

Kālidāsa and the Bastard Son

An Attempt to Read Kālidāsa's *Nāṭakas* Politically

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ABSTRACT

Kālidāsa's *nāṭakas*, namely the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Vikramorvaṣīya* are undisputedly among the greatest works of Sanskrit literature. Thus it is not surprising that there have already been many excellent literary interpretations focusing on these works. My aim is not to augment this list, but instead I intend to shed some light on the less-investigated political message of these dramas. In other words, I am attempting to re-read Kālidāsa's plays as pieces of political theatre.

KEYWORDS

Abhijñānaśākuntala, Gupta Empire, Kālidāsa, Sanskrit dramas, Skanda Gupta, *Vikramorvaṣīya*

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INTRODUCTION

Kālidāsa¹ is often compared to Shakespeare. Not only are they considered among the greatest figures of dramatic literature, but their lives are similarly little known. As far as we know, Kālidāsa may have earned his living as a court poet under the Guptas.² This supposition implies that his works may contain a kind of political message. Otherwise, why would a court poet be employed if his writings lacked the political thoughts of his patrons?

Although cultural studies have been recently engaged with the tendency of ‘depoliticization’, such an attempt seems to be vain in the context of archaic civilizations, where the main ‘products’ of humanity, such as culture, politics and religion were intertwined with each other inseparably.³ In Michael Walzer’s words:

‘Society was conceived as an organic and integrated whole. It might be viewed under the aspect of religion, or politics, or economy, or family, but all these interpenetrated one another and constituted a single reality. Church and state, church-state and university, civil society and political community, dynasty and government, office and property, public life and private life, home and shop: each pair was, mysteriously or unmysteriously, two-in-one, inseparable.’⁴

In this way, many of the scholarly studies on Kālidāsa’s oeuvre have avoided ‘depoliticization’. Historians usually agree that his works are basic sources about everyday life in the Gupta period,⁵ while others such as Gawroński and Pollock went even further, and claimed that Kālidāsa sometimes alluded to the imperial politics intentionally.⁶ Because I agree with the view that the *Raghuvamśa* was intended to introduce the working of the empire,⁷ I find these above-mentioned political interpretations reasonable. On the other hand, I am at least as much convinced that the real venue for the meeting of Kālidāsa’s art and imperial propaganda was still the theatre. Here it is worth citing Hannah Arendt’s statement:

‘... the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art.’⁸

Michel Foucault came to a similar conclusion:

‘The theater, theatrical practice, this dramatization must be a mode of manifestation of the State and of the sovereign as the holder of State power.’⁹

¹ Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Csaba Dezső for having read my article and polishing my English.

² Ingalls 1976: 15.

³ Morgan 2013: 2–3.

⁴ Walzer 1984: 315.

⁵ Agrawal 1989: 34–36; Bhatia 1962: 22–24.

⁶ Gawroński 1914–1918: 43–82, Pollock 2006: 241.

⁷ Dezső 2014: 167–168.

⁸ Arendt 1998: 188.

⁹ Foucault 2007: 347.



These opinions indicate the aim of this article, which is re-reading Kālidāsa's plays as pieces of political theatre. Of course, such an interpretation always depends on the audience.¹⁰ Since Kālidāsa counted on his peers as spectators, my interpretation will be necessarily limited. Despite this, I am sure that some main political thoughts recognised in Kālidāsa's works might be helpful to understand the great poet somewhat better.

In this article, I focus on Kālidāsa's *nāṭakas*, namely the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Vikramorvaśīya*, while I do not deal much with his third theatrical work, the *Mālavikāgnimitra* categorised as a *nāṭikā*¹¹ or *prakaraṇa* (love-comedy),¹² the possible political message of which has already been investigated by Hans Bakker.¹³ Tieken maintained that this latter play was a unique piece in Kālidāsa's oeuvre,¹⁴ while Vasudeva, in accordance with Arendt and Foucault's above-quoted words, suggested that similar interpretations might be fruitful in connection with Kālidāsa's remaining works:

'If Kālidāsa's "Mālavikā and Agnimitra" alludes to actual events, is it possible that his other works do too? It would be interesting to study whether the character of Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā might have anything to do with either Dhruvadevī wife of Candragupta II and mother of Kumāragupta, or with his wife Anantadevī.¹⁵

Thus, the following lines are intended as an answer to this call.

ŚAKUNTALĀ

It is beyond question that Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is the finest pearl of the Sanskrit dramas. Its worldwide fame is unbroken even in these days. Thus, it is not surprising that there have already been many scholarly discussions focusing on several aspects of this drama.

Edwin Gerow, for example, analysed the structure of the play, and demonstrated that a peculiar symmetry determined its narrative.¹⁶ Daniel H. H. Ingalls drew attention to 'polite elegance' as its key feature,¹⁷ while Jens-Uwe Hartmann understood the whole work as the thematization of the contrast between the rural and urban lives.¹⁸ Here, as I have indicated, I do not want to augment this list of the excellent literary interpretations, but instead I try to regard this play, a bit provocatively, as a tool of royal propaganda.

The oldest known version of the Śakuntalā-legend is found in the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁹ It seems quite plausible that Kālidāsa selected his theme from the epic, even though there are apparent differences between the two versions. Romila Thapar claimed that Kālidāsa filled out the epic theme with sub-plots, such as the curse and the signet ring, which may have been borrowed from

¹⁰ Kirby 1975: 130.

¹¹ Tieken 2001: 154.

¹² Rao and Shulman 2009: xv.

