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## Shakespeare, Buddha, and King Lear

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# Shakespeare, Buddha, and King Lear

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## **Abstract**

Given Shakespeare's status as "the secular Bible," it is surprising that his work has not been examined more closely to consider its spiritual teachings. As Buddhist studies increase in popularity in the West, more and more Buddhist scholars are being drawn to evaluate Shakespeare's work in light of Buddhist traditions. Of special interest today is the perception of Shakespeare's works as points-of-resistance to the dominant global-consumerist ideology. According to Stanley Wells, Lear's "non-naturalistic interpretation of action" lends itself to the interpretation of its "moral and philosophical concepts." This article considers the developing relationship between Shakespeare and Buddhism, and through a close read of *King Lear* establishes some of the methods and questions which may prove Shakespeare fertile ground for Buddhist scholars.

Because of their ability to move their readers to action, writers are often the first to be jailed, censored, or suppressed when governments are threatened by revolutionaries, or when successful revolutionaries consolidate their

power. In the West today, with its relatively stable tradition of constitutional rights, we would expect artists—especially writers—to be at the forefront of movements for social justice and progress. Yet despite the fact that we live in a world featuring unprecedented means of communication, the disruptive power of art—this ability for artists to move masses to action—is curiously weakened, if not entirely absent. In this article I will discuss the relationship between art and modern society, and I will further the proposition that Buddhism ought to be more closely examined as a critical approach to literature. In particular I am interested in Buddhism's ability to resist the contemporary (and dominant) ideology of global consumerism/cultural materialism. Finally, I will conclude with a textual analysis of Shakespeare's *King Lear* which illustrates in a practical way how Buddhism may be applied to interpret a Western text.

In his 1964 book, *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse writes extensively about the decline of art and the weakening (or loss) of the disruptive role art has historically played in society. His book, like the writings of his contemporary critics, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, examines the three primary ways in which the global-industrial economy and the mass media have suppressed the radical elements traditionally associated with art. I will recount these ways in brief. First, society creates a role for individuals in which their labor is exchanged for necessities—food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and etc. This dependency on mass production and industrialization brings resistance against the socio/political system into conflict with the individual's needs, thus making resistance actually work against the individual's (short-term) interests. Second, the advent of scientific reasoning and method has placed undue emphasis on *functional objectivity* and *scientific rationality* as thought processes (as opposed to spirituality), and discounted values and concepts

which cannot be quantified in terms of their immediate usefulness. These elements work together to create a system of self-validating logic in which potential oppositions are shut out, and tends to cause people in general to place less faith in traditional spiritual concepts whose benefit cannot be empirically demonstrated. And, third, the mass media itself has a remarkable ability to absorb, repudiate, pervert, or even profit from works of resistance, thereby negating arguments raised against the system.

Whereas in the past art occupied a special place in society, of particular importance as both a beacon to illuminate injustice, and as a catalyst for change, today the mass media tends to absorb art into the system in ways which negates its power of resistance. Thus, for example, protest songs of the 60's are corrupted into advertisements for soft drinks, SUVs, or insurance conglomerates. Artistic visual styles, such as psychedelic, punk, or gang tags, are hijacked into advertising or mainstream entertainment and lose the power of their *otherness*. The same principles which suppress radical art tend to influence criticism of art. Marcuse is not the only scholar to argue this point. Wilbur Sanders writes that, "To detect lost truths in the past is bound to look like an attempt to set the clock back—an activity which we, still deeply involved with post-Darwinian evolutionism, are very nervous about" (1968:338). Because the logic of modern mass production and global-consumerist society becomes ingrained in the individual as a pseudo-ideology, it becomes necessary for modern people who wish to live free within this socio-politico-economic system to formulate new ideologies (or rediscover old ones) which do not operate on the same values of materialism and scientific rationality. Commenting on the works of Foucault, Marx, and New Historicists (like Stephen Greenblatt), James Howe observes that "Their powerful critique of mid-twentieth-century thought does not seem to empower the individual to find new patterns, any more

than did the old assumptions they attack" (1994:19). Howe goes on to suggest Buddhism as a new line of critical inquiry.

