexual behavior and encompasses a broader moral purity. Violations of this standard, especially by women, are met with extreme punitive violence. The sources describe brutal punishments for adultery, including being beaten to death with a red-hot iron applied to the genitals or execution by fire:

“She slept with another man, that’s what happened. [...] So he heated an

iron club in the fire and struck her in the vagina until she died. Then he killed her two sons” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 508).

Another episode involves a woman becoming pregnant outside of wedlock. Upon learning of it, Kim Yusin scolds her:

“How dare you get pregnant without parental permission?” (Iryeon 2016, 81)

He then publicly shames her and declares his wish to burn her alive. The irony in this passage is striking: Kim Yusin, who himself led a tumultuous and highly active sex life, is portrayed elsewhere in the *Samguk yusa* as entertaining himself with three different women simultaneously. This moral double standard highlights the asymmetrical expectations placed upon male and female sexuality in historical discourse. The most emblematic case of infidelity is that of Cheoyong’s beautiful wife, who, in her husband’s absence, becomes the object of desire for the spirit of the plague. The spirit infiltrates their home and lies with her, symbolizing not only sexual violation but also cosmological disorder.

3. Sexual Union and the Politics of Reproduction in Ancient Korea

Women are portrayed in ancient sources as forging emotional bonds, and their circulation—whether voluntary or coerced—emerges as one of the most effective mechanisms in the socialization processes of the time. From the standpoint of structural anthropology, sexual union represents the most elementary basis for social ties. In discussing women in ancient Rome, Virginie Girod observes that their fate was typically limited to two outcomes: to become either a respectable mother of a family or a prostitute (Girod 2013, 63). This dichotomy appears to be broadly applicable to ancient Korean society as well. Entry into one of these opposing categories was determined by a variety of factors, including social class and

lineage, but the decisive criterion was, above all, sexual conduct. Importantly, this behavior was not always a matter of personal choice: a woman's fate was most often decided by her father. In fact, women were rarely granted the autonomy to select their romantic or sexual partners; such decisions were almost invariably negotiated by their families. The seductive or affective dimension of a woman's value was thus subordinated to the material interests involved in her "transfer" (Bataille 2017, 432). In both early societies and, to a lesser degree, among rural populations, a woman functioned as an economic asset (Bataille 2017, 437), belonging first to her father and later to her husband. This notion is illustrated clearly in a statement by the character Dohwarang, who, when rejecting the advances of the king, declares:

"What a woman must uphold, she does not serve two husbands" (Iryeon 2016, 69).

The female body is thus conceived as inseparably bound to its rightful owner. This conceptualization is also evident in the *Taejong Chunchu-gong* narrative in *Wonder 1*, where the court ladies of King Eui-ja of Baekje choose to throw themselves from the northern cliff of Buyeo alongside their sovereign, rather than allow themselves to become spoils of war and property of the victorious enemy. As Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrated, the archaic institution of marriage functioned as a system of exchange and redistribution (Bataille 2017, 245). To marry a woman was to acquire a precious asset—a form of wealth whose value was simultaneously economic, political, and sacred (Bataille 2017, 335). This is confirmed in Korean historical sources, which recount that, in times of famine, a daughter could be sold as a survival strategy (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 277); if particularly beautiful, she could be offered as a gift to the king (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 86) or even to the emperor (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 114). Unlike prostitution, the commodification of the female body in this context was legalized and normalized within the framework of patriarchal morality. Marriage, therefore, is framed not as a mutual emotional bond, but as a transactional gift, a transfer of property that serves

to create alliances between two family groups.

“You have saved my life,” the old man said. “In gratitude I offer you my daughter as your wife” (Iryeon 2016, 130).

“I have two daughters. Choose whichever you prefer to be your wife” (Iryeon 2016, 122).

“King Namhae was pleased with youth’s wisdom and granted him his daughter in marriage. This was the lady Ani” (Iryeon 2016, 40).