¹³ Bakker 2006. 174–177.

¹⁴ Tieken 2001: 158.

¹⁵ Vasudeva 2006: 17.

¹⁶ Gerow 1979: 563–571.

¹⁷ Ingalls 1976: 21.

¹⁸ Hartmann 2004: 117–118.

¹⁹ Thapar 2011: 45–46.



folk literature.²⁰ She also remarked that some features of the play, such as the description of the royal court, the closeness of kings to deities and the institute of *agrahāra*, may reflect Kālidāsa's own times.²¹ Apart from these allusions, Kālidāsa's play contains a couple of apparently negligible motifs in which the great poet may have encapsulated his own, supposedly political message. In this article, I would focus exclusively on these details and thus intend to take one step further than Thapar did.

This proposed way of interpretation touches on three characters of the play, Duṣyanta, Śakuntalā and Sarvadamaṇa, the reunion of whom serves as the happy outcome:

diṣṭyā Śakuntalā sādhvī sadapatyam idaṃ bhavān|
*śraddhā vittaṃ vidhiś ceti tritayaṃ tat samāgatam||*²²

By good fortune, faithful Śakuntalā, this perfect son, your Majesty, – faith, wealth, and law, this triad is united.²³

I think that we can understand the verse better if we take the words, functioning as *upamāna* in the simile, as references to the fundamental requirements of the Vedic sacrifices. Accordingly, *śraddhā* is the trust in the efficacy of the rite,²⁴ *vitta* means money that can cover the cost of the sacrifice, while *vidhi* is the method according to which the ceremony is performed. An anonymous reviewer of this article directed my attention to the commentator Kāṭayavema's quite similar explanation:

*śraddhā āstikyabuddhiḥ vittaṃ dravyaṃ vidhir anuṣṭhānam*²⁵

Śraddhā means the conviction in that something will exist, vitta is money while vidhi refers to religious practice.²⁶

If we interpret these words thus, the simile will suggest that the reunion of the characters means the re-establishment of the sacrifices in the royal family.

The problem of succession and the sacrifices for the ancestors were always related. Therefore, the want of the heir apparent implies not only political risks, but also puts an end to the heavenly happiness of the forefathers. In this way, the worry about the heir accompanies Duṣyanta during the whole drama. First, he appears in the role of the son, who is called back home by his mother:

KARABHAKAḤ: (*upasrtya*) *jaadu jaadu bhāṭṭā| devīo ānaventi jadhā āgamiṇi caūtthe*
diase puttapiṇḍao dānao ṇāma uvavāso bhavissadi tattha dihāūnā avassaṃ saṇṇihideṇā
*hodavvaṃ*²⁷

²⁰ Thapar 2011: 44.

²¹ Thapar 2011: 48–50.

²² *Abhijñānaśakuntala* 7.173. p. 352.

²³ Vasudeva 2006: 353.

²⁴ Lopez 2015: 51.

²⁵ Kāṭayavema comm. ad *Abhijñānaśakuntala* 7.173. (7.129.) p. 439.

²⁶ The translation is my own.

²⁷ *Abhijñānaśakuntala* 2.121. p. 124.



KARABHAKA: (*approaching*) Victory! Victory, Your Majesty! The Queen lets it be known that: ‘On the coming fourth lunar day there will take place the ceremony known as the ‘offering ensuring the birth of a son.’ On this occasion Your Majesty must be present.’²⁸

The cited passage attests to the religious importance of sons. In this case, Duṣyanta, nevertheless, missed performing his duty, and asked his friend, Mādhavya, the *vidūṣaka* of the play to substitute him as an adopted son of the queen:

<Duṣyanta uvāca>

*tvam ajjūbhīḥ putra iti pratigrhītaḥ| tad bhavān itaḥ pratinivṛtya tatrabhavatīnām pu-
trakāryam anuṣṭhātum arhati*²⁹

You have been welcomed by Mama like a son. Therefore you must please return from here and stand in for the duty of a son.³⁰

After this, Duṣyanta stayed in the forest, protected Kaṇva’s *āśrama* from the *rākṣasas*, and finally made Śakuntalā pregnant. Then he returned to his court, where his wedded wife (*bhaṭṭini*, *bhartrī*), Piṅgalikā, the tigress of his harem (*anteuavvagghī*, *antahpuravyāghrī*)³¹ was waiting for him. She apparently failed in her duty of giving birth to an heir, and therefore Duṣyanta’s anxiety about the succession was growing unbearable, especially after the recognition of his misdeed against Śakuntalā:

*āmūlaśuddhasantati kulam etat Pauravaṃ prajāvandhye|
mayy astam itam anārye deśa iva Sarasvatīsrotaḥ*³²

This Paurava lineage, pure from its beginning comes to a close since I, unworthy, have no offspring just as the River Sarasvatī seeps away in an unworthy desert.³³

Among these worries, Dhanavṛddha’s tragedy affirms the importance of the son further. Dhanavṛddha, the wealthy businessman, passed away without a child, and consequently Duṣyanta inherited his money. The pious king concluded his own future misery from this gain, and he intended to reject Dhanavṛddha’s heritage:

LIPIKĀRĪ: *jaṃ bhaṭṭā ānavedi| (patrakam prasārya vācayati) viditam astu devapādānām
yathā Dhanavṛddha iti yathārthanāmā vaṇig vārīpathopajīvi nauvyasane vipannaḥ| sa
cānapatyah| tasya koṣīatasamkhyātam vasu| tad idānīm rājārtham āpadyate| śrūtvā rājā
pramāṇam iti|*

RĀJĀ: (*ākampitaḥ*) *kaṣṭā khalv anapatyatā| Vasumati mahādhanatvād bahupatnīkena ta-
trabhavatā bhavitayvam| vicāryatām yadi kadā cid āpannasattvā kāpi tasya bhāryā syāt|*

PRATĪHĀRĪ: *deva idānīm yeva Kesavaseṭṭhiṇo duhidā nīvuttapumsavaṇā jā sūnīadi|*

RĀJĀ: *nanu garbhaḥ pitryam riktham arhati| gaccha| evam āryaPiśunaṃ brūhi*³⁴

²⁸ Vasudeva 2006: 125.

