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Resisting and justifying changes II

Testifying and legitimizing innovation in
Indian and Ancient Greek Culture

ed. by
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Opera sottoposta a
peer review secondo
il protocollo UPI

*To the Memory of
Alexander Dubyanskiy, Peter John Rhodes, Jaroslav Vacek*

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NATURAL SCENERIES. RECREATING PATTERNS IN SANSKRIT COURT PLAYS

Abstract

In these pages some characteristics of the natural sceneries designed as the settings in a group of Sanskrit court plays are analysed. The works considered are the *Svapnavāsavadatta*, *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Vikramorvaśīya*, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, *Priyadarśikā*, *Ratnāvalī*, and *Mālatīmādhava*. The purpose is to show how single authors retrace apparently consolidated themes developing them in various ways, with the introduction of a number of variations. The settings in question are the gardens of royal palaces or other locations, and the forest, connected with the motif of the search for the lost beloved through invocations addressed to elements of nature.

1. Introduction

It is well known that Sanskrit *kāvya* feeds on predetermined situations and motifs. However, the lack of documentation on what we must assume to have been the formative phases of *kāvya* makes it usually almost impossible to establish who was responsible for the introduction of these *topoi*. Nonetheless, some of these situations and motifs can be traced back to other branches of Sanskrit literature, for example the Epics. In these pages we intend to analyse some of the characteristics of the natural sceneries that serve as settings in a group of celebrated Sanskrit court plays, with the intention of showing how individual authors take up what seem to be established themes, but develop them in various ways and introduce variations. The works examined are the *Svapnavāsavadatta*, one of the so-called Trivandrum Plays, problematically attributed to Bhāsa and therefore possibly pre-Kālidāsa; *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Vikramorvaśīya* and *Abhijñānaśākuntala* by Kālidāsa, 4th-5th century; *Priyadarśikā* and *Ratnāvalī* by Harṣa, first half of the 7th century; and *Mālatīmādhava* by Bhavabhūti, first half of the 8th century¹. We will focus on the garden setting², i.e. domesticated

¹ For the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* we adopt the Devanāgarī recension as edited by M.R. Kale with Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary; for the text of the *Vikramorvaśīya* see below.

² I have devoted a specific study to the gardens of the mentioned works, with a more detailed analysis of their role in the plots and their characteristics as presented

nature, and on a theme concerning wilderness that recurs in two of these works, the *Vikramorvaśīya* and the *Mālatīmādhava*, namely the appeal to the elements of nature to provide information about the lost beloved.

2. Gardens

These works are so well known that there is no need to go into their plots at length. Suffice it to say that they primarily tell stories of falling in love, of passion and the search for fulfilment or at least some sort of serenity. Another recurring theme is the connection of these love affairs with the conquest of political power; but the development of a love story remains the central theme, a love that thrives on difficulties – sometimes arousing a smile, sometimes with more painful implications – and which therefore requires dissimulation and secrecy to reach a happy ending. Not only do the details of the gardens of the royal palaces, presented by the authors of the *Svapnavāsavadatta*, *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Vikramorvaśīya*, *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (Act Six), *Priyadarśikā* and *Ratnāvalī*, most probably reflect at least some of the actual characteristics of these places in contemporary India, but their scenic fruition also quite plausibly reproduces a concrete aspect of court life (cf. Ali 2003: 237). Inside the royal palaces there was no real privacy; even the residential rooms of the king or queens did not escape the gaze of servants, courtiers and so on. The gardens, on the other hand, constituted a kind of intermediate dimension: they were part of the royal residences, places that were protected from the outside and at the same time open to the male and female members of the court, but which, with their pavilions of creepers, bushes, and groves, guaranteed a relative degree of concealment and secrecy. This is exactly the role that gardens or, as we shall see, similar places in other locations play in these theatrical works. And, in general, the fundamental importance that the gardens assume in the plots is based precisely on the *relativity* of the privacy that these places are meant to offer; in fact, it is this *presumed* privacy that functions as a scenic engine. If we consider these plays as a whole, the events that are staged in the gardens (or similar places) follow well-defined and recurring patterns. The motif regularly encountered in the garden settings consists of soliloquies or confidences addressed to same-sex companions by lovers, expressions of love accompanied by the fact that someone else listens unseen and thus becomes aware of the feelings of others: the pattern appears in exactly *all* the works

by the single authors (Pieruccini 2022b). Some of the considerations are taken up or otherwise developed here.

considered. Other situations recurrently set in gardens are the act of falling in love at first sight, after the first glimpse of the other party while the character is hidden by vegetation, and the intimate meeting of the lovers. In Sanskrit court theatre, and this is a fundamental point, these motifs come to us immediately, essentially, as a *fait accompli*, and represent the canonical function of the gardens and the very reason for their presence in the plays.