Buddhism has been steadily gaining popularity in the West since the 1950s, in large part because of its emphasis on honesty, virtue, simplicity, compassion, and non-violence. These principles are in opposition to those which, in general, guide the dominant global-consumerist ethos (if this can be called an *ethos*)—one in which profit is the final arbiter of right and wrong, and the means (corruption, dishonesty, and violence) are justified by the bottom line. The Dalai Lama, writing about the problems associated with the rise of technology and scientific thinking, observes that:

We need also to recognize what happens when we rely too much on the external achievements of science. For example, as the influence of religion declines, there is mounting confusion with respect to the problem of how best we are to conduct ourselves in life. In the past, religion and ethics were closely intertwined. Now, many people, believing that science has 'disproved' religion, make the further assumption that because there appears to be no final evidence for any spiritual authority, morality itself must be a matter of individual preference. And whereas in the past, scientists and philosophers felt a pressing need to find solid foundations on which to establish immutable laws and absolute truths, nowadays this kind of research is held to be futile...My concern is rather that we are apt to overlook the limitations of science. In replacing religion as the final source of knowledge in popular estimation, science begins to look a bit like another religion itself. With this comes a similar danger on the part of some of its adherents of blind faith in its principles and, correspondingly, to intolerance of alternative views...For while both

science and the law can help us forecast the likely consequences of our actions, neither can tell us how we ought to act in a moral sense. Moreover, we need to recognize the limits of scientific inquiry itself. For example, though we have been aware of human consciousness for millennia, and though it has been the subject of investigation throughout history, despite scientists' best efforts they still do not understand what it actually is, or why it exists, how it functions, or what is its essential nature (1999:10-13).

One of Buddhism's appeals is that, in a world made-over by global-consumerism and suffering diluted spirituality, it offers a compassionate alternative way-of-life to both traditional Western religions and to secular materialism. The beatniks of the 1950s were perhaps the first to link Buddhism with resistance to global consumerism. Jack Kerouac, describing the schism deepening between the beats and typical Americans, wrote that:

Everything was fine with the Zen Lunatics, the nut wagon was too far away to hear us. But there was a wisdom in it all, as you'll see if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of on wheels. You'll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way and the Zen Lunatics have long joined dust, laughter on their dust lips (1958:79).

Kerouac's vision is eerily prescient, though hopefully, its apocalyptic conclusion will prove wrong. Still, it is interesting to note that as early as the 1950s some viewed Buddhism as an alternative to the American Dream.

To date, Buddhism has gained only small ground in the West, and its influence and methodology is often subtle. Linda Bamber points out that the act of reading itself is a *Buddhist* act. One of the central tenets of Buddhism is *anatta*—the non-self. It is the kind of liberation from suffering that we experience when we step outside of our everyday, self-absorbed consciousness. To engage our minds in a thoughtful, meaningful way with the world (as, for example, thoughtfully constructing meaning as we read a book) is to be fully present, fully alive (2004:147).

Sooner or later, it becomes inevitable that Buddhists in the West will turn their critical (and radical) perspective towards literature and the arts, but for the scholar today, there is precious little tradition to draw upon. However, the insights and discoveries obtained from the uniquely mongrelized (Eastern and Western) points-of-view should be powerful precisely because the basic tenets of Buddhism are at odds with so much of Western thought and behavior. For example, many central conflicts in Western literature depict a main character in pursuit of a specific goal: a love-interest, financial security, a victory over some adversary. A plot written from a Buddhist perspective, however, might begin with the main character wanting something and end with him or her renouncing attachments and finding happiness in the absence of outside influences. While most people are sympathetic towards happy endings, *renunciation* is hardly a plot for a potential bestseller. While these events, no doubt, can be interpreted from a Buddhist perspective, the *interest* in Western literature (those conflicts which keep the reader reading) is primarily generated by

the *inverse* of Buddhist principles, not the application. Still, this illumination, in black and white, could prove useful. Bamber suggests ways in which Buddhist concepts may be used to analyze literature. In a Buddhist critique of Walt Whitman she writes, "reading as a Buddhist I find in Whitman many Buddhist tendencies: a strong emphasis on non-dualism; a feeling for emptiness; an antagonism to origins and ends as vampires of the present; a cosmological sense of interconnectedness; and so on" (2004:150).