Such passages reflect the prevailing conception of women not as autonomous agents, but as instruments of alliance, wealth, and moral legitimacy in the fabric of early Korean society (Mauss 2016, 2221). Women’s social maturity in ancient Korean society was essentially marked by a true rite of passage: marriage. This institution formalized the transfer of the woman as a “gift” and functioned, in the words of Marcel Mauss, as a *“total social fact”*—a phenomenon charged with social and religious, magical and economic, utilitarian and sentimental, juridical and moral significance (Bataille 2017, 358). Marriage was not merely a personal union, but a culturally dense practice through which the affective and biological dimensions of human life were woven into the political and structural fabric of society. Wedding rites, in particular, served to ritualize and publicly affirm the transformation of individual affective relationships into socially recognized bonds. Through the formalization of these unions, the dialectic of sexuality was reconfigured into a political language, especially when marriage involved elite or royal families. In such contexts, marital alliances acquired an explicitly strategic function, becoming critical tools for inter-clan solidarity, regional integration, and dynastic legitimacy. Far from being a private affair, marriage in premodern Korea was a crucial axis around which the future of social groups and entire polities could turn. This is evident in the dynastic politics of the Later Three Kingdoms period. For example, the alliance between Silla and Goryeo was further strengthened when King Gyeongsun bestowed

the beautiful daughter of his uncle upon Wang Geon, the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, as a royal bride (Iryeon 2016, 135).

“The founder of our kingdom, having united the two royal families through friendly ties, soon recognized Silla’s culture and gave his daughter in marriage. He restored his loyalty, and now the two kingdoms are united, ruling together over the Three Han” (Iryeon 2016, 136).

This gesture was not merely matrimonial, but symbolic of the transfer of legitimacy, the sealing of an alliance, and the integration of two dynastic lineages. Such a marriage represented a fusion of bloodlines and political destinies, essential for stabilizing power and ensuring continuity. Moreover, these marriages often had implications beyond the immediate families involved. They could affect regional peace treaties, military alliances, tribute relationships, and even the transmission of cultural and religious capital. The woman in these cases, although often silent in the sources, functioned as the living embodiment of inter-political cohesion. Her body became a symbolic and functional terrain on which alliances were enacted and sovereignty was negotiated. In sum, marriage in ancient Korea was not simply a personal or familial matter—it was a central institution through which gender, power, economy, and cosmology intersected. The woman’s transition into marriage marked not only her entry into adulthood, but also her inscription into the broader structures of political economy and symbolic exchange. Marriage, as a recognized sexual union between a man and a woman, also played a significant role in pacification and the prevention of conflict. It functioned not only as a domestic institution but as a diplomatic tool, often used to mark the end of hostilities or to solidify political alliances. In this context, unions with foreign women were not uncommon. One example is the legendary marriage between King Suro of Geumgwan Gaya and the princess of Ayuta, a kingdom located in what is now India—an episode that reveals how the symbolic and reproductive functions of marriage were intertwined with early international diplomacy (Iryeon 2016, 162).

However, in Three Kingdoms society, the union of sexed bodies through marriage was celebrated primarily for its reproductive potential. The survival of the household, the clan, and the state itself depended on fertility. In an agrarian and pre-antibiotic context, a woman's ability to conceive and bear children was considered her most valuable physical trait. Unsurprisingly, classical Korean sources promote a model of sexuality that is tightly regulated by conjugal duty, with its primary aim being reproduction rather than pleasure. A woman who failed to fulfill this reproductive role could be repudiated or marginalized (Iryeon 2016, 113). Infertility was almost exclusively regarded as a female failure, with no apparent reflection on the possibility of male sterility. One striking example appears in the case of King Gyeongdeok, whose sexual potency is explicitly described:

“King Gyeongdeok’s member was eight inches long, yet his queen could not bear him a son. Consequently, he sent her away, bestowing upon her the title Lady Saryang, and took Lady Manwol in her place” (Iryeon 2016, 113).