Now, in chronological terms, the first great garden of a royal palace in Sanskrit literature is of course the *aśokavanikā*, the ‘*aśoka*³ grove’, of Laṅkā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (V.12 ff.). The place is presented in magnified, excessive and fabulous terms, just like everything regarding Rāvaṇa’s residence in Laṅkā: we are on the borderline between the human and the supernatural, but this does not detract from the fact that for the poet the concrete inspiration cannot but come from the earthly ruler’s residence, transfigured by fable and myth. The *aśokavanikā* in Laṅkā is also a place where what can be defined as a kind of love encounter takes place, which contrasts Sītā’s strenuous loyalty to Rāma with Rāvaṇa’s dark, tragically threatening lust; and here too the driving force of the plot is the presence of a hidden character, obviously Hanumān⁴. Can we assume that, for the authors of plays, the *aśokavanikā* of Laṅkā represents an archetype? Certainly the motif of the palace garden is developed in the *aśokavanikā* in harrowing terms: the romantic, often melancholic, gentle and basically positive tone – at least according to the ethics granting polygamy to kings – with which it is treated in the theatre is of an entirely different kind.

As for the variations introduced by the authors in the works under examination, we can consider the importance given to the setting in the garden, the interaction between the characters and specific plants, and the application of the motif to different gardens or to places, as mentioned above, made equivalent to gardens.

On the first point, the primacy certainly goes to Harṣa. Particularly in the *Ratnāvalī*, the first three of the four Acts of the play are staged in the palace garden; the characters move continuously among groves and pavilions of creepers. It is not insignificant to recall that Harṣa was a sovereign, who in the first half of the 7th century reigned for some forty years over a vast empire in northern India. Even considering the

³ The *aśoka* (*Jonesia asoca* Roxb., or *Saraca asoca* [Roxb.] de Wilde), which blossoms in spring and whose most characteristic form has fiery red-orange flowers, is one of the most cherished trees in Sanskrit poetry. For a still useful overview of its literary and artistic occurrences, see Syed 1990: 77-115.

⁴ I have analysed the *Rāmāyaṇa* passages concerning the *aśokavanikā* of Laṅkā in a previous article (Pieruccini 2022a).

conventionality of this literature, one really has to think that Harṣa was in a position to know the gardens of a royal palace very well, and that perhaps, in composing his court plays, he was thinking of his own gardens, or perhaps of his ideal ones.

A major example of interaction between a character and an element of vegetation in the palace garden appears in the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, where Kālidāsa introduces the famous kicking of the *aśoka* as a central motif. Afflicted by *dohada*, pregnancy cravings, the tree needs a young woman to kick it for it to flower, but since the first queen has injured herself falling from a swing, she entrusts the task to Mālavikā, who performs the task successfully. As is well known, subsequent Sanskrit literature displays a vast series of poetical interactions between young women and specific trees, which, in order to blossom, are deemed to need a young woman's spit, embrace, laughter, singing, and so on; the motif will gradually be enriched with new elements and formalisations and remain literarily significant until at least the 16th century⁵.

In other works too, Kālidāsa alludes to the kicking of the *aśoka*: see *Meghadūta* 75, *Kumārasambhava* III.26, *Raghuvamśa* VIII.62-63. He also already uses the motif concerning the *kesara*, which in order to flower needs to receive wine from the mouth of a young woman: examples are *Meghadūta* 75 and *Raghuvamśa* XIX.12. The *Ratnāvalī* (I.[18]) also alludes to the motifs related to the *aśoka* and the *bakula* (a possible synonym for *kesara*); perhaps the *campaka* is mentioned here in reference to the *dohada* as well. We can assume that the examples connected with such trees are the first poetically exploited uses of the *dohada* motif; it is clear however that Kālidāsa takes them for granted, i.e. they are already well known to his audience. The origin can probably be sought in folkloric festivals and rituals related to the celebration of spring⁶, which at some point (with Kālidāsa first?) *kāvya* poetry absorbs and reworks.

It should also be remembered that the discourse on the *dohada* cannot be entirely separated from that on the so-called *śālabhañjikā*, because both concern the same relationship between female and vegetation fertility. The term *śālabhañjikā* is usually employed to define the female figure clinging to a tree and holding one of its branches with one lifted arm. On the basis of an isolated passage from the *Avadānaśataka*, in a seminal pioneering article J.Ph. Vogel identified the origin of the term, meaning 'she who breaks [a branch] of a *śāla* [tree]', in a practice,

⁵ The *dohada* motif is intertwined with the motif of the so-called *śālabhañjikā*: see below, and footnote 7.