Howe, on the other hand, takes a more meta-textual view of the relationship between Buddhism and literature—in part drawing on the tradition of Jacques Derrida and the deconstructionists. He cites Rene Girard, who asks, "Will a critic do to Shakespeare what Derrida has done to Plato? Shakespeare has already done it to himself" (1994:21). Howe is interested in the ways in which Shakespeare deconstructs the *reality* of the play by calling attention to its artifice—its *theatricality*. His conclusion? "It might be that by recoding Shakespeare's many forms and kinds of subversion, we could learn not how to be more powerful, but what may be more crucial, how to evade the clutches of both society and its agents, ourselves" (ibid:21). Shakespeare might be amused by the wordplay between *Dharma* (truth) and *Drama* (the presentation).

Bamber also elicits Derrida in her claims that Modernism "reads so well from a Buddhist point of view." She cites what Derrida called the "Western 'metaphysics of presence:' God, Nature with a capital N, the stable, knowable, and conscious Self" (2004:156). The differences in approach between Bamber and Howe illustrate another problem in writing about the relationship between Buddhism and Western literature. Buddhism encompasses a wide variety of concepts, beliefs, practices, and perspectives—as broad a field of inquiry as any of the other great religions



or philosophies. Clearly it is not possible, in a short period of time, to examine even a fraction of these. But over time, various points ought to be discussed, as opportunity arises. Bamber and Howe provide interesting models for the analysis of the *substance* of literary works. Bamber draws inspiration first from Walt Whitman (whose poetry evokes Buddhist imagery and tradition), then from other poets (including Buddhists such as Gary Snyder). Howe turns his critical eye towards Shakespeare—a logical choice, given Shakespeare's works' status in the West as a "secular Bible" (1994:9).

Howe's methodology suggests an examination of Shakespeare's plays in search of ways in which various characters and conflicts illuminate Buddhist principles. No one is going to argue that Shakespeare was a Buddhist—Shakespeare was a devoted, life-long Catholic. But Buddhism, itself, does not lay claim to exclusive usage of any of its spiritual concepts. Many, if not most, arise in some form or another in other religious systems including Christianity. Certainly all have been the subject of debate among philosophers for eons. So it is not surprising that they appear as themes in Shakespeare's work. I would argue that these spiritual principles, no matter what their origin, and no matter what prestige they hold in literary studies, constitute an important point of resistance to the dominant ideology driving our modern, technological society.

Of particular interest to me is the concept of *insight*, and its accepted literary corollary—the epiphany. Modern scholars generally attribute the technique of the epiphany to James Joyce (the O.E.D. defines epiphany as "*esp. in Lit. Theory, constituting or containing a significant moment of revelation*"). There is something especially epiphanic about death in Shakespeare, and the concept has a Buddhist corollary. Lama Surya Das

writes that, "Tibetan Buddhism tells us that the clear light of Rigpa—innate awareness, spontaneous wakefulness—dawns momentarily for everyone at the moment of death." Das suggests that right-living and cultivating awareness will aid a person in comprehending and benefiting from this moment. He argues that, "Anybody who is sufficiently aware can merge consciously with this transcendent pure light at that crucial moment of transformation." And even if the dying individuals themselves fail to grasp this moment, the potential remains for others to realize the significance. "An awareness of death," according to Das, "is the greatest teacher for learning to live" (1997:123-124).

One can scarce mention death and Shakespeare in the same breath and not call to mind Hamlet's soliloquy and his assertion that death—through conscience—"makes cowards of us all" (*Hamlet* iii.1.83). But at the end of the play, Hamlet is clearly transformed. He is not a coward, and in his moment of death he has obtained great insight; he understands the significance of both his life and his death. A perusal of the death scenes in a number of Shakespeare's tragedies suggests a similar effect and raise, for me, two questions: *What lessons about life do the tragic deaths in Shakespeare offer?* and *In what ways do these lessons suggest resistance to global consumerism as an ideology?* One of Shakespeare's plays strikes me as particularly fertile ground for this discussion: *The History of King Lear*.

