

## KĀLIDĀSA

### fourth century

Kālidāsa, the author of the Sanskrit play *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (Śākuntalā and the ring of recollection, commonly referred to as *Śākuntala*), is India's preeminent classical poet. As with other great writers of the classical era, his life is clothed in popular legend, but royal inscriptions and other sources indicate that he flourished during the Gupta period, between ca. 335 and 470, possibly in Ujjayinī (Ujjain), the Gupta capital in north India, where he may have served at the court of the greatest of the Gupta kings, Candragupta II (375–415), called Vikramāditya (Like the Sun in Valor).

*Śākuntala* is the most beloved of Indian plays. Sir William Jones's English translation (1789) created a sensation in Europe, especially in Germany, where it had a powerful impact on Goethe and the writers of the German Romantic movement. Rooted in the values of India's classical civilization, and at the same time articulating a profoundly human vision, this play about lovers parted and reunited transcends cultural particularities.

The plot, adapted from an older epic tale, is simplicity itself. On seeing the lovely maiden Śākuntalā in the enchanting setting of the woodland hermitage presided over by the sage Kaṇva, Duṣyanta (model king and romantic hero) inevitably falls in love with her. The young woman, daughter of a celestial nymph and a child of nature, returns his passion. Circumstances cause the lovers to part. A sage's curse and the loss of the king's signet ring result in the king's forgetting his liaison with Śākuntalā, and plunge her into further suffering, far away from her lover. The recovery of the ring jogs the king's memory, and now it is his turn to suffer, not knowing where to find his beloved. With the intervention of gods and sages, the lovers are reunited, together with their young son.

In Sanskrit dramaturgy, *Śākuntala* is a heroic romance (*nāṭaka*), a play about love between a noble hero and a beautiful woman. The *nāṭaka* is the most important of the ten types of plays (*rūpaka*, "representation") described in the classical texts on dramaturgy. While in some respects the play resembles the romantic comedies of the Western tradition, such as Euripides' *Alceste* or Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, its cultural premises and aesthetic goals are entirely different from those of Greek or Shakespearean drama, following instead the canons of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. second century), the authoritative text on aesthetics and dramatic theory.

Some Sanskrit critics consider drama (*nāṭya*) to be the best of the *kāvya* genres because it is most inclusive, or complete. Although rhythmic speech is the only expressive medium available to lyric poetry, with the occasional addition of music, drama has at its command both prose and lyric verse as well as an entire range of nonverbal expression. Hence it is also called, from the perspective of the audience, "poetry to be seen" (*dṛśyakāvya*), as opposed to other kinds of *kāvya* texts, which are "poetry to be heard" (*śravyakāvya*). From stage directions in the texts themselves and from ancient accounts and treatises on dramatic theory, we know that extensive use was made of stylized gesture, facial expression, eye movement, music, and dance in enacting the poetic text. Meaning was to be conveyed to the audience through *abhinaya*, acting conceived as a symphony of "languages," the verbal text being only one of them. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* treats dance, music, and poetry as aspects of dramatic action in the unified aesthetic of *rasa*, preserved in the major traditions of classical dance in India today.

In classical aesthetic theory, *rasa* signifies "sentiment" or "mood," the aesthetic experience evoked by the artistic depiction of human emotion. Sanskrit poetic theory distinguishes eight fundamental emotions (*bhāva*), expressed in eight major *rasas*, ranging from the erotic to the horrific. (Later tradition added "the calm" as a ninth.) According to Bharata, both text and performance are aimed at such emotional states, stimulating in readers and viewers their aesthetic flavor. This is not actual emotion but rather its universalized counterpart, to be conveyed through the stylized interplay of text, character, and the nuances of affect and response produced by the actors. Where real emotion limits by its particularity, *rasa* liberates the individual from the limitations of the everyday world, propelling him or her toward a higher apprehension of beauty, an experience of extraordinary universality.

Like all Sanskrit plays, *Śākuntala* ends in happiness and harmony because it must do so. The absence of tragedy sharply differentiates Sanskrit drama from Greek drama, its ancient counterpart in the Western tradition. Tragedy is impossible in the Hindu and Buddhist conceptual universes, in which time and life function as open-ended cycles and human beings are linked with nature and the cosmos through *karma*—impersonal networks of volition, action, and response. The characters of the Sanskrit drama, especially the hero and heroine, are types, not individuals. The universalization of emotion in aesthetic terms depends on the predictability of character and behavior; kings, sages, and beautiful women are defined by their social roles and dramatic personae and must look, speak, and behave in entirely recognizable ways. The individual will and personal destiny, which are essential to the notion of tragedy, have no place in this vision.