⁶ For a vast overview on spring celebrations, *vasantotsavas*, see Anderson 1993.

again, related to a folk festival (Vogel 1929). Vogel's analysis, which is still an essential reference on the subject, shows how the term is later largely used in literature to indicate, more generically, sculptures of female subjects on pillars or other locations. The seemingly first figurative attestations that have come down to us of female figures holding a tree branch with their arm raised high appear among the famous sculptures of the Bharhut railing (circa 100 BCE), which reproduces a number of minor and popular deities absorbed by Buddhism and identifiable thanks to their accompanying inscriptions; two figures in the posture of the *śālabhañjikā* are called, respectively, Culakokā Devatā and Yakṣī Candrā (Cadā). More or less a century later, equally famous examples of the woman embracing a tree, namely the female brackets of the Great Stūpa of Sanchi, bear no inscription, but, here too, they are undoubtedly fertility nymphs. The iconography will be widespread for centuries, and the link between this iconographic scheme and fertility and generation is the reason why queen Māyā, as well known, is described and represented in such a posture as she gives birth to the future Buddha in the Lumbinī wood⁷. In the face of all this, we really have to think that the image of a woman, divine or not, connected with a tree was familiar to the poets and the audience we are dealing with, and that this represented, in short, a sort of obvious discourse⁸.

Another motif of direct interaction between characters and plants appears in the *Ratnāvalī* (Acts One and Two). Here the motif concerns

⁷ The figures of Bharhut and Sanchi have been endlessly reproduced, and the iconographic repertoire concerning Māyā is extremely wide and well-studied. Similarly, after Vogel, many scholars have dealt with the subject of the *śālabhañjikā*, often in connection with the *dohada* motif, and also taking into consideration such figurative works. For reasons of space and convenience here we limit ourselves to mentioning the very remarkable Roth 1957, and some significant more recent works, Desai 2010, Bautze-Picron 2010, and Bawa 2013: Chapt. 6 in particular; for a valuable synopsis, Dehejia 2009: 87-92. Although we cannot expand on the subject here, we recall that the connection with the *śāla* tree (*Shorea robusta* Gaertn.f. or *Vatica robusta*) remains in the name commonly attributed to this posture but, even in the earliest attestations, the trees to which the female characters cling are different and varied.

⁸ A relief on a railing pillar in the Government Museum, Mathura (no. J. 55), according to the hypothesis already formulated, albeit with some doubts, by Vogel (1909), may specifically depict the kicking of the *āsoka*. A comparable image is to be found on a pillar from Sanghol (Bawa 2013: fig. 6.41). On a railing pillar of Bodhi Gaya, a relief seems to represent the actual ritual, or game, of the *śālabhañjikā*. Here a man uses his hands to support the right foot of a young woman who is clinging to a tree with her left arm and leg; the upper part of the relief is damaged, so that neither the right arm, presumably holding a branch of the tree, nor the crown of the tree are visible. For reproductions, see for instance Quintanilla 2007: fig. 116, and Bawa 2013: fig. 6.31. All these reliefs can be dated to the first two centuries CE.

two creepers, a *mādhavī* in full bloom, which is dear to the queen, and a *navamālikā*, which her spouse king Udayana, in a playful challenge, wants to make bloom out of season. He is successful thanks to the instructions of a certain Śrīkhaṇḍadāsa, who has come to the royal court from a place called Śrīparvata. The interesting point is that the relationship between the king and queen and each of these two plants is established by the use of the verb *parigrah-*, which essentially means ‘to marry’; the two characters have “married” their favourite plant. Ritual practices of marriage between a man or a woman and a tree or a plant are documented in folklore up to modern times in India; their purposes and meanings appear to be multifaceted, but one important idea seems to be that this is the way to exhaust an inauspiciousness that might otherwise fall on an authentic marriage between two persons⁹. Nowadays a sort of preventive marriage, with a plant, an animal or an auspicious object, appears to be recommended on the basis of the position of Mars (Maṅgala) in the birth horoscope; if the planet lies in certain configurations, it may, among other things, cause the premature death of the spouse, hence the expedient of making the “first” spouse suffer this sad fate instead. A glance on the Internet at the term *manglik*, or *mangala dosha*, indicating respectively the person afflicted by the “dangerous” position of Maṅgala, and the defect (*doṣa*) conferred by its position, can give a good idea of the diffusion of the belief today. In the *Ratnāvalī* the “marriage” to the creepers and the related challenge by Udayana are obviously a kind of game; but here too, just as with the kicking of the *aśoka*, the origin of the motif may lie in a folklore practice with a long history.