Similarly, another queen, though formally welcomed at court, failed to produce an heir. After her father's political insurrection, she too was expelled. These examples illustrate how a woman's fertility status could determine her political and social fate. Even Queen Seondeok, one of the most celebrated monarchs in Korean history, was subtly criticized for her presumed infertility. Chinese envoys are said to have gifted her a painting of peonies without bees—a veiled allusion to her inability to reproduce, despite her success as a ruler. Conversely, the sources also record and glorify women of exceptional fertility, offering them up as models to inspire others and reinforce reproductive norms. Fertile women were publicly praised and materially rewarded:

“In October, the wife of the Taesa Geummo gave birth to three sons” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 277).

“In December, a woman from the Gomi district had triplets—all three were boys” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 303).

These celebratory reports echo the Roman *lex iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, a law promulgated under Augustus and recorded by Dio Cassius, which incentivized procreation among Roman citizens through a system of fiscal rewards for families with three or more children (Girod 2013, 66, 1051). A comparable reward system appears to have existed in ancient Korea:

“In the autumn, the wife of the Hwangjinaema of Taeyanggwan-gun in the Udu region gave birth to two boys and two girls, and the king rewarded her with 100 seok of rice” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 278).

“On the tenth day of the third moon in the third year of Linte (Byeong-in, 666), a female slave named Giri, belonging to a commoner, gave birth to triplets; and on the seventh day of the first moon in the third year of Tsungchang (Gyeong-o), a female slave belonging to Ilsangupgan of the Hangi Department bore quadruplets—one girl and three boys. The king rewarded each woman with two hundred large bags of rice” (Iryeon 2016, 101).

These passages reveal a politics of fertility, in which women’s reproductive capacity was both surveilled and celebrated, punished or rewarded, depending on whether it conformed to the state’s demographic and symbolic priorities. Sexuality, thus, was not only personal but also institutionalized, moralized, and economically inscribed into the core of early Korean statecraft.

4. Sex, Deviance and Body

Although the historical texts under consideration were certainly not written with the explicit aim of documenting the sexual customs of the peo-

ples of the Three Kingdoms period, references to sexuality nonetheless animate numerous passages. *Samguk yusa*, for instance, opens with a strikingly symbolic scene of interspecies union: the myth of Korea's founding begins with a female bear being transformed into a woman and uniting with a heavenly deity—an act that results in the birth of Dangun, the mythical ancestor of the Korean people. Here, sexuality plays a legitimating role, particularly in origin myths, which frequently revolve around acts of seduction or miraculous, often oviparous, births. Even though the compilers of such texts—especially monks like Iryeon—were skeptical of their historicity, they nevertheless chose to record these episodes, aware of their symbolic and narrative power (Iryeon 2016, 137).

In one passage from *Samguk sagi*, it is noted that people attach great importance to sex (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 496), though sexual pleasure itself is not depicted as a central element of happiness or fulfillment. Rather, in the language of these sources, the act of sex is often described with the term *gyotong* (交通) (Iryeon 2016, 142), a word that more literally means “communication” or “exchange.” This linguistic choice likely alludes to the interpenetration and mutual entanglement of two bodies, understood as a form of embodied dialogue rather than hedonistic indulgence. However, desire is not always fully contained by public morality. Bodily impulses frequently override social conventions and rational restraint. Several passages recount extramarital sexual encounters, often infused with dreamlike or fantastical elements:

“One month after his appointment, Suljong-gong and his wife both had the same dream in which a young man, radiant with beauty, entered their bedroom” (Iryeon 2016, 107).