Performed at seasonal festivals and auspicious occasions such as weddings, the ancient dramas were regarded as rites of renewal and order. The goal of Sanskrit drama is to reestablish emotional harmony in the spectators by showing underlying correspondences that reconcile the apparent conflicts of existence. In *Śākuntala*, the realization of the play's dominant mood, the erotic *rasa*, turns on the tension between duty (*dharma*) and desire (*kāma*), traced through the relationship between the king and Śākuntalā. At first each acts impulsively, moved purely by passion. In the end, each is refined by duty and chastened by suffering. The king needs Śākuntalā, as she needs him, for both the reclusive life of the hermitage and the outwardly vital life of the court are, in reality, incomplete and sterile. The ideal life is the life of the golden mean, of mutually tempered duty and desire, of vitality shaped by self-control, of nature celebrated as culture's foundation and its complement. At the end of *Śākuntala*, through the intense, transporting savoring of *rasa*, we are to reach a state of integrity with ourselves and our world.

The curse and the loss and recovery of the ring, the "chance" events that guide the course of the plot, are Kālidāsa's invention, necessitated precisely by an ideal of plot that is not "action" in the Aristotelian sense but a chart of emotional interactions. We trace not the progression of external events but the finely calibrated play of suggested emotional states, through individual moments and "scenes" such as the one in which we observe the king watching Śākuntalā from his hidden vantage point, while the frightened young woman wards off an annoying bee. We must also remember that the full effect of the text is to be realized in performance, with the actors suggesting the transitory emotions of eagerness, fear, and nascent attraction, through dance, mime, gesture, the language of the eyes, and in the king's case, lyric verse. The verses and songs in *Śākuntala* embody moments of concentrated emotion in the progression of the plot.

The effectiveness of a Sanskrit play depends to a great extent on canonically required contrasts and complementarities among its diverse elements. The contrasts in Kālidāsa's play—between lyric verse and prose dialogue; the erotic and

the heroic moods; the gluttonous buffoon and the disciplined king; the Sanskrit spoken by noblemen and the Prakrit dialects assigned to women, children, and male characters of the lower castes (including the buffoon who, although he is a high-caste brahman, normally speaks Prakrit)—are staples of Sanskrit dramatic theory. The play's plot, too, is analyzable according to the precisely delineated stages and junctures of the ideal dramatic plot according to Bharata. The contrasts in *Śakuntala*, however, transcend these traditional requirements. Court and hermitage, the active and the contemplative life, are pitted against each other, as are the domestic and public worlds and the emotional universes of women and men. The women's rites in Act IV contrast with the king's court of Act V; Duṣyanta moves freely between earthly and celestial hermitages, Indra's court in heaven, and his own on earth, paralleling the audience's movement, through the prologue, from the real world into the world of the theater.

Among the many excellences impossible to convey in translation are the limpid clarity and sweetness of Kālidāsa's language and the powerful imagery and formal perfection of his lyric verse. His genius shines equally in his deep feeling for nature and the delicate and personal sensibility he brings to the stereotyped characters and situations of his play. The comparison between women and nature is a commonplace of Sanskrit poetry, rooted in the notion of the relatedness of all life, but Śakuntalā's personal kinship with nature makes her unforgettable. Born of a nymph and a sage but reared by the *śakunta* birds of the forest, Kālidāsa's heroine expresses a touching love of the plants, birds, and deer of her adoptive father's hermitage. Act IV, in which the animals and plants bid farewell to the heroine as one of their own, is in the original a passage of haunting, lyrical beauty and affective power.

In contrast to the heroine, and similar to the other kings of Kālidāsa's poems and plays, Duṣyanta is an establishment figure, in whose persona the poet gathers up the conservative values of *dharma* and the royal ethic of action and protection. It is clear from the focus of the psychological plot, however, that the king's heroic persona is equally grounded in his vulnerability to the awakening of love and its permeation into the depths of his being. In Indian thought, with its framework of *karma* and rebirth, all learning is recognition or recollection, a recovery or retrieval, through memory, of lost knowledge and lost sensibilities. Memory can carry us back not only into the past in this life but to the pasts of all our previous lives. In this sense then, love is a union with our deepest selves. In the symbolic acts of recollection in the play, and in the very symbol after which the play is named, "the ring of recollection or recognition," Kālidāsa has given profound artistic expression to the Indian belief that memory and love have the power of making human lives whole.