The third point of the variations considered here, the typology of the garden, and the extension of the poetic features connected with the garden setting to different places, concern the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Mālatīmādhava*. In the extremely famous plot of Kālidāsa’s play, exactly the same events as those encountered elsewhere in the gardens of royal palaces take place in the flowery spaces of the *tapovana*, the hermitage, of Kaṇva, and on the wooded banks of the Mālīnī. In Act One King Duṣyanta, initially hidden, sees Śākuntalā watering the young plants in the hermitage with her friends, and immediately falls in love with her, intervening in the scene to save the girl from being molested by a bee (a motif that will be taken up by Harṣa in Act Two of *Priyadarśikā*, where this takes place in the palace garden). In Act Three, Śākuntalā and her friends are on the banks of the river in a pavilion of creepers, a

⁹ On these practices see Gupta 1960, *passim*, and especially Thankappan Nair’s article included there, Nair 1960; and Parkin 1997.

latāmaṇḍapa that immediately brings to mind those occurring in palace gardens. Here Duṣyanta, unseen, overhears Śakuntalā's conversations with her friends and learns about the passion that torments her; then he comes forward and it is here that the Gāndharva marriage takes place. At least as far as the first meeting in the hermitage between Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta is concerned, Kālidāsa is obviously aware that the matrix is an already canonical "garden" scene, for he has the *vidūṣaka* say to Duṣyanta: 'I see you have transformed a penance-grove (*tapovaṇam*) into a garden (*ubavaṇam*)'¹⁰.

Then, an important reworking of the motif occurs in Bhavabhūti. The *Mālatīmādhava* stages the contrasted love between the son and daughter of two ministers, not a king's love affair, and the events do not take place inside a royal palace. But, as an heir to the solid tradition established by previous court plays regarding gardens, Bhavabhūti appears well aware that, in a sense, some events must, or indeed can, only take place in gardens. Or rather, he evidently believes that gardens are in any case indispensable for the development or the direction of the plot. He therefore adapts the theme to his own needs, shifting the motifs of the hidden character falling in love at first sight, the overheard confidences, and the lovers' meetings, to gardens belonging to other places. Act One also presents a multiplication of the motif, a sort of play of mirrors. In fact, a place called the 'Garden of the young *bakula*(s)' (*bālabakulodyāna*, I.[19]+) is where Mādhava confides in his friend Makaranda and is overheard by Mādhava's faithful servant. But these confidences concern the events that had happened shortly before in another garden, normally defined by the text as *madanodyāna*, 'Garden of Madana', that is of the god Love, annexed to a temple of Kāma, where Mādhava, initially unnoticed, saw Mālatī for the first time and instantly fell in love with her. In Act Four the garden (called *kusumākara*, roughly 'Treasury of flowers') again belongs to a temple, this time dedicated to Śaṅkara; the plan is that Mādhava may see Mālatī again as she comes to honour the god. Mādhava sees her and secretly listens to the dialogues; Mālatī catches sight of him, but events take a different turn due to the irruption of a tiger. Finally, at the end of Act Six and in Act Eight, the 'walled garden' (*udyānavāṭa*) of a monastery (*vihārikā*, VI.[18]+), where the nun Kāmandakī has directed the two lovers, offers them safe refuge. It is interesting to note that whereas in the whole tradition the vegetation of gardens is intended to evoke colours, scents or to resonate with the

¹⁰ *kidam̐ tue ubavaṇam̐ tapovaṇam̐ tti pekkhāmi (kṛtam̐ tvayopavanaṁ tapovanam̐ iti paśyāmi), Abhijñānaśākuntala* II.[12]+). The term *upavana* is defined by the *Amara-kośa* (II.4.2) as 'artificial forest' (*kṛtrimam̐ vanam̐*).

poetic images codified by *kāvya*, the vegetation of this monastic garden is essentially utilitarian, which seems to add a touch of realism: Bhavabhūti describes it in fact as endowed with betel shrubs (*tāmbūlī*), areca palms (*pūgadruma*), berries (*kakkolī*) and citrus trees (*mātuluṅga*) (VI.[19]).

