This paper seeks to address an important issue in Korean Studies that tends to be evaded rather than addressed. The share of recognition classical Korean literature possesses in the global republic of letters is unimpressive when compared to other national literatures and when measured against the claims made for Korean culture’s venerable heritage. This is due to a large extent to an absolute dearth of appealing translations of its important works into English. The latter part of this paper looks in more detail at translation issues, focussing on translations of two sijo in particular. But prior to that, a general discussion of the stakes and hurdles involved may not be out of place, considering the obvious disparity between the two literatures, Korean and English.

One translates literary works out of love – perverted and mostly unrequited love perhaps, but love nonetheless, since the sheer amount of labour and pain translators accept as their lot cannot be explained otherwise. Some may translate with a view to pecuniary gain, but the pay never quite matches the toil. The endless hardship of the work can be likened to that of a galley slave, chained to the oar, serving the pleasure of the captain, in this case the original author, ceaselessly rowing until the destination is reached. The glory and booty accrue to the author and not to the translator. The invisible wretch has little more reward than his own aching limbs, or if he has not been disabled yet, the prospect of more rowing. If this is love, then, let us pray to be free from it. But there are those accursed creatures who, professionally or otherwise, cannot extricate themselves from the clanking clutch of the chain. In my case, being a slave serving two masters, English Literature and Korean Literature, one flamboyant and prosperous, the other obscure but nonetheless exacting and sensitive,

---

1 This paper owes its birth to the Centre of Korean Studies seminar at SOAS on 28 October 2011. I thank Dr Jae Hoon Yeon, Dr Grace Koh and all the others who came to the seminar and offered helpful comments.
I chose to turn my abjection into affection, bordering on addiction probably, shuttling between the two, hoping to please both.

English Literature – that renowned, magnificent and palatial edifice – is a master or mistress who pays my bills and keeps my family fed, housed and clothed. There is no shortage of lovers offering service to him or her; lovers of all persuasions, hailing from all corners of the world. Korean Literature, on the other hand, commands my native attachment, the language and the tribe being my own, despite some minor aberrations in my biography. Lovable as she is, Korean Literature enjoys only a meagre share of recognition in the English-speaking world, if any: slim chance of running into her at Waterstones in the UK and shamefully low in the Amazon.com sales ranking. Even in the league table of subjects constituting Korean Studies, literature seems to occupy its lower regions. The British Library catalogue returns an overwhelming number of books on the Korean War when searched under ‘Korean’; the mainstream media loves to lampoon North Korea, while a good portion of YouTube and the blogosphere patronizes Korean Pop. The success story of South Korea’s export-driven economy courts envy, but Samsung and LG brands, true to their business instincts, do not always trumpet their national provenance. That Korean Christianity, both orthodox and heretical, has a global profile is not well known among secular westerners, but it commands greater respect than Korean literature judging by the Korean translation of the notice in St Paul’s Cathedral’s Sung Eucharist service booklet. No canonical institutes in the literary world have granted comparable honour to Korean classics: no single volume of Korean fiction has made it to the Penguin Classics list; no single work of poetry has been invited to the Norton Anthologies.

Surely Korean literature deserves better courtesy than to be totally assigned to virtual invisibility? But what is this entity, object, or body called ‘Korean literature,’ or to narrow it down a bit more, ‘Korean classical literature’? Canonical English literature flaunts some renowned names that stand shoulder to shoulder to support the phalanx of its canon. Classical Italian literature, despite the fact that a unified Italian state did not exist until the 1860s, stands on the solid ground secured by the great

---

2 In the Norton Anthology of World Literature, which is widely used in university courses on ‘world literature’ in North America, classical texts of Chinese and Japanese literature are given due respects, but Korean literature before 1900 is solely represented (only in the full six-volume version and not in the shorter three-volume version) by a few pages taken from the ‘Song of a Faithful Wife, Ch’unjyang’, which has the honour of coming last in the collected samples of ‘East Asian Drama’ in Volume D led by two Japanese works and one Chinese author (Puchner 2012: 74–89).