Barbara Stoler Miller, ed., *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kālidāsa* (1984), contains the best translations of Kālidāsa's three plays, along with an excellent introduction to Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy. A selection of the major Sanskrit plays is available in (adapted) translation in P. Lal, *Great Sanskrit Plays* (1964). In *Two Plays of Ancient India* (1968) J. A. B. van Buitenen has translated Śūdraka's *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (The little clay cart) and Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākṣasa* (Rākṣasa's signet ring), major plays of the Gupta period, both very different from *Śakuntala*. For a comparative perspective, see Henry W. Wells, *The Classical Drama of India* (1963). Readers interested in Kālidāsa's lyric poems should consult the beautiful translations of the court epic *Kumārasambhava* in Hank Heifetz, *The Origin of the Young God* (1985), and of the minor lyric poem *Meghadūta* in Leonard Nathan, *The Transport of Love* (1976).

## PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables and stress accents to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Abhijñānaśākuntala: <i>uhb-hee-gnyah'-nuh-shah'-koon-tuh-luh</i> | Paulomī: <i>pow'-loh-mee</i>              |
| Anastūyā: <i>uh-nuh-soo'-yah</i>                                 | Priyaṃvadā: <i>pree-yuhm'-vuh-dah</i>     |
| Aparājitā: <i>uh-puh-rah'-jee-tah</i>                            | Puru: <i>poo'-roo</i>                     |
| aśoka: <i>uh-shoh'-kuh</i>                                       | Raivataka: <i>rai'-vuh-tuh-kuh</i>        |
| Ayodhyā: <i>uh-yodh'-yah</i>                                     | śakunta: <i>shuh-koon'-tuh</i>            |
| Bhāratavarṣa: <i>bah'-ruh-tuh-vuhr-shuh</i>                      | Śakuntala: <i>shah-koon'-tuh-luh</i>      |
| cakravāka: <i>chuhk-ruh-vah'-kuh</i>                             | Śakuntalā: <i>shuh-koon'-tuh-lah</i>      |
| cakravartin: <i>chuhk'-ruh-vuhr-teen</i>                         | śamī: <i>shuh'-mee</i>                    |
| Candragupta: <i>chuhn'-druh-goop-tuh</i>                         | Sānumatī: <i>sah'-noo-muh-tee</i>         |
| Caturikā: <i>chuh-too'-ree-kah</i>                               | Śāradvata: <i>shah'-ruhd-vuh-tuh</i>      |
| Dakṣa: <i>duhk'-shuh</i>   | Śārngarava: <i>shahm'-guh-ruh-vuh</i>     |
| Dhanamitra: <i>duh'-nuh-meet-ruh</i>                             | Sarvadamana: <i>suhr'-vuh-duh-muh-nuh</i> |
| dṛṣyakāvya: <i>dreesh'-yuh-kahv'-yuh</i>                         | śīrṣa: <i>shee-ree'-shuh</i>              |
| Durvāsas: <i>door-vah'-suhs</i>                                  | Somarāta: <i>soh-muh-rah'-tuh</i>         |
| Duṣyanta: <i>doosh-yuhn'-tuh</i>                                 | Somatīrtha: <i>soh-muh-teert'-huh</i>     |
| Haṃsapadikā: <i>huhm'-sah-puh-dee-kah</i>                        | śravyakāvya: <i>shruhv'-yuh-kahv'-yuh</i> |
| Hastināpura: <i>huhs'-tee-nah-poo-ruh</i>                        | śṛṅgāra: <i>shreen-gah'-ruh</i>           |
| Jayanta: <i>juh-yuhn'-tuh</i>                                    | Sūcaka: <i>soo'-chuh-kuh</i>              |
| Kalanemi: <i>kah'-luh-nay-mee</i>                                | svabhāvokti: <i>svuh-bah'-vok-tee</i>     |
| Karabhaka: <i>kuh-ruh'-buh-kuh</i>                               | svarga: <i>svuhr'-guh</i>                 |
| kṣatriya: <i>kshuh'-tree-yuh</i>                                 | svayaṃvara: <i>svuh-yuhm'-vuh-ruh</i>     |
| Mādhava: <i>māhd'-huhv-yuh</i>                                   | Taralikā: <i>tuh-ruh'-lee-kah</i>         |
| Madhukarikā: <i>muhd'-hoo-kuh-ree-kah</i>                        | Triśaṅku: <i>tree-shuhn'-koo</i>          |
| Mārtca: <i>mah-ree'-chuh</i>                                     | Triṣṭubh: <i>treesh'-toob</i>             |
| Martci: <i>muh-ree'-chee</i>                                     | Vasumatī: <i>vuh-soo'-muh-tee</i>         |
| Mitrāvasu: <i>meet-rah'-vuh-soo</i>                              | Vātāyana: <i>vah-tah'-yuh-nuh</i>         |
| mokṣa: <i>mohk'-shuh</i>   | Vetravatī: <i>vay'-truh-vuh-tee</i>       |
| Nātyaśāstra: <i>naht-yuh-shahs'-truh</i>                         | vidūṣaka: <i>vee-doo'-shuh-kuh</i>        |
| Parabhṛtikā: <i>puh'-ruh-bree-tee-kah</i>                        | Viṣṇu: <i>vish'-noo</i>                   |
| Parivaha: <i>puh-ree'-vuh-huh</i>                                | Viśvāmītra: <i>veesh-vah'-meet-truh</i>   |
|  | yaqṣī: <i>yuhk'-shee</i>                  |

Śakuntalā and the Ring of Recollection<sup>1</sup>

## CHARACTERS

*Players in the prologue:*

DIRECTOR: Director of the players and manager of the theater.  
ACTRESS: The lead actress.