3. *Wild nature*

Wilderness is an important presence in the *Vikramorvaśīya* (Act Four) and in the *Mālatīmādhava* (Act Nine), connected in both works with the motif of the lover who, separated by some vicissitude from his (elsewhere her) partner, wanders through woodlands in search of her (or him), questioning in vain elements of nature about where she (or he) can be found. The motif has illustrious antecedents in the *Mahābhārata* in the story of Nala and Damayantī (*Nalopākhyāna*, III.50-78), when Damayantī wanders in the forest in search of Nala, and in *Rāmāyaṇa* III.58, in the very famous passage describing Rāma's reaction to the discovery of Sītā's disappearance, who, as he later finds out, had been abducted by Rāvaṇa¹¹. The theme of the search in the forest for the lost beloved will be taken up in later works based on Rāma's story, as well as in Purāṇic literature, where the *gopīs* yearning for Kṛṣṇa invoke nature in a similar way¹². In the works we are analysing here, the common thread of the invocation motif lies in the fact that the poets do not describe the natural elements per se; or rather, they do so in part, but with the essential aim of projecting human feelings onto nature, of establishing and painting an emotional relationship between the human being and the elements themselves, a relationship that is however one-sided, ultimately set in a framework of complete incommunicability.

Let us begin by outlining how the motif is formulated in the Epics. In the *Nalopākhyāna*, Damayantī is abandoned by Nala in the forest and, alone and distraught, she turns first to a tiger (*śārdūla*, III.61.30-34), then to a mountain (III.61.39-52)¹³, asking these indifferent and mute beings to give her news of her husband. The invocation to the mountain is particularly long and verbose, since Damayantī first describes it and

¹¹ Of both poems here we only consider the Critical Editions.

¹² A brief account of the works which contain the theme of searching for the lost beloved can be found in Pollock 2007 [1984]: 58-59. In a previous article (Pieruccini 2004), I have already analysed the motif of the invocation to the elements of nature in the relevant passages of the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Vikramorvaśīya*. Here the discourse will be reformulated, also highlighting the important innovations Bhavabhūti introduces into the motif.

¹³ In particular on these two encounters, cf. Biardeau 1985: 25-27.

then addresses it profusely presenting herself, her father, her father-in-law, her spouse, and her own terrible situation. Later in the passage she questions an *aśoka* tree (III.61.98-102), and her words play on the tree's name, *a-śoka*, i.e. without *śoka*, without pain: may she and Nala be rendered as such... Then, before leaving the tree and continuing on to another forest, she walks around it three times (III.61.103)¹⁴. Now, these invocations of Damayantī are important in the economy of the passage, but they are part of a much wider series of situations that the woman has to face. Moreover, they do not seem particularly out of place in a passage that is imbued with supernatural overtones: Damayantī is at first mistaken for a sylvan deity by the characters she meets and is welcomed to a hermitage that then vanishes before her eyes. At one point, she describes herself as 'mad' (III.61.21, *unmattām*), and the text insists on defining her 'as a madwoman' (III.60.18, *unmattavad*; III.61.110, *unmattarūpā*; later, III.62.19, *unmattām iva*); however, there is no real madness in her behaviour, but rather despair, total bewilderment and alienation from the situation in which she finds herself.

In the passage from the *Rāmāyaṇa* (III.58) the situation is quite different: Rāma's invocations to the elements of the forest immediately precede, and act as a prelude to, the famous passage in which the god-king, having become aware of Sītā's disappearance, threatens, indeed promises, to destroy the whole universe¹⁵. First of all, it is necessary to point out that Rāma's invocations are anticipated, in a way, by Sītā herself, who, while she is being kidnapped by Rāvaṇa, prays to some elements of nature to inform her husband of her misfortune (III.47.29-34): Janasthāna and its *karṇikāra* trees, Mount Prasravaṇa, the Godāvārī river, the spirits dwelling in the trees, and all the animals of the forest; lastly, she calls on the great vulture Jaṭāyus (III.47.36) and, in fact, it is Jaṭāyus, as he lays dying from the wounds inflicted by Rāvaṇa, who will inform Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa of the adversity that has befallen her. Rāma's invocations unfold in a compact group of stanzas (III.58.12-22),

¹⁴ The passage, which clearly attributes a special status to the *aśoka*, condenses characteristics of this tree that are to become canonical: the dazzling beauty of its flowering, the poetic possibility of constructing puns on its name, and a sacredness – expressed by the circumambulation – that evokes the spring rituals connected with fertility (see Anderson 1993); perhaps this tree is already beginning to be regarded as a symbol of love and passion. Let us recall that the passages in the *Rāmāyaṇa* concerning the *aśokavanikā* of Lāṅkā do not give particular prominence to the presence of these trees, but rather insist on constructing a contrast with their name and Sītā's pain, *śoka* (Pieruccini 2022a).