One of the appeals of *King Lear* is what Stanley Wells calls the "non-naturalistic interpretation of action." What Wells means is that it is impossible to recreate on the stage the wilderness into which Lear is driven. As such, the performances breaks with conventional staging technique and the resultant representations, as Wells observes, lend themselves to "moral and philosophical concepts." According to Wells, the play depicts "life as a battle with the elements, a struggle for survival against wind and rain in a

world where humanity has to compete with animal forces both within and outside itself" (Shakespeare 2000:33-35). In this instance, Lear's suffering is the direct result of his egotism. As he prepares for his succession by dividing his kingdom, he challenges his daughters to:

...Tell me, my daughters,  
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
That we our largest bounty may extend  
Where merit doth most challenge it? (1.44-47).

Gononil, the eldest, answers first:

Dearer than eyesight, space, liberty;  
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;  
No less than life; with grace, health, beauty, honor;  
As much as child e'er loved, or father, friend;  
A love that makes breath poor and speech unable (1.50-54).

The contest Lear instigates between his daughters for the best portions of his kingdom is clearly materialistic, and the rivalry between Gononil and Regan takes on the trappings of two petty officials vying for a promotion—a plot that could play out today in a modern corporate environment. But one daughter, Cordelia, refuses to play the game. Her rejection of material values is a decidedly Buddhist trait. When asked, "What can you say to win a third more opulent than your sisters?" she replies, "Nothing, my lord." Lear's response is also eerily Buddhist, "Nothing can come of nothing" (1.78-

81). This line is two-edged, a point Shakespeare (the master of word play) must have known. As a Buddhist, I am seized by the notion of emptiness his words imply. But Lear—at this point in the play—may well have intended them in a materialistic sense. To KING Lear, political, military, and economic leader of England, no good could come out of *not wanting*. But by the end of the play, Lear is shown to be (tragically) correct in both turns of the phrase. The irony of Lear's test is that he becomes the subject of his own experiment, though not in the way he initially foresaw. In his madness, his "sight, space, and liberty" are all called into question. And he loses his "grace, health, beauty, and honor."

According to Lama Surya Das,

When there is nothing wanting, there is nothing working against anything. There is no grasping at anything, there is no grasper and nothing to be grasped. There are no karmic sticks rubbing together igniting these fiery confliction passions; there is no clinging to sights or sounds or smells or tastes or touches. There is just the unimpeded, spontaneous, free experiencing of things just as they are, moment after miraculous moment. This is the natural great perfection (1997:101).

In repudiating Lear's test, Cordelia demonstrates herself to be the most spiritually pure and worthy daughter. But Lear, in his unenlightened state, is unable to grasp the significance of her reply.

Most people today are familiar with the concept of *karma*. It is a common theme in both Christianity and Buddhism. In the King James Bible we read, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Das describes karma in less-religious, almost

scientific terms, saying: "The traditional Buddhist Law of Dependent Origination means that every cause has an effect, and every effect has a cause...The law of karma spells out very meticulously that everything has its implications; every thought, word, and deed has an effect" (1997:127, 129). As Gonoril says, "he [Lear] must needs taste his folly" (7.449). This is exactly what happens as the play unfolds. Lear must atone for his unjust banishment of Cordelia, and re-evaluate the misshapen values which justified his decision. Kent diagnoses Lear's madness as of a spiritual origin saying:

A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own unkindness,  
That stripped her from his benediction, turned her  
To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights  
To his dog-hearted daughters—these things sting  
His mind so venomously that burning shame  
Detains him from Cordelia. (17.43-48).

Lear's vanity and rash dismissal of Cordelia sets in motion a chain of conflicts which ultimately results in the destruction of his house. But before he *literally* dies, Lear is *figuratively* killed and resurrected—a series of events that ultimately engineers his epiphany, his moment of insight. Having divided his kingdom between the two daughters, Lear finds opposition from both and calls his inhospitable reception "worse than murder" (7.201). The symbolic death which follows is the result of the destruction of Lear's values, and he is abandoned to the literal and spiritual wilderness.