The sources refer to these unauthorized sexual episodes as *yahap* (野合)² (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 438), literally “wild unions” or “rustic inter-

² The term “wild union” (野合) appears in both Chinese and Korean sources to denote unions or

course”— a term that emphasizes the instinctual and untamed nature of desire, likening it to bestiality or primal behavior. While abstaining from sex is not condemned (Iryeon 2016, 299) and, in some cases, is even praised—such as in the lives of Gwangdeok and his wife (Iryeon 2016, 346), or of the two strikingly handsome monks Nohil Buduk and Taldal Bakbak (Iryeon 2016, 238) — an excess of libido is treated with deep suspicion. Uncontrolled lust is repeatedly portrayed as a destabilizing force, capable of undermining moral order and political authority. The sources often associate sexual excess with dynastic decline, framing it as one of the principal causes behind the collapse of royal mandates.

Thus, although sexuality is not presented as a pursuit of pleasure or liberation, it occupies a central and ambivalent place in the historical imagination of early Korea—simultaneously a force of creation, seduction, disruption, and collapse. Sexual indulgence as a sign of political decay is a recurring theme in both Korean and Chinese historiography. Numerous rulers are condemned not merely for administrative failures but specifically for their unrestrained pursuit of sensual pleasure. King Gyeongae, for example, is described as having abandoned himself to merriment and indulgence, frequenting the Pavilion of the Stone Abalone (*Seokjeonnu*) where he reveled in the company of courtiers and chosen beauties (Iryeon 2016, 137). His neglect of state affairs in favor of personal gratification is portrayed as a symptom of the kingdom’s imminent collapse. Similarly, King Saryun, after only four years on the throne, was deposed by his own people—his misrule and sexual excesses cited explicitly as the cause of popular rebellion (Iryeon 2016, 137). This moralizing framework echoes broader East Asian historiographic traditions. Chinese historical records recount the downfalls of King Jie of the Xia dynasty and King Zhou of the Shang, both infamous for indulging in the

couplings that fall outside formalized marriage practices or normative spousal relations. In Chinese historiography, it often implies illicit or unsanctioned sexual activity, whereas in Korean usage, it more commonly refers to irregular unions—those lacking formal betrothal, ritual sanction, or social approval—rather than unrestrained erotic excess. In this study, the term is interpreted with caution, as a descriptor of non-normative sexual or marital behavior, without assuming inherently transgressive or ecstatic connotations.

pleasures of sex and wine. Their obsessive pursuit of pleasure, it is said, allowed corruption to fester, drove competent ministers from court, and ultimately led their empires into ruin (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 247). In the face of these crises, Kim Chijeong of Ichan, taking advantage of the growing unrest, gathered a coalition and laid siege to the royal palace. The king's sexual misconduct, more than a private vice, is here portrayed as a cosmological and political transgression, one that disturbs the natural order and invites rebellion (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 247). These narratives frame the body of the ruler as not merely private but politically symbolic: his ability—or failure—to control desire becomes a metaphor for the state of the kingdom itself. Erotic excess is thus never just a personal flaw, but a harbinger of wider disorder and collapse.

Not even women were immune to the sin of lust, but power intoxicates those who hold it and inhibits their sexual restraints. In secret, the queen summoned two or three beautiful children to court and engaged in lascivious relations with them. She even appointed them to positions in the realm, leaving the affairs of the Kingdom in their hands (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 304). During her six-year reign the Queen loved many court men, who usurped her power and misused her authority. This led to a collapse of morals so that famines increased, the people fled and bands of brigands rose up against the government (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 146).

Excess was not the only form of abnormal conduct. In creating a systematic definition of morality and paradigms of behavior, the historian's interest inevitably shifts to deviations. Deviance is exemplified by King Hyegong and his effeminate behavior, which caused the government to weaken, the kingdom to descend into utter confusion, and the rise of thieves everywhere. The sources do not contain explicit references to homoerotic love, but this passage seems to betray an absolute intransigence towards non-heterosexual attitudes, so much so that, in the end, public morality forced the king to repent of his [womanish] ways (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 115).