¹⁵ The passage has been acutely analysed by Pollock (2007 [1984]: 55-67), who sees in it the expression of one of the divine components of the figure of the king, echoing Rudra-Śiva and the need for violence.

in which he invokes, one stanza after another, first eight trees (*kadam-ba*, *bilva*, *arjuna*, *kakubha*, *tilaka*, *aśoka*, *tāla*, *jambū*) and then three animals (*mṛga*, *gaja*, *śārdūla*). With the exception of a couple of cases, he addresses them directly, and the pun on the *aśoka* is inevitable. The scansion of the invocation seems to extend those recurrent monotonous lists of trees and animals that are typical of the Epics when it comes to describing natural landscapes. However, for each invoked element the poet creates a different brief image, playing largely on two motifs: the natural element is either loved by Sītā, or bears a resemblance to her – her breasts are like the fruits of the *tāla* (III.58.18), her eyes resemble those of the does (III.58.20), her thighs are like the elephant's trunk (III.58.21), and so on.

At the beginning of her search, Damayantī suspects that Nala is voluntarily hiding from her (*Mahābhārata* III.60.7-8); the same thought also crosses Rāma's mind (*Rāmāyaṇa* III.58.23-25; 59.4, cf. also 15). None of the trees or animals gives an answer: in a way, it is the very structure of the passage that does not seem to contemplate replies. Continuing their search, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa reach the Godāvarī, and here too the animals do not reply to Rāma's anguished question about where Sītā is to be found; they urge the river to speak about her abduction, but the river keeps silent, since it is afraid of Rāvaṇa (III.60.6-9). Then, Rāma addresses Mount Prasravaṇa, threatening it to either show him Sītā or be destroyed; and he declares he will dry up the river, if it does not give him news about her (III.60.19-21). As we have seen, these are the very river and mountain that Sītā had invoked during her abduction¹⁶.

Now, having outlined the main features of the antecedents, we come to the plays, turning to Act Four of the *Vikramorvaśīya*. The circumstances are well known. While the nymph Urvaśī and king Purūravas are in the Gandhamādana grove, it happens that Purūravas' gaze lingers too long on a Vidyādhara maiden; in a fit of jealousy, Urvaśī turns away and, forgetting that this is forbidden to women, enters the grove of the god Kumāra, where she is immediately transformed into a creeper. Hence Purūravas' search for her, solved towards the end of the Act by the discovery of a magic stone capable of reuniting lovers, thanks to which Urvaśī will regain her appearance.

¹⁶ Interestingly, when Rāvaṇa abducts Sītā and flies away with her, the whole of nature – animals, mountains, tree spirits, and so on – is described as being in pain, fear and dismay (III.50.32-40); in short, they appear to be anything but indifferent to the event.

This Act, which in many ways can be called the poetic heart of the work, has a well-known textual problem. The *Vikramorvaṣīya* has in fact been handed down in two main recensions, the so-called northern and southern versions¹⁷. In the former, this Act Four is much longer, because it contains, in addition, a conspicuous group of Prakrit stanzas. To be precise, these are stanzas in Mahārāṣṭrī, recited (or rather sung) possibly by an off-stage voice, many of them evoking a male elephant desperately searching for his beloved, and where the animal forms a kind of double for Purūravas; and a series of stanzas in Apabhraṃśa, which Purūravas himself pronounces alternating them with the stanzas in Sanskrit. In addition, this recension also contains valuable stage directions. Scholars have been divided about the authenticity of this longer version: is it “original”, i.e. to be attributed to Kālidāsa himself, or do the Prakrit stanzas and the stage directions represent an insertion by someone else, perhaps by a stage director, and, if so, to which epoch can they be ascribed? This *vexata quaestio* has generated a very large bibliography but, unless new textual discoveries are made, is destined to remain unresolved. However, it is a matter of fact that, in the “long” version, and throughout the Act, Sanskrit and Apabhraṃśa stanzas converge in depicting the same scenario. The Apabhraṃśa stanzas, whether they are later additions or not, do not change or correct, but rather take up, amplify and refract what is expressed in the Sanskrit stanzas: their presence serves, as Lyne Bansat-Boudon writes when studying the “scenic” function of the longer version, “à exacerber l’émotion esthétique” (Bansat-Boudon 1998: 55). This obviously also applies to the motif under consideration here, which in the *Vikramorvaṣīya* reaches the apex of complexity and length, to the point of occupying almost an entire Act. And undoubtedly the “long” version, considered here, is the one of undoubtedly major charm¹⁸.

