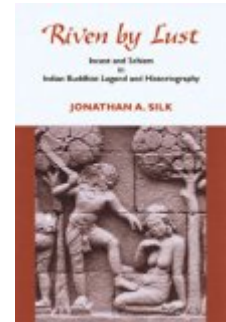


Jonathan A. Silk. *Riven by Lust: Incest and Schism in Indian Buddhist Legend and Historiography.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008. Charts. 368 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-3090-8.



Reviewed by Douglas Osto

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Commissioned by Daniel A. Arnold (University of Chicago)

Riven by Lust is a book concerned not so much with schism, legend, or historiography, as with incest--and particularly with Buddhist stories about mother-son incest. In this regard, Jonathan A. Silk has produced an innovative comparative study of narratives about transgressive sexuality ranging across centuries, cultures, languages, and continents. With a philological acumen rarely matched these days in Buddhist studies, the author translates and analyzes incest stories (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist) from India, China, Tibet, Japan, and Europe. Sadly, the author's editions of the original texts have not been included in the book, although Silk has promised to post them on a Web site "in the near future" (p. xiii). While many specialist scholars might have been dissuaded from undertaking such a broad-based study, Silk rises to the challenge, making *Riven by Lust* an enjoyable and engaging read through his lucid writing style and his well-crafted arrangement of the monograph into twenty short chapters.

In chapter 1, "Incest and Schism," Silk begins with the story of primary interest, which may be summarized as follows. Once long ago there was the son of a merchant from Mathurā called Mahādeva. With his father off in foreign lands, Mahādeva grows to manhood and "defiles" his mother. When his father returns, Mahādeva and his mother conspire to kill him, which Mahādeva does. Having fled to Paṭaliputra, mother and son seclude themselves. When a saintly monk recognizes him, Mahādeva, fearing their crime would be discovered, murders him. Later, finding his mother has been "unfaithful" to him, he kills her, too. Coming to regret these misdeeds, Mahādeva overhears a Buddhist monk reciting a hymn about how the karmic effects of crimes may be eradicated by cultivating goodness. He then visits the monk and convinces him to ordain him without the usual background investigation.

Having introduced this tale, Silk offers some comments on his theoretical approach to his sources. To this end, he discusses a challenge that the historian of Buddhism (and other religions)

faces “if he would attempt to address that tradition according to the canons of historical criticism applicable to all other sorts of mundane phenomena”; in short, “he must honor the facts, but he must animate them” (p. 4). In this regard, Silk proffers a caveat to historians of religion that illuminates his own positivist approach: “If in reading between the lines they allow themselves to imagine the transcendent elements of a religious tradition as if they have the same reality as facts that can be seen and verified in this world, their work cannot help but move from the realm of careful, justifiable reconstruction to that of fiction—interesting, even stimulating, but ephemeral and imaginary” (p. 5). For the theologically minded or deconstructionist historian, however, this statement may seem either to set up a “straw man” or beg the question.

Few theologians (Buddhist or otherwise) would attribute to claims such as “God exists” or “all phenomena are empty of inherent existence” the same status they would allow for claims like “the Battle of Hastings was in 1066,” or “some century or so after the Buddha there ruled in India an emperor named Aśoka who had rock and pillar edicts constructed.” The first two claims likely would be considered transcendent, ahistorical truths, while the latter two represent contingent, historical truths. The imagined theologically oriented historian who treats transcendental truths “as if they have the same reality as facts” is Silk’s straw man. Likewise, Silk’s statement would be equally objectionable to deconstructionist historians. For many deconstructionists any writing of history is itself a narrative about the past. History qua narrative employs literary tropes that do more than animate the facts toward an accurate reconstruction of the past, but in effect construct “a past” in which story and facts are inextricably intertwined. One of the tropes thus used by Silk and common to what Alun Munslow calls “reconstructionist historians” is the “trope of the real”—the representation of one’s project as guided only by unbiased fidelity to objective history.[1] How-

ever, the ability to reconstruct an objective past is exactly where reconstructionists like Silk and deconstructionists part company. Nonetheless, those sympathetic to Silk’s positivism will find much to admire in the author’s careful examination and insightful analysis of his sources.