Lear's pain—and reaction to it—can be precisely described in Buddhist terms. According to Das, there are three "poisons" which are primarily responsible dissatisfaction and unhappiness. These are ignorance, attachments, and aversion (1997:68-70). Lear exhibits ignorance when he fails to understand (first) the nature of his initial request of his daughters (for gratification of his ego) and (second) to anticipate the consequences of his actions (dividing the kingdom between them would set up a rivalry). Lear exhibits attachment to the intended outcome of his actions by clinging to the expectation that his daughters will reciprocate his generosity and honor him with their hospitality. Lear exhibits the third poison when he unleashes his angry tirade against his daughters. He shouts:

To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,  
 To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes,  
 And, in conclusion, to oppose the bolt  
 Against my coming in. Thou better know'st  
 The offices of nature, bond of childhood,  
 Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.  
 Thy half of the kingdom hast thou not forgot,  
 Wherein I thee endowed (7.331-338).

According to Das, the three poisons almost always work together in a pattern. "Because we are ignorant of the truth, we think we can be made happy by fulfilling our attachments to a specific person, place, thing, feeling. Inevitably we are disappointed, and then aversion, dislike, or even hatred rears its ugly head" (1997:70). It is irrelevant whether or not Lear

perceives Edmund the Bastard's manipulative hand in his undoing. What matters is that Lear's plans, and more importantly, the values by which he constructs order in the world, are undone. Lear will not recover until he recognizes the truth of his actions, releases his attachments, and turns away from his anger and expresses compassion and love for his daughters. And this is exactly what happens.

It is important to note that Lear is not alone in the wilderness, but has (first) his fool for company and (later) Kent and Edgar. Few figures in Shakespeare have a more Buddhist nature than fools, for in Buddhist tales fools are almost inevitably ironic sources of wisdom. M. Conrad Hyers calls attention to the importance of clown figures in Buddhism saying that:

Behind all the fable and fiction there is the persistent form of a personality and role to which the designation "clown" is not inappropriate. This is not to suggest a clown-figure in the sense of the playful buffoon, or of clowning for the sake of clowning—though this may be involved—but rather in the sense of the clown who by his queer antics and strange attire, or by his "divine madness," gives expression to the special freedom that he has attained, and who in that freedom reveals some truth through the outlandishness of his performance, or who in some bizarre way becomes the agent of redemption in a particular situation (1970:7).

Lear's fool fulfills this definition by exhibiting unconditional love for his master. He follows Lear to the death, and the fool's selfless act of love makes him, as Hyers observed, Lear's "agent of redemption." He turns Lear from madness to sanity. It is towards his fool that Lear first expresses compassion—the evidence of his return to sanity. When Kent tries to talk Lear into seeking shelter, Lear at first refuses—he chooses to sit in silence as

"the pattern of all patience" and endure (Job-like) the suffering brought on by the storm (9.36). It is not until he sees the suffering of his companion, the fool, that he experiences compassion. He asks:

Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?  
 I am cold myself.—Where is this straw, my fellow?  
 The art of our necessities is strange,  
 That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel—  
 Poor fool and knave, I have one part of my heart  
 That sorrows yet for thee (9.69-74).

Lear's recognition of his fool's suffering invokes Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. These are:

- (1) Life is difficult.
- (2) Life is difficult because of attachment, because we crave satisfaction in ways that are inherently dissatisfying.
- (3) The possibility of liberation from difficulties exists for everyone.
- (4) The way to realize this liberation and enlightenment is by leading a compassionate life of virtue, wisdom, and meditation.

Thich Nhat Hanh describes the process of enlightenment saying that:

Many people are awakened during a difficult period in their lives, when they see that living irresponsibly has been the cause of their suffering, and that by transforming their lifestyle they can bring an end to their suffering. Transformation is gradual, but once we see



clearly the causes of our suffering, we can make the effort to change our behavior and bring our suffering to an end (1998:41).