²⁹ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 2.126. p. 124.

³⁰ Vasudeva 2006: 125.

³¹ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 6.179–180. p. 294.

³² *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 6.212. p. 300.

³³ Vasudeva 2006: 301.

³⁴ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 6.191–194 p. 296–298.



SCRIBE: As your majesty commands. (*opens the document and reads*) ‘Let it be known to his majesty that the aptly named merchant Dhanavṛddha who trafficked by sea has perished in a shipwreck. He is without issue. His wealth amounts to thousands of millions. This now falls to the royal estate. Hearing this, may the king make a ruling.’

KING: (*shaken*) It is a misery to have no children. Vasumati! Because he was wealthy he must have had many wives. Enquire whether one of his wives may be pregnant.

PORTRESS: Lord, just now we have learnt that his wife, the daughter of the guildsman Keśava, has performed the pregnancy rite to ensure the birth of a son.

KING: Well then the unborn child is entitled to the father’s inheritance. Go, tell the honorable Piśuna so.³⁵

This announcement of the pregnancy of Keśava’s daughter indicates the potential salvation for Dhanavṛddha from his misfortune, and at once it offers hope for Duṣyanta. The king, just like Dhanavṛddha, has many wives, any of whom – not only Piṅgalikā – are invited to give birth to the desired son, the heir apparent to the throne.

In this way, the further step of this analysis touches on Śakuntalā’s figure and her ability to become a medicine for Duṣyanta’s suffering. As a matter of fact, there is always an uncertainty about Śakuntalā’s birth. When Duṣyanta met her first, he also did not miss to express his doubts about this, even though he finally convinced himself that Śakuntalā was in fact a *kṣatriya*:

RĀJĀ: *api nāma kulapater iyam asavarṇakṣetrasambhavā syāt| atha vā
asaṃśayaṃ kṣatraparigrahakṣamā yad evam asyām abhilāṣi me manaḥ|
satām hi saṃdehapadeṣu vastuṣu pramāṇam antaḥkaraṇapravṛttayaḥ||*³⁶

KING: Can it be that she is born in a caste different from the patriarchs? Or, rather, Doubtless she is fit to be wed by a warrior, since my heart desires her so. For the good, the inclinations of their inner faculties are authoritative in matters of doubt.³⁷

Another verse said by the king points at Kaṇva’s hard-heartedness in connection with this: the sage made his step-daughter, Śakuntalā perform penance, although her body was not capable of this:

*idaṃ kilāvyaḥjamaṇoharaṃ vapuḥ
tapaḥkṣamaṃ sādhayituṃ ya icchati|
dhruvaṃ sa nīloṭpalapatradhārayā
samillatām chettum ṛṣir vyavasyati||*³⁸

The sage who tries to make this guilelessly appealing figure capable of enduring penance: surely he has set about cutting hard firewood with the edge of a blue water-lily petal.³⁹

³⁵ Vasudeva 2006: 297–299.

³⁶ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.97–98 p. 74.

³⁷ Vasudeva 2006: 75.

³⁸ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.178. p. 70.

³⁹ Vasudeva 2006: 71.



Perhaps, it is this disharmony between Śakuntalā and her surroundings which stimulates the tragic happenings in the play. From this view, the situation reminds me of the famous legend of Śambūka, the *sūdra* performing penance.⁴⁰ Śambūka did not find his own place and behaved like a *brāhmaṇa*, which caused the death of an innocent boy. This tragedy, just as the negligence of Śakuntalā can be reasoned by similar discrepancies in the social order.

The *mādhavi*-creeper of the *āśrama*, on the other hand, seems to be a further hint at Śakuntalā's foreign status among the ascetics. Śakuntalā is often compared to this plant introduced as the only treasure of the hermitage,⁴¹ while there is a whole bower furnished with *mādhavis* in Duṣyanta's capital.⁴²

These allusions may suggest that Śakuntalā's place is in Duṣyanta's harem rather than among the hermits. Yet this does not mean that Śakuntalā became the queen of the empire at once. Just the opposite, Kaṇva's words comparing her to Yayāti's second wife, Śarmiṣṭhā affirm that Duṣyanta already had other wives:

*Yayāter iva Śarmiṣṭhā bhartur bahumatā bhava|
putraṃ tvam api saṃrājaṃ seva Pūruṃ samāpnuhi||*⁴³

Be honored by your husband, as Śarmiṣṭhā was by Yayāti. May you, too, bear a son to be emperor, as she did to Pūru.⁴⁴

Simon Brodbeck understood this verse as an allusion to an elder son of Duṣyanta, who is known in the southern recension of the *Mahābhārata*,⁴⁵ but apart from this possible exception, he is neglected by Kālidāsa.⁴⁶ Contrary to this interpretation, I rather think that this verse only says that, though Śakuntalā is going to be wed as secondary wife, she will also have a chance to bear an heir apparent, just as Śarmiṣṭhā, whose son, Pūru being the youngest among Yayāti's sons, inherited the throne of his father.⁴⁷

To sum up, Kālidāsa certifies that Śakuntalā, in spite of her obscure birth, is fit to be married to a *kṣatriya*, otherwise Duṣyanta would not fall in true love with her. On the other hand, Śakuntalā's figure also attests that any woman of the royal harem can become the mother of the future king.