The next five chapters of *Riven by Lust* set the stage for chapter 7. In chapters 2-3, Silk introduces the polemical context of early Indian Buddhist sectarianism and its relation to the Mahādeva story as found in an important scholastic text of the period, the **Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā* (often referred to simply as the *Vibhāṣā*). Chapter 4 discusses Indian Buddhist views of Mahādeva’s crimes, among which incest seems not to have been considered as serious as his murders. Chapter 5 looks at East Asian and Tibetan versions of the story. Chapter 6 examines the Buddhist doxographies recounting the central role of Mahādeva in the initial schism of the hitherto unified monastic community.

Chapter 7 is then pivotal for Silk’s overall project. In this chapter, Silk introduces the story of Dharmaruci from the *Divyāvadāna* collection. In this story, the Buddha tells the past-life story of one Dharmaruci, who was a merchant’s son during the mythical eon of the Buddha Krakucchanda. The story of Dharmaruci is remarkably similar to the story of Mahādeva: he has sex with his mother, kills his father, kills a saintly monk, and kills his mother. Then after being refused ordination by many monks (whom he also kills by setting fire to their monasteries), he is ordained by the Bodhisattva who is the future Buddha, and finally stops his killing. The story ends by explaining that during the intervening eons, the Bodhisattva perfects his virtues and becomes the Buddha, while Dharmaruci suffers for his crimes in hell. After translating this tale, Silk points out a fundamental difference between the narratives of Mahādeva and Dharmaruci: Mahādeva is the instigator of sex with his mother, while Dharmaruci is seduced by his mother. This and other differ-

ences have the effect that while Mahādeva is portrayed “in a radically monochromatic fashion” as the complete antihero, Dharmaruci’s role is much more ambiguous—he is both villain and victim (p. 73).

Stating the centrality of this difference, Silk says: “To formalize the central hypothesis I have alluded to several times already: those [Sarvāstivādin authors of the *Vibhāṣā*] who attacked the Five Theses [of the Mahāsaṃghikas] added to their criticisms of the content of those theses an ad hominem attack upon their putative author [Mahādeva]” (p. 64). Thus the *Vibhāṣā*’s authors adapted a preexisting story about Dharmaruci for the polemical, sectarian purpose of demonizing Mahādeva, who is represented as the instigator of an Oedipal calamity. Of the direction of borrowing, Silk states, “There can be virtually no doubt that the Mahādeva stories we have examined are, if not based directly upon this specific version of the tale of Dharmaruci, at least ultimately dependent on precisely the same narrative tradition” (p. 72). Regardless of whether Silk’s level of certitude here is shared by every reader (at what point does probability become proof?), few would doubt that this scenario is entirely plausible, if not highly likely, based on the evidence presented.

In many ways, the remaining chapters of *Riven by Lust* add to this basic argument by examining related stories and placing such narratives within a broader comparative framework. Of particular interest to the Indologist will be chapters 15-17, wherein Silk investigates incest in ancient Hindu sources. These chapters offer a challenge to the hypotheses of A. K. Ramanujan and Robert Goldman concerning Ramanujan’s conception of the “Indian Oedipal.” Those interested in comparative studies on incest will find chapter 9 (on “Persian Perversities”) and chapter 18 (on the “Medieval European Oedipal Judas”) particularly illuminating. And for those interested in relating these various incest narratives to contemporary psychological literature dealing with incest, Silk

provides admirable treatments in chapter 8 (“Abuse and Victimhood”) and chapter 19 (“Why Incest Taboos?”).

In his concluding chapter, Silk writes, “Having studied both the ‘unrevised’ story of Dharmaruci and the recast story of Mahādeva, it seems to us quite clear that the latter is a recreation of the former with its protagonist suitably demonized” (p. 226). However, *Riven by Lust* does much more than provide arguments toward this conclusion. The popular saying “It’s the journey that counts” definitely applies in this case. The greatest strength of this book is not its theoretical sophistication or startling conclusions, but the way it skillfully guides the reader in a highly engaging manner into the vast labyrinth of Buddhist, Indian, and European narratives focusing on the motif of incest.

Note

[1]. See Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 2nd. ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 65.

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