Purūravas directly asks a peacock, a female cuckoo, a *haṃsa*, a *cakravāka*, a bee (*ṣaṭpada*), an elephant, a mountain and an antelope (*kṛṣṇasāra*) for news of his beloved. He also addresses other natural elements – a cloud, the river – and yet again dwells on others. The

¹⁷ The textual history of the *Vikramorvaṣīya* is fully expounded by Velankar (*The Vikramorvaṣīya of Kālidāsa*, 1961: xxxiii-xxxvii) and by Gitomer (in Stoler Miller 1984: 344-348).

¹⁸ We follow here the text published in the Clay Sanskrit Library (JJC Foundation), edited and translated by V.N. Rao and D. Shulman, based on the critical edition by H.D. Velankar (1961), who relied on the most extensive recension for this Act Four. In the introduction to the Clay volume, Rao and Shulman make profound observations on this Act (cf. xxviii-xxxvi). In the passages cited here it is specified which stanzas are in Prakrit.

fact that we are at the beginning of the monsoon is an important poetic connotation; the overall result is the presentation of a vast landscape, enlarged precisely by the proliferation of the stanzas in different linguistic registers, which comes to us broken up into a series of individual components.

No requests are now addressed to trees. But the text shows a full awareness of the tradition concerning the theme. Not only do Purūravas' words briefly introduce the idea that Urvaśī is hiding on purpose (IV. [9]) but, more importantly, they thoroughly develop the idea that the natural elements bear a resemblance to the lost beloved. While this idea was still only sketched in the *Rāmāyaṇa* passage, here it is taken to its fullest consequences, since, in his wanderings in the forest, Purūravas spots Urvaśī practically everywhere. For example, the raindrops on a flowering banana-tree remind him of her tears (IV.[15]), or he establishes a comparison between the peacock's tail and Urvaśī's hair (IV.[22]), and so on. But, and this is the decisive feature, in several cases the superimpositions of Urvaśī on the natural world, and more generally the encounter with the elements of the landscape, result in momentary illusions or genuine mirages, with which Purūravas has to come to terms each time. Most of the Act is pervaded, as has often been pointed out, by a hallucinatory atmosphere, which imbues Purūravas' behaviour. At the beginning of the Act, he mistakes a cloud for a demon that is abducting Urvaśī, only to realise that it is indeed a cloud, and that the lightning he has seen is not the beautiful nymph (IV.[5]+-[8]; stanza [8] in Pkt.). On a stretch of grass covered by insects *indragopa* he firstly sees the bodice she is wearing (IV.[16]+-[17]+). He presumes that he has heard a reply from the female cuckoo (IV.[25]+), or that the trumpeting of the elephant he addresses is a kind of confirmation that the animal has seen the nymph (IV.[48]+). He mistakes the echo of his own words for a reply from the mountain (IV.[53]-[53]+); he thinks he hears the sound of Urvaśī's anklets, but then he understands that it is instead the voice of a *haṃsa* (IV.[27]+-[30]). The most extraordinary image concerns the mountain river which Purūravas totally identifies with Urvaśī, only to have to admit that he is once again mistaken (IV.[54]-[57]+; stanzas [55-56] in Pkt.).

In each encounter, Purūravas recognises the illusory nature of his interpretations; his consciousness dissolves and then reassembles, understanding the fallacy. Nevertheless, he does not seem at all aware of his condition, which undoubtedly, in the poet's intentions, is a kind of momentary madness. But, in spite of this utterly bewildering situation, the fact remains that Kālidāsa's general tone is light and benevolent, and Purūravas' despondency does not in any way take on the contours

of tragedy. As Pollock (2007 [1984]: 59) writes, comparing this passage with the one in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, “[t]he sense of overwhelming desperation is gone from the search; there is now something almost comedic about it all”; and the happy ending – the reunion with Urvaśī – is not only close, concluding the Act, but appears to be predictable and obvious.

Finally, let us consider Act Nine of the *Mālatīmādhava*. The antefact here is the abduction of Mālatī by the sorceress Kapālakuṇḍalā; in this way, the latter wants to avenge her master Aghoraghaṇṭa, who had been killed by Mādhava while the two were about to sacrifice Mālatī to the terrible goddess Karālā. Towards the end of the Act, we learn that Mālatī has been saved thanks to the intervention of Saudāmanī, a *yoginī* friend of the protagonists. Here too we are at the beginning of the monsoon, and in fact the piece, rather than containing Mādhava’s invocations in the strict sense, is mainly composed of what can be called descriptions of natural elements; starting from the prologue, where the vision from above of a great landscape – the city of Padmāvatī, rivers, trees, mountains, animals... – takes shape through the words of Saudāmanī as she flies over the region. Mādhava asks a cloud to comfort his beloved, believing that he receives reassurance when the cloud moves away (IX.[23]+-[26]+); he later turns to a male elephant commenting on his behaviour towards his companion, and, when the elephant goes away, Mādhava feels that he is showing contempt for him (IX.[33]+-[34]+). The actual request for news of Mālatī, addressed to the ‘creatures of mountain and forest’ (*bhūḍharāraṇyavāsinaḥ*, IX.[28]+), is exhausted in one stanza ([29]), because, in the immediately following ones, Mādhava realises that the animals before him – a peacock, a *cakora*, monkeys and elephants¹⁹ – are entirely uncaring, as they are more or less happily intent on their own love affairs, and it is therefore useless to speak to them. Even the identification of the lost beloved in the elements of nature, so predominant in Kālidāsa, is confined here to one stanza, in which Mādhava thinks that Mālatī is dead, seeing her charm distributed among *lodhra* flowers, creepers, antelopes and elephants (IX.[27]).