Although Śakuntalā's legitimacy is confirmed, her pregnancy seems to be unfruitful, because she disappears together with her son, the only legitimate candidate for Duṣyanta's throne. A glimmer of hope still occurs. Though Duṣyanta fails to recognise his former mistress, the recognition of his son could still save the ancestors.

This leads us to the outcome of the play, when Duṣyanta unexpectedly finds his son, Sarvadama at Mārica's heavenly *āśrama*. This scene can easily cause one to remember the first meeting of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā. Here, the king is faced again with the same disharmony that he perceived between Śakuntalā and Kaṇva's *āśrama*:

⁴⁰ *Raghuvamśa* 15.42–53; *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.64.2–67.5.

⁴¹ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.83. p. 72, 3.30–31 p. 138.

⁴² *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 6.94–97 p. 276–278.

⁴³ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 4.100. p. 196.

⁴⁴ Vasudeva 2006: 197.

⁴⁵ *Mahābhārata* 1.89.16.b*877.1–2

⁴⁶ Brodbeck 2011: 228.

⁴⁷ *Mahābhārata* 1.70.29–32.



RĀJĀ: *tathā* | (*ity upagamyā*) *ayi maharṣiputra* |
evam āśramaviruddhavr̥ttinā saṃyamī kim iti janmadās tvayā |
sattvasaṃśrayasukho 'pi dūṣyate kṛṣṇasarpaśisuneva candanaḥ ||⁴⁸

KING: Indeed! (*approaches*) Here now, son of a great seer!

Why are you thus dishonoring your self-possessed father – as a young cobra does a sandal-tree – with deeds out of keeping with a hermitage, even though it pleases him that beings take refuge in him?⁴⁹

After that, Duṣyanta becomes gradually aware of the delight that he has found his own son. In this case, it is quite remarkable that Sarvadamana verifies his claim for being Duṣyanta's son by his deeds. There is no doubt that he is a true-born *kṣatriya*. He wrestles with a lion cub,⁵⁰ and moreover, feels spontaneous love for Duṣyanta:

TĀPAŚĪ: *assa bālassa asambaddhe vi bhaddamuhe saṃvādiṇī ādi tti vimhidamhi* | *avi a accantapariidassa via appaḍilomo eso de saṃvutto* ||⁵¹

ASCETIC: I am amazed at the resemblance between you and this boy, although you are not related. Moreover, he is easy-going with you as if you were someone very familiar.⁵²

These signs cause Duṣyanta to recognise his son, and the dynasty is rescued.

URVAŚĪ

The myth of Urvaśī thematises the love between the human and the divine. Its roots are already found in the *R̥gveda*,⁵³ and it may have been known in various versions before Kālidāsa's period.⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, it is quite difficult to establish the possible sources of the great poet. At least we can say that the plot of Kālidāsa's play is somewhat similar to two *purāṇic* versions of the story, those of the *Matsya*-⁵⁵ and the *Padma-purāṇas*,⁵⁶ even though it is uncertain whether it was Kālidāsa who borrowed from the *purāṇas* or the mythological collections were influenced by his play.⁵⁷

Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman have already noticed the similar imagery and pattern of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Vikramorvaśīya*.⁵⁸ Their observations seem to be likewise true for the supposed political message of the *Vikramorvaśīya*. Here we find again the same triad of the characters, namely the sonless king, his divine mistress, and their child.

⁴⁸ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 7.86–87 p. 336.

⁴⁹ Vasudeva 2006: 337.

⁵⁰ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 7.65–74 p. 332.

⁵¹ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 7.93. p. 338.

⁵² Vasudeva 2006: 339.

⁵³ *R̥gveda* 10.95.

⁵⁴ Rao and Shulman 2009: xvii–xx.

⁵⁵ *Matsya-purāṇa* 24.9–34.

⁵⁶ *Padma-purāṇa* 1.12.51–76.

⁵⁷ Rao and Shulman 2009: xix–xx.

⁵⁸ Rao and Shulman 2009: xv–xvi.



In this play, the sonless king is called Purūravas. He is a real bon vivant, who, unlike Duṣyanta, cares less for royal succession. The words of his *vidūṣaka*, nevertheless, reveal the danger threatening the dynasty:

*asaṃtānattaṇaṃ vajjia se <Purūravasah> ṇa kiṃ vi soaṇīaṃ*⁵⁹
Except for lacking a son, he has everything he could wish.⁶⁰

This remark indicates that even though Purūravas has a populous harem, his wives have been unable to deliver a son yet. Of course, there is no harem without its ‘tigress’, who is here the daughter of the king of Kāśī. As a matter of fact, she is a tamer one, and allows her husband enjoy other women:

DEVĪ (*rājñah pūjām abhiniya prāñjaliḥ praṇipatyā*): *eṣā ahaṃ devadāmihuṇaṃ RohiṇīMi-alañchaṇaṃ sakkhīkaria ajjauttam aṇuppasādemi* | *ajjappahudi jaṃ itthiaṃ ajjautto patthe-di jā ajjauttassa samāamappaṇaṇīṇī tāe mae pīdibandheṇa vattidavvaṃ ti*⁶¹
QUEEN (*acts out worshipping the king, with her hands folded, bowing*): I, the queen, intent on making my husband happy with me, say this with that divine couple, the Moon and his wife Rohiṇī, as witnesses. From now on, whatever woman my husband desires, or whatever woman desires him, will be treated by me as a friend.⁶²

What could motivate such a concession? Perhaps the love of the queen was so overwhelming that she offered such a privilege to her sweetheart. Besides, I find it as much possible that, despite Purūravas’s carelessness, his wife might be in fact anxious about the future of the dynasty.