In short, without being aware of his first steps down the path of enlightenment, Lear has recognized that he *is* suffering, realized that *his* stubborn insistence on sitting in the weather causes others to suffer, that the suffering is unnecessary and can be relieved, and that way to relieve their suffering is for *him* to show compassion for others by seeking shelter. Once Lear has been through this pattern once, it becomes easier for him to repeat it in the future. Through his own suffering, Lear develops compassion for the suffering of others—even while in his maddened state. And as he develops compassion for others, he begins to suffer less from his own. On entering the hovel he states:

This tempest will not give me leave to ponder  
On things would hurt me more; but I'll go in.  
Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bid the pelting of this pitiless night,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just (11.23-33).

Lear is not Shakespeare's only voice for commenting on the relationship between suffering, compassion, and enlightenment. Edgar, Gloucester's banished son, observes:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,  
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.  
 Who alone suffers, suffers most i'th' mind,  
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind.  
 But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip  
 When grief hat mates, and bearing fellowship.  
 How light and portable my pain seems now,  
 When that which makes me bend, make the king bow (13.95-102).

Lear's return to sanity is not easy—he vacillates between reason and madness for much of the remainder of the play. But once begun down this road, he does not turn back. When he meets Gloucester and sees that Gloucester's eyes have been put out, Lear is moved again to show compassion. Lear acknowledges his kingship, but with a gentler demeanor than before, one which recognizes that injustice is the source of suffering. He says:

When I do stare, see how the subject quakes!  
 I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?  
 Adultery? Thou shalt not die for adultery.  
 No, the wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly  
 Does lecher in my sight.  
 Let copulation thrive, for Gloucester's bastard son

Was kinder to his father than my daughters  
Got 'tween the lawful sheets... (20.105-112)

It is ironic that Lear does not perceive that Edmund is behind the plots against Lear and Gloucester, and that Edmond (Gloucester's son) is not kinder than Lear's daughters. But though the point is interesting and worth noting, it is not significant to the development of my argument. Lear does not yet know the whole story. But he is, as a result of his own suffering, able to extend compassion to Gloucester, and that leads Lear, at last, to confront Cordelia, and himself. When Lear wakes to find Cordelia ministering to him and accepts responsibility for his actions saying:

Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.  
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me; for your sisters  
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.  
You have some cause; they have not (21.68-72).

And when Cordelia replies that she holds "no cause" with Lear, he asks her forgiveness saying, "Pray now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (21.82-82). Lear's enlightenment is complete.

Like many of Shakespeare's tragedies, the play ends with most of the main players dead. But in this instance, the deaths of Gloucester, Cordelia, and Lear are all tempered by the goodness and virtue which they cultivated in their lives. Lear's final days were transformative—his suffering refining his initial character defects into attributes. Ernest Howse describes Shakespeare's tragedies saying, "We may see goodness vanquished, but our hearts are on the side of goodness. We may see evil victorious, but we loathe

it even in its victories." He cites George Morrison's assessment that we leave "with the glowing certainty that the good are the real victors though they perish and that heaven, though dark with clouds, is on their side" (1955:20). Howse says, about *King Lear*, that it is:

...in one respect strikingly different from the others [Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth]. In *King Lear*, a bad man is redeemed...Shakespeare introduces Lear as thoroughly unlikable—a stupid, arbitrary, bad-tempered old man. We begin with no liking for him whatever. But in time, we see him as "a man more sinned against than sinning." At the end our hearts are filled with an overflowing pity (1955:61-62).

According to Das, Buddhist teaching "isn't just about nirvana and enlightenment; this is about living sanely and gracefully, living impeccably without regrets, without leaving behind and unfinished mess. When it is time to die no one exclaims, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'" Shakespeare, it appears, would agree with Das' assessment. Everybody knows that we are all going to die. The real question, according to Das, is "are we each going to truly *live*?" (1997:126).

I'm going to break here from the dialogue with *King Lear* and return to my original proposition: that the relationship between art and morality has gone out-of-fashion with serious consequence for society. Douglas Lanier has written an excellent article describing two ways in which mass media and global culture are absorbing and distorting Shakespeare. The first he calls the "sub-genre in business publishing, the Shakespeare corporate management manual." The second is the way in which the movie industry commercializes Shakespeare to create:

a particular middlebrow literary canon in line with what has become the lingua franca of global capitalism: the codes, practices, and ideologies of contemporary mass media. To put the matter bluntly, one overarching aim of recent Shakespeare films has been to definitively establish the screen image—and thus the culture industries that make and market that image—as the principle vehicle for sustaining Shakespeare's cultural authority in a post-theatrical, post-literary age (2002:162).