Within this moral discourse, beauty and the physical body emerge as central elements in the construction of erotic attraction. The case of Princess Seonhwa is particularly illustrative: it is her legendary beauty

(美艷無雙)—of which Seodong hears long before seeing her—that triggers his desire and motivates his journey to find her (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 142). In this narrative, the body precedes and determines love, functioning as both stimulus and justification for erotic action (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 124, 301). In fact, throughout Korean historiography, the body is not merely physical—it is symbolic, a visible manifestation of inner virtue and legitimacy. Historical descriptions often begin with physical characteristics, which are then followed by observations about a person’s character or intellectual abilities. This reflects a cultural belief that moral qualities are naturally reflected in the appearance of the body. Tall stature, handsome features, and physical symmetry are often equated with moral strength, wisdom, and fitness to rule.

Thus, beauty is never a neutral attribute: it plays an active role in the erotization of virtue, in the justification of desire, and in the shaping of historical memory. The sexed body—marked by gender, beauty, and desire—becomes both a social index and an ethical signifier, capable of reinforcing or destabilizing the order to which it ostensibly belongs.

“The king was seven measures tall, was magnanimous and loved others” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 107).

“The king had a peculiar face and an imposing body; he was poised and witty” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 111).

“King Muryeong stood eight measures tall and possessed facial features as if he had been drawn; he was also charitable and magnanimous” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006b, 84).

“Among these, the fourth son, Geumgang, was tall, handsome and intelligent” (Iryeon 2016, 154).

This ideal of perfection corresponds to the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia* (καλοκαγαθία), which finds its effective translator in Iryeon’s expression ‘(her) virtue and appearance are both beautiful’ (德

容雙美, Iryeon 2016, 135). In addition to height and physical prowess, the face mainly embodies the erotic drive; so do the teeth (or smile) and the eyes. Sometimes the eyebrows were like “two eight-colored rainbows” like those of Yao, the sage-king of ancient China, and “his eyes sparkled with double pupils” like those of Shun, Yao’s son-in-law (Iryeon 2016, 146). But it is in the gaze that the magic of seduction is concentrated. The gaze takes on an essential role; it is the vehicle of the power of Eros, the material emanation of the loved object.

“His heart rejoiced, and he cast her a seductive glance” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006b, 353).

“A virgin followed him as she prayed, casting glances until their eyes met. [...] He took her to a secluded place, they entered, and there they exchanged outpourings of love” (Iryeon 2016, 279).

In the end, the phallus constitutes one of the most conspicuous elements of the human body. It is a symbol of sexuality itself, and hyperphallicity even becomes a tool for legitimizing the power of a sovereign. References to the penis recur in various passages of the sources, and we do not know if what today is perceived as obscene, polluted by excessive modern materialist positivism, could simply have held a prophylactic or cathartic value (Girod 2013, 11, 116).

“The monk drew himself up with dignity and said —Who is more to blame, a man who carries a dead fish on his back or a man who holds living flesh between his legs? And with these words he departed” (Iryeon 2016, 348).

“The King was a big man and his phallus measured one foot five inches, so that it was difficult to find a suitable queen for him” (Iryeon 2016, 67).

In these narratives, beauty is not only portrayed as a sign of virtue, but also—conversely—as a dangerous weapon. As *Samguk yusa* warns,

“The dream of a beautiful woman is a pernicious dream” (鰥夢蛾眉賊夢藏). The allure of the body is thus both powerful and perilous, and its effects—like the beauty itself—are ultimately transient. This ambivalence is poignantly reflected in the despair of Josin’s wife:

“When I first met you your face was beautiful and you were in your prime. Your clothes were neat. Together, we tried all kinds of food. Together, we wore all kinds of fabrics. For these fifty years, our affection has grown ever deeper, and our love more intense; ours has been a destined love. But many years have passed since then, ailments and diseases have increased over the years, and we suffer more and more from hunger and cold. The shame of living under the roof of others and begging to eat weighs on us like a mountain. A couple who can no longer protect their children from hunger and cold, how could they enjoy their love? Our colorful faces and our beautiful smiles are now like dew on the grass. Even our promises that once smelled of gromwell and orchid are now like a pussy willow trembling in the wind. I have become a burden for you, and you are a cause for concern for me. If I think back to the happiness of the past few days, I think that is the beginning of my concern. How did we end up in this state?” (Iryeon 2016, 250)

If, on the one hand, the sources exalt the beauty of the bodies and exalt all the seductive weapons of a handsome body, they at the same time abhor and mock what is ugly or anomalous. “Extremely ugly” (甚寒寢) is the description given of the princess, daughter of King Gyeongseon, literally ‘extremely frigid in bed’. Ugliness is singled out as something monstrous and is repudiated and denigrated.

