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Liz Wilson. *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Women in Culture and Society Series). University of Chicago Press, 1996. Pp. 258. ISBN 0-2269-0054-1, (paperback), \$19.95.

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Why do so many men want to see women undress? I have written about the pagan origins of the striptease, the ritual unveiling of a body that will always remain mysterious because of the inner darkness of the womb, from which we all came.¹

So wrote Camille Paglia, the (often maligned) culture critic of the 1990s, pondering the reasons why men throughout history have been obsessed with the female form. Liz Wilson, in her well-written and thought-provoking book, provides a fascinating case study of this preoccupation: she questions the practice whereby Buddhist men gaze upon the unveiled female form as part of their liberative meditations. Paglia seeks to direct her readers' attention to the mysterious power of the female, an innate principle that males do not have, that beckons men by its allure. Linking this mysterious power to the womb, Paglia argues, in her 1990 reflections on art and her 1994 essays on contemporary feminism, that women possess an ancient vampiric power over men.² That power is neither rational nor measurable (*Vamps and Tramps*, ix). The womb, hidden within the female body, is predicative of all of men's dealings with women (*Sexual Personae*, 22): women cannot be known completely because their power (i.e., the womb) is veiled; men stare at the female form in order to know it, and thus to know themselves. After all, it is from whence they came. In short, in her cross-cultural analysis of the female form and what it represents, Paglia documents what she calls men's excruciating obsession with and subordination to women (*Vamps and Tramps*, 58) that culminates in the female-as-object. For Paglia, the persistence and omnipresence of the female-as-object represents the power to transform that the female has over the male. But is the transformative power an essential aspect of the female or yet another quality attributed to the objectified female by cultures whose definitions (of male and female) and whose discourses (of liberation and subordination) have been dominated by men?

These concerns (though not Paglia's specific contribution) suffuse Wilson's important study, which explores the role of the female body in Indian Buddhist hagiographic literature. In these texts, the female body is endowed with extraordinary powers (139) that are transformative for those (usually males, sometimes females) meditating upon it. In Wilson's estimation (and unlike Paglia), it is not the female form *per se* that is transformative; rather, it is the female form as it appears to the deluded that has the power to liberate (73). Hence, unlike Paglia (who considers female transformative power to be inherent), Buddhist hagiographers regard the power as conditioned and, like all things, the effect of delusion.

Wilson locates this conditioned female power in Buddhism's ideas about samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Wilson argues, as have others before her, that Buddhists have gendered samsara as female, and entrapment in it as a male dilemma (71). Because women have wombs, they embody rebirth, or that which Buddhism aims to transcend; thus men who find women alluring descend further into samsara. The female body, enticing and attractive, on the one hand, yet fecund and foreboding as a symbol of rebirth, on the other, signifies all that is veiled. To unveil her, to strip her, and thus all that is covered (including one's nature) is to experience a liberation. In the hagiographies that Wilson analyzes, the female-as-object of meditation is stripped not only of her clothes, but her beauty, her finery, even her skin itself, in order to reveal the repulsive inner condition of the female body that is normally hidden from the male gaze (177). In the Buddhist hagiographies, then, it is not simply the naked female form that becomes the object of the gaze (as in Paglia's case studies). Rather, it is the female, usually a corpse, whose markers of femininity have broken down (only to be analyzed for their constituent parts, including mucus, blood, and urine), who wields power over the male.

From my reading of Wilson's textual evidence, the living female form, symbolic of rebirth, and the charming cadaver who uncovers the repulsive, true condition of her body, both subordinate the male. This recalls the gift that a woman made to the order of monks that Tim Ward recounts in his 1990 study of life in a Thai monastery.³ The gift was her own cadaver. Aware of the ability of her form to transform, the Thai woman bequeathed her dead body. The female's capacity (especially in death) to edify those who gaze upon her stems from her power to horrify, to shock the viewer into reality. Yet, Wilson sees something else, a reversal of the power relationship I have noted: namely, the subordination of the female to the male, for [t]o be the object of another's gaze is to have a diminished sense of one's position as a subject (182). In short, the sole function of the female form in the narratives that Wilson explores, is the liberation of men. The female form thus exists to serve men: usually an anonymous helper, she is object of the male gaze and is unaware of herself as subject.

According to Wilson's analysis, the male gaze is normative in the Indian Buddhist hagiographies and sets the standard for all meditators. Women themselves reflect upon their own form; Wilson has not found any post-Asokan narratives about females who contemplate dead or disfigured male bodies (105). While Wilson sees Buddhist women's internalization of the male gaze as further proof of female disempowerment, Paglia (if she were to read Wilson's work) might see women meditating on the female form as further proof of the power of the female: women, too, are moved by

their own ability to transform. Indeed, according to Paglia, the male gaze is that puritanical superstition cooked up by ideologues with no instinct for art (See *Vamps and Tramps*, 340).

As Wilson herself makes plain, her account of Buddhist saints lives and their meditations on women's bodies is the product of her own training as a 1990s feminist scholar. In an interesting rumination of scholarship on Buddhism and gender that she includes in the Introduction, Wilson situates her own study in the context of several decades of Buddhist scholarship. With perspicacity, she remarks that the history of Buddhism reflects the concerns of the scholars reconstructing it (7), thereby guiding us to the conclusion that just as all things are subject to change, so are all interpretations. In other words, whether the male gaze empowers or disempowers the female, or whether there is a male gaze at all, remains to be seen. But, without a doubt, the images of the charming cadavers that Wilson has brought to life will remain thanks to her important research.

In sum, Wilson's study is a thorough-going, fascinating account of Indian Buddhist literature, from the Pali canon to post-Asokan hagiographic literature. She takes us on a gendered journey through Buddhist texts, exploring the position of the female in them. From the scene in which the Buddha-to-be leaves home, having just witnessed the horrific sleeping figures of drooling and distorted women—a sight that is the catalyst for his renunciation—to Buddhist monks who meditate on the corpses of hitherto desirable female bodies—and are liberated because of them—Wilson leaves no evidence unexamined. With a careful eye, Wilson herself gazes upon the female figure of Buddhist texts, itself the object of centuries of Buddhist soteriological practices which, by its allure, wields power even over the twentieth-century Buddhist scholar.

Notes

1. Camille Paglia, *Vamps and Tramps* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 61.
2. Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage, 1990).
3. Tim Ward, *What the Buddha Never Taught* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1990).