Thus Bhavabhūti takes up the motif of the search for the beloved in the heart of the forest and he also outlines a wide scenery, though without lingering too much on the protagonist’s requests to the natu-

¹⁹ It may be noted that Act Four of the *Vikramorvaśīya* also dwells at length on elephants as a pair (IV.[44]+-[49]; stanzas [45] [47] in Pkt.); this is also the case for many of the stanzas in Mahārāṣṭrī that probably are recited by an off-stage voice, alluded to above.

ral elements that populate it²⁰. But he introduces an important innovation to the motif of the search, because Mādhava is not alone in the forest, but always accompanied by his friend Makaranda. The friend initially tries to comfort him, drawing his attention to the beauty of the natural scenery, but then recognises the ‘madness’ (e.g. IX.[35]+, *unmāda*) into which Mādhava has fallen and despairs at his repeated fainting spells, thinking him dead and planning to commit suicide himself. The piece, in general, has a greater dramatic atmosphere than its *Vikramorvaśīya* predecessor, but much of this drama is expressed precisely by Makaranda’s grief, as he becomes both witness and mirror to Mādhava’s estrangement. The love story between Makaranda and Madayantikā, who in turn is one of Mālatī’s close friends, runs parallel to that of the two protagonists. But Makaranda’s affection, particularly in this Act, strengthened by the suicidal intentions he expresses, really seems to configure something more than a deep friendship: ‘You were sandalwood to my body, the autumn moon to my sight | To my heart you were bliss itself’ (IX.[22])²¹; ‘lord of my life’ (*jīviteśvaram*, IX.[35]+); ‘There is the body, dark as a waterlily, no embrace of which could ever satisfy me’ (IX.[38])²²; and so on. Among the possible literary parallels, one may think of Shakespeare’s Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, obviously with all due diversities, and despite the fact that Makaranda, unlike Antonio, also has a relationship with a woman; do the manifestations of deep affection for a close male friend indicate homosexuality, or rather a form of bisexuality in Makaranda’s case, or are they to be framed in another way? A deliberate ambiguity can perhaps be detected in both poets in their portrayal of these characters²³. The

²⁰ Regarding Bhavabhūti, we note in passing that a parallel is sometimes drawn between this Act Nine of the *Mālatīmādhava* and the Act Three of the *Uttararāmacarita*; but there the loss of the beloved evoked in a wilderness setting is played out very differently. In the *Uttararāmacarita* Rāma remembers the moments spent in the forest with Sītā, who is present at the scene but invisible to him and whose presence he senses only for a moment, and he is shaken by memories and by a regret that is intertwined with remorse; he meets the animals and plants that were dear to her but does not invoke their help, nor does the motif of her similarity to the elements of nature recur. In other words, for Bhavabhūti the madness of Mādhava or Purūravas is not appropriate to Rāma.

²¹ *gātreṣu candanaraso dṛṣi śāradendur ānanda eva hṛdaye mama yas tvam āśiḥ* |. The translations of the *Mālatīmādhava* quoted here are by Coulson (1981).

²² *tad etad asitotpaladyuti śarīram asmīn abhūn mamātidrāḥapīḍanair na tṛptir ālīnganaiḥ* |.

²³ On the possible allusions to Makaranda’s homosexuality/bisexuality I have had fruitful exchanges with Fabrizia Baldissera, to whom I am very grateful. On Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, of course within a vast bibliography, see for instance, with different opinions, Pequigney 1992 and Patterson 1999.

discourse could be better substantiated by investigations into the feelings involved in interpersonal relationships in premodern India, and the ways in which they are manifested²⁴. But it remains clear that the motif has been reformulated by Bhavabhūti to express more than one feeling of love, thus lending a whole new depth to the scenery of the invocation of distant nature.

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²⁴ In the direction recently taken by Ali (2021).

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