In the first instance, Lanier argues that such books as *Shakespeare in Charge*, *Power Plays*, *Shakespeare on Management*, and even *Shakespeare on Golf*

mirror the central obsessions of new historicism: the privileging of the exemplary anecdote; the preoccupation with the microdynamics of interpersonal strategy, tactic, and the logic of social institutions; and a fixation on the legitimating of status and power...Shakespeare management manuals have simply embraced the image of a Shakespeare engaged with power politics and reconfigured "politics" in the form of "universal" truths of social *interaction that can be put into the service of corporate management [emphasis added]* (2002:160).

Regarding movies, Lanier asserts that, "This process of mediatization has also undermined one powerful symbolic position Shakespeare has occupied in twentieth-century popular culture itself, as a site of resistance to mass culture and its institutional imperatives" (2002:162). It was this place which Shakespeare occupied as an "ideological resource" which caused Louis B. Mayer to claim that "Shakespeare was box-office poison" (2002:162). But mass market adaptations of Shakespeare—of which there have been hundreds—are, by virtue of their sheer volume and subtle reconfigurations,

accomplishing the "transcoding of Shakespeare into a mainstream cinematic vocabulary" (2002:163).

By appropriating Shakespeare as the system's own, and by diluting or perverting his message, the mass media "threatened to erode a certain inherited oppositional potential, the sense that Shakespeare represents the possibility of a critique of, or at least an oblique relation to, mass media and the logic of the pop-culture marketplace" (2002:165). In other words, what mass-market presentations of Shakespeare focus on are not the spiritual elements of his work, nor the socially and politically destabilizing elements, but rather, the tried-and-true plotlines of commercial simplicity and appeal. The deeper (and often subversive) messages of Shakespeare's work are lost in plotlines of adolescent love, political intrigue, or farcical humor. Lanier warns that:

The remaking of Shakespeare in the image of corporate ideology would seem to confirm the worst fears of those who, like Theodor Adorno, warned of a monolithic culture industry that threatens to assimilate all forms of cultural expression to its own institutional standards, negating art's capacity for critique and opposition, offering its audience only the illusion of enlightenment and diversity while in fact compelling conformity to a social and aesthetic status quo (2002:159-160).

The result of Shakespeare's commercialization is to mask the moral and radical elements of his work. *Romeo and Juliet* is trivialized into a simplistic teen-age love story or an adaptation about gang violence. But what would it reveal about love, violence, and loyalty were it analyzed from a Buddhist perspective? *Othello* is known as a tragedy about a jealous black man loving a white woman, but the real message, if studied carefully, is that it calls into

question the English experiment with democracy. What deeper and more radical points might be extrapolated if it (and Shakespeare's other plays) were scrutinized from a Buddhist perspective? These are the lines of inquiry I wish to promote. Howe has these deeper points of resistance in mind when he states, "It might be that by recording Shakespeare's many forms and kinds of subversion, we could learn not how to be more powerful but, what may be more crucial, how to evade the clutches of both society and its agents, ourselves" (1994:21). Sanders writes that,

This reciprocal illumination of the present by the past, and the past by the present, gives to contemporary consciousness a broader base, and a wider range of possibilities than would otherwise be open to it. What it means today to be human is enriched by a sense of what it has meant in the past, and what it always will mean...It is one way, after all, of expressing our concern for the evolution of society—which consists in a perpetual rediscovery, in new contexts, of the truths by which we live, and a steady labour to embody them more fully in the life-forms of the present" (1968:338).

To revisit traditional forms of morality and ideology is to keep faith with something inherently *human* and special in each of us. And in this epoch of history, when social forces seem to be shaping mankind in its corporate image, we need every tool at our disposal to maintain our independence, our identity, and our integrity.

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