By all means, hope for the ancestors is provided again by a mysterious woman: Urvaśī. She is an *apsaras*, and therefore her place in Purūravas’s harem is more questionable than Śakuntalā’s. She is not only an odd creeper far from the royal bower of *mādhavīs*, but she is a celestial being whom humans should avoid. Loving her is doubtlessly risky, as suggested by the anxiety of the *vidūṣaka*:

VIDŪṢAKA: *Niṇṇie viṇṇavehi tatthabhoḍiṃ jadāmi dāva miatiṇhiādo ṇivatteduṃ vaas-aam tado devīe muhaṃ pekkhissaṃ ti*⁶³
CLOWN: Tell Her Majesty that I’ll do my best to wean my friend from this mirage. I won’t come to see her until then.⁶⁴

His advice to Purūravas reveals the same intention:

VIDŪṢAKA: *siviṇasamāamaāriṇiṃ ṇiddaṃ sevadu bhavaṃ* | *aha vā tatthabhoḍīe Uvvasīe paḍikidiṃ ālihia oloanto ciṭṭha*⁶⁵

⁵⁹ *Vikramorvaṣīya* 5.2. p. 184.

⁶⁰ Rao and Shulman 2009: 185.

⁶¹ *Vikramorvaṣīya* 3.126. p. 108.

⁶² Rao and Shulman 2009: 109.

⁶³ *Vikramorvaṣīya* 2.13. p. 36.

⁶⁴ Rao and Shulman 2009: 37.

⁶⁵ *Vikramorvaṣīya* 2.101. p. 56.



CLOWN: Go to sleep. You'll see her in your dream. Another way is to paint a picture of Urvaśī and stare at it.⁶⁶

The other problem with Urvaśī is that she is not concerned about royal succession, because the birth of a son, in accordance with Indra's order, will put an end to her love story with Purūravas:

<Bharatasya dvitīyaḥ śiṣya uvāca>

*Purandareṇa uṇa lajjāvaṇadamuhiṃ Uvvasiṃ pekkhia evaṃ bhaṇidaṃ jassiṃ baddhabhāvā si tumaṃ tassa me raṇasahāssa rāesiṇo piyaṃ karaṇīyaṃ | sā tumaṃ Purūravasaṃ jahākāmaṃ uvaciṭṭha jāva so tui diṭṭhasaṃtāṇo bhodi ttiḥ*⁶⁷

‘Indra saw her with her head bent in shame and said “I owe a favour to the man you were thinking about. He helped me in battle. You may stay with Purūravas, as you wish to, until he sees a child from you.”⁶⁸

Thus, when Urvaśī's son was, in a somewhat mysterious way, born, she hid him at Cyavana's hermitage. Fate, however, proved to be outside Urvaśī's control. Her son, Āyus once became excluded from the *āśrama*, because he killed a vulture:

TĀPASĪ: *suṇādu mahārō | eso dīhāu Āu jādametto evva Uvvasie kiṃ vi ṇimittaṃ avekkhia mama hatthe ṇāsīkido | jaṃ khattiakumārassa jādakammādivihāṇaṃ taṃ se bhaavadā Cavaṇeṇa asesam aṇuciṭṭhidaṃ | gahidavijjo dhanuvvede a viṇīdo |*

RĀJĀ: *sanāthaḥ khalu saṃvṛttaḥ |*

TĀPASĪ: *ajja pupphasamidatthaṃ isikumāraehiṃ saha gadeṇa imiṇā assamaviruddhaṃ āaridaṃ |*

VIDUṢAKA: *kadhaṃ via |*

TĀPASĪ: *gahidāmisō kila giddho pādavasihare ṇilīamāṇo lakkhikido bāṇassa*⁶⁹

HERMIT WOMAN: Please listen. No sooner was this young boy, Āyus, born – may he live long! – than Urvaśī, for whatever reason, entrusted him to me. All the rituals appropriate for a warrior prince, beginning with the birth ceremony, were performed by the sage Cyavana. He was properly educated and trained in archery, too.

KING: Then he was properly looked after.

HERMIT WOMAN: But today, when he went out with the other young boys to gather flowers and firewood, he did something utterly against the rules of the hermitage.

CLOWN: Like what?

HERMIT WOMAN: He shot down a vulture sitting at the top of a tree with a piece of meat in its beak.⁷⁰

Āyus's deed shocked the hermits, but it was applauded in Purūravas's court. The bird killed by the young man had stolen Purūravas's magic jewel (*saṃgamaṇīyo maṇiḥ*) which guaranteed his relationship with the divine Urvaśī. Although the jewel was thus returned, Āyus's fated arrival,

⁶⁶ Rao and Shulman 2009: 57.

⁶⁷ *Vikramorvaśīya* 3.13. p. 84.

⁶⁸ Rao and Shulman 2009: 85.

⁶⁹ *Vikramorvaśīya* 5.72–77 p. 196–198.