“The child was the laughingstock of the village because of his big head and flat forehead, like a wall. The people called him Daeseong (Big Wall)” (Iryeon 2016, 380).

“Ondal had an anomalous face and made people laugh” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006b, 427).

Deformed or unnatural bodies disturb, terrify, or even become a fatal omen.

“In the third month, a woman from Mamiji District in Mujin County gave birth to a son, but he had two heads, two bodies, four arms. When she was giving birth to him dazzling lightning appeared in the sky” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 247).

“During the first year of King Munmu’s reign, the body of a huge woman came floating on the sea south of Sabisu. Her body was seventy-three feet long, her feet six feet long, and her vagina was three feet long” (Iryeon 2016, 97).

In reflecting upon these narratives, it becomes clear that the body—admired when symmetrical and beautiful, feared when deformed or ambiguous—serves not merely as a biological fact but as a moral and political text. Physical appearance becomes a mirror of virtue, a vehicle of legitimacy, and a battleground for anxiety over disorder, sexuality, and social control. Ultimately, these stories reveal less about individual bodies and more about the societies that judged them—societies obsessed with ideal forms, but haunted by everything that resisted or exceeded those ideals.

5. Love and Jealousy

A traditional semantic analysis applied to the different contexts of use of the term *éros* reveals that in the earliest classical texts, it generally referred to a desire for glory or political power, rather than simply a desire for a physical relationship (Sissa 2003, xxviii). It is, however, the obsessive desire for a particular person that gives rise to expressions such as *erân* (“being in love”) and *erasthēnai* (“falling in love”). The term ‘pye’ (嬖, “to love and favor”) translates the love—exchanged for favors—that Queen Jindeok feels for the men of the court. The term ‘chin’ (親)

expresses Dangun's desire for Habaek's daughter. Yet both are surpassed in intensity by the term 'ae' (愛), which is more accurately translated as "true love," stemming from emotional attachment. This is the feeling that the daughter of Taesu Kim has for Josin. He returned to the statue of Gwaneum and accused her of not having fulfilled his dream. As the days passed, he wept until, exhausted by his own feelings, he fell asleep, and the daughter of Taesu Kim appeared in a dream. Joyfully, she entered the door and, smiling and showing her beautiful teeth, said: "Ever since I beheld your face for a moment, I have loved it in my heart, and I have never forgotten it. But, pressed by my parents, I have been forced to become betrothed to another" (Iryeon 2016, 248). Beyond unions regulated by rigid social norms and domesticated by economic and political interests, there are others marked by pure feeling or instinctive, uncontrollable passion. Seodong's story also belongs to this context: he courts Seonhwa until she falls in love with him (Iryeon 2016, 142). Love is a spell, as perhaps also demonstrated by the magical jewel with which Myojong causes the king to fall in love with him to the point of not letting him go (Iryeon 2016, 119). As soon as the emperor confiscates the jewel, no one loves or trusts him anymore (Iryeon 2016, 119).

"Josin came to the farm and he liked the daughter of Taesu Kim Heun, he was deeply attracted to her; he often went in front of the Gwaneum, secretly praying that his love could be crowned with success, but many years passed and she now had a partner" (Iryeon 2016, 248).

