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A Buddhist's Shakespeare: Affirming Self-Deconstructions (Book Review)

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come, Skura posits, encompasses fratricidal rage and competition. Thus, Richard III's hatred is a "natural" outgrowth of the playwright's domestic situation, and rival pairings based on the Cain and Abel story are common throughout his plays.

Finally, two chapters are devoted to the "reflecting glass" (personal identity and "theatrical optics") and a "cluster" of images identified by Caroline Spurgeon as "dogs, licking, candy, melting." To some degree these chapters resonate back and forth as Skura analyzes the potential danger that players were thought to exhibit (players as "monsters and freaks") and, alternatively, a similar potential projected by the audience, which is always ready to mock, ridicule, and eviscerate. The ways in which actor and audience are affected by their mutual exchange redefines theatricality and leads back to the actor's psyche, a flatterer himself and the object of flattery, but always—as so many of Shakespeare's characters—the sad celebrity and the parasite rolled into one.

Additional discussions, such as those involving the circular playhouse and the enclosed garden, enrich Skura's analysis with original, often exciting insights. They are too complex to describe here; however, what begins as a study of the ways in which Shakespeare's plays answer cultural and individual needs ultimately bears significant implications for our assessment of all aspects of Shakespeare's plays and theatrical experience, both in his own terms as a player-dramatist and in his audiences.

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James Howe. *A Buddhist's Shakespeare: Affirming Self-Deconstructions*. London and Toronto: Fair-

leigh Dickinson University Press, 1994. 273 pp. \$42.50.

James Howe is both a Buddhist and a post-modernist, a distinction without a difference as we come to find in his intriguing study of Shakespeare. Howe shares with many others the notion that criticism as a disinterested endeavor to know the complex but unitary truth has given way to a belief that "any interpretation is a reader's 'reinvention' of the chosen text, and that the primary function available to a critic is to record his or her transaction with it" (15). At the same time, Howe recognizes that criticism is an act of discipleship: our transactions are influenced, to say the least, by the ideologies surrounding us and also by the teachers we choose. Howe acknowledges Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan spiritual advisor, as his teacher and *A Buddhist's Shakespeare* is a "partial record" (13) of his discipleship to Trungpa and the long and varied tradition of Buddhism.

According to Howe, the three masters or philosophies alluded to in the book's title — Buddhism, Shakespeare, and deconstruction — are, contrary to what might be our first impression, the most likely of bedfellows. Buddhism is the most fully articulated of the three, defined by Howe as primarily "a system of *contradictions*, a systematized denial of the validity of all systems" (20). By revealing the wisdom of emptiness and the "fruitful side of 'absence'" (17), Buddhism continually works to free its practitioners from self-entrapping illusions, worldly attachments, and misunderstandings about human desires and capacities. Howe sees these ideas beginning to take hold now in Western thought via deconstruction, and it might be well worth a long essay to go more deeply into what he much-too-briefly labels the "Dharmic/Derridean function of dissolution" (21). But his main concern and, of course, the reason why his

book comes to our attention, is to extensively analyze the much earlier intimation of Buddhist philosophy in western culture represented by Shakespeare, “every period of [whose] career rewards an approach that joins self-deconstruction to Buddhism” (22).

Each of the eight main chapters focuses primarily on one play, and Howe, well-versed in modern critical approaches — especially those influenced by Derrida, Foucault, and Greenblatt — shows how consistent these approaches are with what he calls Buddhist dimensions of Shakespeare. He focuses repeatedly on the lessons of theatricality. Bottom, for example, “seems to embody the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment” (31), and his play not only subverts royal power but usefully reminds all spectators, on stage and off, of the limited truth-value in any representation. This lesson is also reinforced by *Richard III* and, perhaps most provocatively, by *The Merchant of Venice*, where even Portia comes to embody the monstrousness of believing we have a firm hold on a truth that will set us free. Unless this truth is that there is no truth, we remain in the “vicious cycle of samsara” (93), the world of confusion.

For Howe, Shakespeare’s major tragic characters are victims of desire. Some, like Antony and Brutus, never relinquish their desires or their mistaken beliefs in an integral, unified self, and therefore die agonizing and unenlightened deaths. Others, like Hamlet and Lear, move to a “Buddhist form of desirelessness” (178). But Shakespeare’s ultimate concern is not so much the characters as the audience, who by witnessing a spectacle of constant undoing, subversion, and loss come to know that “desolation” is “the basis of ‘freedom’” (144).

In Howe’s analysis, Shakespeare typically leaves us “without a safety net” (143) by setting his plays on a course of

subversion and dissolution that, once started, cannot be stopped — a vision of Shakespeare as bold, radical, post-modern, and, according to Howe’s definition, Buddhist. I also find it overstated. Hovering on the edges of philosophical Fluellenism, he is quick to collocate every appearance of negation either explicitly or implicitly with the wisdom of Trungpa, and in many instances such collocations are insubstantial rather than synergistic. Moreover, his frame for Shakespeare’s drama and philosophy generally neglects other important rhythms in the plays, complex movements towards order and resolution and sympathetic attachment that may be bold and radical but are not post-modern or Buddhist. Despite Howe’s insistent and provocative argument, the unsettling and Noble Truths in Shakespeare still only seem randomly and occasionally to overlap rather than mirror those of Derrida and the Buddha.

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Daniel J. Kornstein. *Kill All the Lawyers? Shakespeare’s Legal Appeal*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. xvii + 274 pp. \$24.95.

Daniel J. Kornstein’s title suggests the multiple purposes behind his study of legal motifs in Shakespeare’s plays. By converting to a question Dick the butcher’s exuberant contribution to Jack Cade’s utopia in *2 Henry VI* — “First thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers” — he indicates his desire to reassess Shakespeare’s alleged hostility to lawyers and rebut populist lawyer bashing. The pun on “appeal” emphasizes both the humanistic value of Shakespeare’s texts and the need to rehear the case against including literary analysis in law studies. Kornstein engages Richard Posner’s argument in *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* (Harvard