⁷⁰ Rao and Shulman 2009: 197–199.



nevertheless, had to cause the divorce of their parents. In this difficult situation, Nārada, as a *deus ex machina*, entered into the picture to forward Indra's message. According to this, Urvaśī can stay on Earth as long as Purūravas lives. In this way, we arrive at the happy outcome of the play: the members of the royal triad reunite, and thus the dynasty survives:

*adyāhaṃ <Purūravāḥ> putriṇām agryaḥ satputreṇāmunā tava|
Paulomīsaṃbhaveneva Jayantena Purandaraḥ||*⁷¹

I feel like Indra when his wife gave birth to Jayanta – a proud father of a worthy son.⁷²

THE ROYAL PATRON BEHIND KĀLIDĀSA'S NĀṬAKAS

After analysing the plots of Kālidāsa's two *nāṭakas*, we should find out what message these plays might have had for the contemporary audience. As I have indicated, both stories present a case of dynastic crisis. They represent a narrative, in which the dynasty is close to vanishing, and its only hope is a son of obscure birth – whom some people may despise for being a bastard – and who, nevertheless, proves his suitability for the throne with his deeds.

The other key figure of these plays is the mother who gives birth to the heir. In both *nāṭakas*, the mothers are born of *apsarases*, the appearance of whom indicates a kind of divine intervention. In connection with them, Romila Thapar, moreover, hypothesised that the *apsarases* of the mythical genealogies originally stood for non-Āryan, perhaps tribal women adopted as such 'un-human' beings in the royal dynasties.⁷³

Above all, who might have been interested in sponsoring putting this theme on stage in the theatres? If we accept that Kālidāsa worked under the Guptas, in my opinion, it will be hard to find any better candidate for this than Skanda Gupta.

It is widely accepted that Skanda Gupta was not the rightful heir to Kumāra Gupta's throne.⁷⁴ Although he introduces himself as Kumāra Gupta's son in his inscriptions,⁷⁵ he, unlike his ancestors, fails to mention the name of his mother. From this, many scholars have concluded that Skanda Gupta may have been born from a woman of low rank;⁷⁶ in Bakker's words, he was a bastard son.⁷⁷ The only, more or less exact fact about his mother is that she is compared to Devakī in the Bhitri pillar inscription:

*pitari divam upete viplutām vaṃśalakṣmīm
bhujabalavijitārīr yaḥ pratiṣṭhāpya bhūyaḥ|
jitam iti paritoṣān mātaram sāsrānettrām
hataripur iva Kṛṣṇo Devakīm abhyupetaḥ||*⁷⁸

⁷¹ Vikramorvaśīya 5.119, p. 204.

⁷² Rao and Shulman 2009: 205.

⁷³ Thapar 2013: 108.

⁷⁴ Tandon 2014: 557.

⁷⁵ *CII Vol. 3. No. 12. p. 50. l. 22–23, No. 13. p. 53. l. 6–8, No. 14.*

⁷⁶ Basham 1955: 368–369; Kulke and Rothermund 2002: 89; Tandon 2014: 557.

⁷⁷ Bakker 2006: 178.

⁷⁸ *CII Vol. 3. No. 13. p. 54. l. 12–14.*



‘Who, when (his) father had attained the skies, conquered (his) enemies by the strength of (his) arm, and established again the ruined fortunes of (his) lineage; and then, crying “the victory has been achieved” betook himself to (his) mother, whose eyes were full of tears from joy, just as Kṛṣṇa, when he had slain (his) enemies, betook himself to (his) mother) Devakī.’⁷⁹

Bakker and Willis interpreted this reference as an allusion to Skanda Gupta’s triumph over his paternal uncle, Ghaṭotkaca Gupta.⁸⁰ However, this tempting way of explanation is less probable, because the inscription, on the one hand, does not explicitly suggest that Skanda Gupta’s enemy did not belong to the royal family, on the other hand, Ghaṭotkaca Gupta, as a paternal uncle, does not correspond in fact to Kaṃsa, Kṛṣṇa’s maternal uncle.⁸¹ Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning that Kaṃsa’s identification with Kṛṣṇa’s uncle may have been less certain. According to the *Harivaṃśa* (3rd or 4th century A.D.),⁸² Kaṃsa calls Devakī his father’s sister which suggests that he and Kṛṣṇa may have been cousins in an early version of the myth.⁸³ Although Kaṃsa, in this way, only stands for Skanda Gupta’s main rival, the simile seems to be still remarkable. Skanda Gupta’s choice for comparing himself to Kṛṣṇa could evoke the same narrative that we have already found in the case of Pūru, Sarvadamana and Āyus:

Pauravī Rohiṇī nāma Bāhlikasyātmaajā nṛpa|
jyeṣṭhā patnī mahārāja dayitānakadundubheḥ||
lebhe jyeṣṭham sutam Rāmaṃ Śāraṇaṃ Śaṭham eva ca|
Durdamaṃ Damanaṃ Śvabhraṃ PiṇḍārakaKuśīnaraū||
Citrāṃ nāma kumārīṃ ca Rohiṇītanayā nava|
Citrā Subhadreti punar vikhyātā Kurunandana||
*Vasudevāc ca Devakyāṃ jajñe Śaurir mahāyaśāḥ|*⁸⁴

O king, Vasudeva’s first, beloved wife was Rohiṇī, Bāhlika’s daughter, a descendant of Pūrus. She gave birth to nine children, eight sons, namely Rāma, the oldest, then Śāraṇa, Śaṭha, Durdama, Damana, Śvabhra, Piṇḍāraka and Kuśīnara, and one daughter called Citrā who was also known as Subhadrā. Of Devakī, [on the other hand], Vasudeva engendered the very glorious Kṛṣṇa.⁸⁵

Apparently, the *Harivaṃśa* attests that Devakī, just as Śarmiṣṭhā, Śakuntalā and Urvaśī, was a secondary wife, who, despite this, delivered the most glorious child for his husband. In this way, Devakī’s mention in the inscription might hint at Skanda Gupta’s obscure birth, and not that he, just as Kṛṣṇa, killed his own uncle.