Love and passion do not seem to be synonymous with happiness; rather, they can also be a source of torment or misfortune. Evidence of this can be seen in tales of unrequited love, exemplified by the sovereign who is madly infatuated with the beautiful Dohwarang: "the King learned of her beauty, invited her to court and began to desire her" (Iryeon 2016, 69). Further proof of this attitude is the misery to which Josin himself has been reduced. At last, wiping away her tears, the old wife spoke to her husband: "When I married you in the flower of my youth and beauty, you kissed my blushing cheeks and called them roses.

Then we had fine clothes to wear and good food to eat, and our married love deepened as long as the mellow wine flowed from our barrels. No one in this wide world will give us so much as a night's sojourn in a storeroom or a bottle of soy sauce. We have become a laughingstock" (Iryeon 2016, 250). As previously discussed, the gender difference in ancient Korean culture is fundamental and extends to all aspects of life. With its apparent fragility and weakness, the female body is understood as unarmed and helpless; it is a human body but lacks defenses. However, in the dialectic of eroticism, the woman is not merely a passive object of man's desire; rather, she is physiologically able to make men vulnerable to her beauty. Man has never been able to deny that sensuality can render even sovereigns, princes, and monks vulnerable to female beauty.

"The woman entered the cell and the monk lowered the wick of the burning candle in the niche and chanted Buddhist prayers without stopping a moment in order to keep the temptation of a pretty woman out of his pure mind" (Iryeon 2016, 239).

"The King returned to the palace and shot an arrow into the harp case. When it was opened, he beheld his Queen in the loving embrace of a monk, both pierced by the arrow and dead" (Iryeon 2016, 51).

"As for me, I was too weak to resist her charming beauty, and turned her away for fear of falling in love with her and going to hell instead of heaven" (Iryeon 2016, 241).

"Lady Suro was a peerless beauty, and whenever she traveled, whether to mountains, lakes or seashore, she would be seized by gods and dragons because of her charms" (Iryeon 2016, 110).

Another aspect of women's erotic nature is the rivalry in love—jealousy—which appears to theatrically characterize the female experience of eros. It is described as an intensity of feeling to such an extent that they may even be driven to kill for love: a love that intoxicates and

leads to violence and murder.

“The two women were rivals (in beauty) and jealous of each other and Junjeong lured Nammo by inviting her to her house, offered her some liquor and got her drunk, then dragged her to a river and threw her in, killing her” (Iryeon 2016, 110).

“(The king loved her incredibly) [...] then the queen became jealous and planned to kill her” (Iryeon 2016, 244).

In this way, jealous love becomes a perilous deviance, even leading to the murder of one’s rival. These narratives show that love, while celebrated as a force of union and transcendence, is also fraught with contradiction. It ignites devotion and joy, yet just as easily slips into sorrow, obsession, and destruction. Jealousy, in particular, emerges not merely as an emotional by-product of love, but as a defining axis of its drama—capable of transforming affection into violence. Erotic desire, when thwarted or rivaled, turns inward, becoming both a torment and a motive. In the end, love in these stories is not just a feeling, but a force—capable of elevating or unraveling the self, and shaping the destinies of those who fall under its spell.

Betrayal—or the disruption of marital trust—emerges as an almost inevitable narrative element in both historical records and literary traditions. Ancient Korean poetic narratives often encode tensions surrounding desire and conjugal disruption in indirect yet symbolically rich ways. Songs such as Hwangjo-ga (黃鳥歌), Haega (海歌), and Cheoyong-ga (處容歌) explore triangular relationships marked by the temporary unraveling—and eventual restoration—of marital order.

Among various interpretations, Hwangjo-ga has been read as King Yuri’s lament for his solitude following a failed romantic triangle involving two women, revealing both male vulnerability and female agency in early Goguryeo court life. In Haega, the abduction of the noblewoman by a sea deity triggers collective resistance, where the act of singing becomes a performative tool of moral enforcement. Similarly, in Cheoy-

ong-ga, the eponymous protagonist chooses not retaliation but dance and poetry to reclaim his violated household, prompting the demon's surrender and the restoration of harmony.