⁷⁹ Fleet 1888: 55.

⁸⁰ Bakker 2006: 179; Willis 2005: 137.

⁸¹ Tandon 2014: 560–562.

⁸² Brockington 1998: 326.

⁸³ *Harivaṃśa* 48.38.a, 65.77.c, 65.88.c.

⁸⁴ *Harivaṃśa* 25.1–4b.

⁸⁵ The translation is my own.



On the other hand, the Bhitri inscription tells us that Kumāra Gupta, unlike Candra Gupta I and Samudra Gupta, did not announce Skanda Gupta as his chosen heir.⁸⁶ Therefore, Skanda Gupta needed to prove his suitability for the throne by his own heroism:

*krameṇa buddhyā nipuṇaṃ pradhārya
dhyātvā ca kṛtsnān guṇadoṣahetūn|
vyapetya sarvān manujendraputrāṃl
Lakṣmīḥ svayaṃ yaṃ. <Skandaguptam> varayāṃ cakāra||⁸⁷*

...whom the goddess of fortune and splendour of her own accord selected as her husband, having in succession (and) with judgment skilfully taken into consideration and thought over all the causes of virtues and faults, (and) having discarded all (the other) sons of kings (as not coming up to her standard).⁸⁸

For want of the old king, Lakṣmī, ‘the goddess of fortune’, appears and selects a new husband for herself. Her choice seemingly depends on the righteous deeds of the candidates.

In my opinion, this idea occurs as a leitmotif in Kālidāsa’s plays. Duṣyanta was unaware of the identity of his son, but Sarvadamaṇa’s boyish heroism, his wrestling with the lion cub revealed him. Purūrava’s son, Āyus was, in a similar way, hidden in an *āśrama* until his valour became plain against the thieving vulture. Thus their heroic deeds qualified these sons to the throne of their fathers. They were of course of royal descent, but they were brought up outside the royal court, and their birth was certified by their virtuous conducts.

With regard to Skanda Gupta, the affinity of these boys with Skanda seems also intentional. Both of them find pleasure in peacocks, the bird serving as Skanda’s *vāhana*. On the one hand, Sarvadamaṇa plays with a clay peacock,⁸⁹ while on the other hand Āyus fosters a pet peacock called Maṇikaṅṭhaka.⁹⁰ In this latter case, the resemblance is, furthermore, announced by Nārada at the end of the play:

*Āyuso yauvarājyaśrīḥ smārayaty ātmajasya te|
abhiṣiktaṃ Mahāsenam saināpatye Marutvatā||⁹¹*

The newly crowned prince, your son, brings to mind the happy day, when Indra crowned Kumāra commander of his army.⁹²

To sum up, I think that the narrative of Kālidāsa’s plays are built on such a schema, which could be quite valued for such a king like Skanda Gupta.

⁸⁶ Tandon 2014: 559.

⁸⁷ *CII Vol. 3. No. 14. p. 59. l. 5.*

⁸⁸ Fleet 1888: 62.

⁸⁹ *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 7.75–80 p. 334, 7.103–108 p. 340.

⁹⁰ *Vikramorvaṣīya* 5.115. p. 204.

⁹¹ *Vikramorvaṣīya* 5.187. p. 218.

⁹² Rao and Shulman 2009: 219.



CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this article, I referred to Vasudeva's call for re-reading Kālidāsa's works with special regard to their political subtexts.⁹³

Concerning Kālidāsa's *nāṭakas*, my answer to this question is definitely positive. While Vasudeva expected Anantadevī or Dhruvadevī's mirror images to appear in these works, this investigation concluded that Kālidāsa's *apsaras*-born heroines stood for Skanda Gupta's low-born mother. Thus, the story of both Śakuntalā and Urvaśī offers such a schema which can validate the claim of the bastard son to the imperial throne.

The idea that Kālidāsa was at some point under Skanda Gupta's patronage, has already been put forward by many scholars.⁹⁴ Among them, Gawroński claimed that the first five kings of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* related, in a special mytho-historic way, the deeds of the Gupta emperors. In his explanation, the most celebrated king of the Raghus, Rāma corresponds to Skanda Gupta, which also means that he may have been contemporary with the author.⁹⁵

According to Michael Willis, an initial form of the Rāma-cult flourished under Skanda Gupta.⁹⁶ This cult probably exerted influence of Kālidāsa's Rāma-story embedded in the *Raghuvamśa*.⁹⁷ His resume followed Vālmiki's plot quite strictly. The only exception is its overture, which Kālidāsa may have altered deliberately.

At the beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the deities commissioned Viṣṇu, as their only chance, to save the world.⁹⁸ This attests that Rāma-Viṣṇu had not been identified yet with the Supreme being in this phase of the epic.⁹⁹ On the contrary, the *Raghuvamśa* reports that Viṣṇu rebukes the gods because he, being omniscient, has already been aware of the danger and he, incidentally, should not be reminded of his duty by any deity including Indra.¹⁰⁰ Because the court laid claim for Rāma's identity with the Highest divinity, Kālidāsa's innovation in the plot seems to be reasoned.

Skanda Gupta's sympathy with Rāma, on the other hand, may have another, personal aspect, too. The Solar Dynasty (*Sūryavamśa*) just as the lineage of the Guptas, was broken slightly after Daśaratha's death, because he was not in fact Rāma's biological father. In lieu of him, it was the greatest deity, Viṣṇu, who incarnated himself to save not only humankind from the *rākṣasas* but also the house of Ayodhyā. After that, Rāma's way to the throne of his father, just as Skanda Gupta's, was not straight. Although he was born as Daśaratha's true heir, he became exiled because of Kaikeyī's villainy. During his exile, Rāma performed heroic deeds through which he certified his suitability for being Daśaratha's heir. After the final challenge, the killing of Rāvaṇa, Rāma returned and took over his paternal heritage. Rāma's legend, in this way, seems to have been a quite obvious paradigm for Skanda Gupta to legitimise his rule as a result of a similar divine intervention.

⁹³ Vasudeva 2006: 17.

⁹⁴ Mazumdar 1909: 735–739; Pathak 1916: viii–xi.

⁹⁵ Gawroński 1914–1918: 67–69.

⁹⁶ Willis 2009: 241.

⁹⁷ *Raghuvamśa* 11.1–15.103.

⁹⁸ *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.14.17.cd.

⁹⁹ Brinkhaus 1992: 103–104.

¹⁰⁰ *Raghuvamśa* 10.39–41.



Perhaps, the case of the *Kumārasambhava* is even clearer. I agree with Vasudeva's remark, according to which this poem may have been composed remembering the struggles with the Huns in the last years of Kumāra Gupta's rule.¹⁰¹

Kālidāsa's third theatrical work, the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, however, seems to be a bit problematic because it is often regarded as a key proof for the other popular theory about Kālidāsa's life, namely for his employment as Candra Gupta II's court poet.¹⁰² This play, unlike the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Vikramorvaśīya*, takes its topic from the events of the historical past instead of the mythological tradition. Even though it is a love comedy, it contains some allusions to the political diversification of Vidarbha and the presence of the Nāgas at Vidiśā which make Hans Bakker's supposition quite probable that the *Mālavikāgnimitra* mirrors the contemporary political stage. According to him, Vidiśā was an important political centre of the western part of the Gupta empire where the crown princes may have resided.¹⁰³ This idea seems fairly acceptable in the case of Rāma Gupta, Samudra Gupta's elder son, nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that the annexation of the country of the Śaka *kṣatrapas* would not have lessened its importance. Furthermore, the court of Vidiśā does not appear as an esteemed office in the *Mālavikāgnimitra* as it could have been under Rāma Gupta.

Although Bakker claimed that Agnimitra, the hero of the play was the heir-to-the-throne and his relations with his father were good,¹⁰⁴ these words can be hardly supported if we read Kālidāsa's work closely. At the end of the story, we are informed that Agnimitra was angry with his father:

*tad idānīm akālahīnaṃ vigataroṣacetasā bhavatā vadhūjanena saha yajñasevanāyāgantavyam iti*¹⁰⁵

So now that my grandson has returned my horse just as Aṃśumat had returned Sagarā's, I shall perform the sacrifice.¹⁰⁶

Although the reason of their conflict remains unexplained, it is slightly suggested that Puṣpamitra favoured his grandson Vasumitra against Agnimitra. While Agnimitra is introduced as a typical bad king addicted to his love affairs, Vasumitra is a brilliant general, who is really of use to the empire. When Puṣpamitra is involved in his *aśvamedha*, it is Vasumitra again who fulfilling the typical duty of an heir took care of the sacrificial horse:

*so 'haṃ idānīm Aṃśumateva Sagarah pautreṇa pratyāhrtāśvo yakṣye*¹⁰⁷

So now that my grandson has returned my horse just as Aṃśumat had returned Sagarā's, I shall perform the sacrifice.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Vasudeva 2006: 17–18.

¹⁰² Mirashi and Navlekar 1969: 34.

¹⁰³ Bakker 2006: 175.

¹⁰⁴ Bakker 2006: 174.

¹⁰⁵ *Mālavikāgnimitra* 5.154. p. 198.

¹⁰⁶ Balogh and Somogyi 2009: 199.

¹⁰⁷ *Mālavikāgnimitra* 5.154. p. 198.

¹⁰⁸ Balogh and Somogyi 2009: 199.



With regard to the mythological background, Agnimitra should correspond to Sagara's evil son, Asamañja, who was banished from the capital because of his misconduct and instead of whom his son, Aṃśumat ascended the throne.¹⁰⁹ If we accept that Agnimitra is Asamañja's counterpart, his appointment as a governor on an outer edge of the empire can rather serve his exclusion from the succession than his straight way to the imperial throne. This at once gives me the impression that the *Mālavikāgnimitra* may mirror the political circumstances at some time after the fall of the *kṣatrapas*, when Vidiśā had lost its dominance in the Western part of the empire.

On the whole, I hope that this paper was able to present some remarkable allusions in Kālidāsa's *nāṭakas*. Of course, these parallels cannot be regarded as ultimate evidences for Kālidāsa's date, but, in any case, they suggest that many of his works could serve Skanda Gupta's policy.

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¹⁰⁹ *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.37.2–38.6.



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