These narratives share a structural logic in which disorder—often instigated by divine or royal forces—does not lead to erotic indulgence or emotional collapse, but rather to the reaffirmation of normative values. Female virtue, male restraint, and the symbolic power of performance coalesce to restore social equilibrium. In this light, erotic deviance in early Korea appears less as an expression of personal passion and more as a threat to (or mechanism for reaffirming) cosmic and familial order.

Conclusion

While fully acknowledging the methodological limitations of this research—chief among them the difficulty of reconstructing regional specificities and variations, and the fact that all surviving records are filtered through a male-centered perspective shaped during the Goryeo period, which likely embraced different cultural and social paradigms—this article has sought to shed light on key aspects of erotic discourse in Three Kingdoms Korea through close readings of selected passages from *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi*. These narratives are far from being neutral records of desire; rather, they articulate a moral cartography that clearly demarcates the boundaries between normative and deviant behaviors. In doing so, they contribute to the construction of two distinct and asymmetrical models of sexuality: one masculine, heroic, and active; the other feminine, chaste, modest, and above all reproductively functional.

While male deviance is typically expressed through abstinence or excessive libido, the former is treated benignly, even valorized in monastic figures, whereas the latter—especially when embodied by kings—is consistently associated with political failure and moral collapse. The king's inability to restrain his sexual urges becomes a metaphor for a kingdom out of control, as pleasure supplants governance and the ruler's body mirrors the degeneration of his mandate. Likewise, the rejection of

masculine norms, particularly through effeminacy, is cast as a direct threat to the ideal of heroic virility. The case of King Hyegong, whose perceived non-masculinity is said to have contributed to political disarray, illustrates how gender nonconformity was framed not only as social deviance, but as a destabilizing political force—one that ultimately demanded repentance and moral correction.

On the other hand, female deviance is defined by a very different set of concerns. In a predominantly agricultural society marked by high mortality and continuous warfare, procreation was essential to the survival of the household and the state. Within this framework, infertility is not merely a biological misfortune—it becomes a form of sexual failure that strips a woman's erotic value of its economic and social utility. Infidelity, too, is portrayed as a distinctly feminine transgression. Unlike men—whose multiple sexual partnerships are tolerated, even normalized—women who violate sexual exclusivity face extreme punishment, including torture or execution by fire. Such asymmetries lay bare the deeply entrenched gender hierarchy in the regulation of desire.

The body—and its aesthetic value—is another crucial axis of this erotic discourse. While the sources celebrate beauty and physical vigor, they are equally unforgiving toward the grotesque or the malformed. The bodies of figures such as Taeseong or Ondal are mocked and marginalized, reminders that ancient Korean society was deeply invested in strict corporeal standards: only beautiful, symmetrical, and virtuous bodies were deemed worthy of narrative legitimacy. Yet even within the discourse of beauty, two divergent paradigms emerge. Male beauty is typically read as the external expression of internal moral or political virtue. Female beauty, by contrast, is associated with seduction, temptation, and danger. It is commodified, exchanged, and subjected to paternal control—yet it also becomes a weapon of agency. The female figure, though often depicted as the object of male desire, does not remain passive. She manipulates her own erotic capital, ensnares men, monks, and even spirits, and can become a disruptive force within the sexual order.

The sources even allow space for the *femme fatale*: the woman who kills out of jealousy, asserting erotic dominance by overturning the norms

of submission and modesty. In this theatrical inversion of roles, she ceases to be the victim and emerges as the executioner, transgressing both moral and gendered expectations.

Ultimately, these narratives do more than regulate behavior; they moralize sexuality, imbuing it with guilt, anxiety, and fear. Through the constant reiteration of dichotomies—male/female, active/passive, virtuous/deviant—the texts reinforce a binary sexual logic that leaves little room for ambiguity or fluidity. The result is an artificially rigid system, one that amplifies the distance between two sexual worlds that barely communicate, creating a structurally asymmetrical relationship between the sexes and a vision of eros profoundly shaped by moral, political, and gendered imperatives.

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