*Principal roles:*

KING: Duṣyanta, the hero; ruler of Hastināpura; a royal sage of the lunar dynasty of Puru.  
ŚAKUNTALĀ: The heroine; daughter of the royal sage Viśvāmitra and the celestial nymph Menakā; adoptive daughter of the ascetic Kaṇva.  
BUFFOON: Māḍhavya, the king's comical brahman companion.

*Members of Kaṇva's hermitage:*

ANASŪYĀ and PRIYĀMVADĀ: Two young female ascetics; friends of Śakuntalā.  
KAṆVA: Foster father of Śakuntalā and master of the hermitage; a sage belonging to the lineage of the divine creator Mārīci, and thus related to Mārīca.  
GAUTAMĪ: The senior female ascetic.  
ŚĀRṄGARAVA and ŚĀRADVATA: Kaṇva's disciples.  
Various inhabitants of the hermitage: a monk with his two pupils, two boy ascetics (named Gautama and Nārada), a young disciple of Kaṇva, a trio of female ascetics.

*Members of the king's forest retinue:*

CHARIOTEER: Driver of the king's chariot.  
GUARD: Raivataka, guardian of the entrance to the king's quarters.  
GENERAL: Commander of the king's army.  
KARABHAKA: Royal messenger.  
Various attendants, including Greco-Bactrian bow-bearers.

*Members of the king's palace retinue:*

CHAMBERLAIN: Vātāyana, chief officer of the king's household.  
PRIEST: Somarāta, the king's religious preceptor and household priest.  
DOORKEEPER: Vetravatī, the female attendant who ushers in visitors and presents messages.  
PARABHṚTIKĀ and MADHUKARIKĀ: Two maids assigned to the king's garden.  
CATURIKĀ: A maidservant.

*City dwellers:*

MAGISTRATE: The king's low-caste brother-in-law; chief of the city's policemen.

1. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller.

POLICEMEN: Sūcaka and Jānuka.

FISHERMAN: An outcaste.

*Celestials:*

MĀRĪCA: A divine sage; master of the celestial hermitage in which Śakuntalā gives birth to her son; father of Indra, king of the gods, whose armies Duṣyanta leads.  
ADITI: Wife of Mārīca.  
MĀTALI: Indra's charioteer.  
SĀNUMATĪ: A nymph; friend of Śakuntalā's mother Menakā.  
Various members of Mārīca's hermitage: two female ascetics, Mārīca's disciple Gālava.  
BOY: Sarvadamana, son of Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta; later known as Bharata.

*Offstage voices:*

VOICES OFFSTAGE: From the backstage area or dressing room; behind the curtain, out of view of the audience. The voice belongs to various players before they enter the stage, such as the monk, Śakuntalā's friends, the buffoon, Mātali; also to figures who never enter the stage, such as the angry sage Durvāsas, the two bards who chant royal panegyrics (*vaitālikau*).  
VOICE IN THE AIR: A voice chanting in the air from somewhere offstage: the bodiless voice of Speech quoted in Sanskrit by Priyamvadā; the voice of a cuckoo who represents the trees of the forest blessing Śakuntalā in Sanskrit; the voice of Hamsapadikā singing a Prakrit love song.

The setting of the play shifts from the forest hermitage (Acts I–IV) to the palace (Acts V–VI) to the celestial hermitage (Act VII). The season is early summer when the play begins and spring during the sixth act; the passage of time is otherwise indicated by the birth and boyhood of Śakuntalā's son.

## Act I

The water that was first created,  
the sacrifice-bearing fire, the priest,  
the time-setting sun and moon,  
audible space that fills the universe,  
what men call nature,<sup>2</sup> the source of all seeds,  
the air that living creatures breathe—  
through his eight embodied forms,  
may Lord Śiva come to bless you!<sup>3</sup>

2. Here, earth. 3. This verse is a *nāndī* ("benedictory verse") recited at the beginning of a Sanskrit play, immediately after the preparatory rituals performed before a dramatic performance in ancient India. The benedictory verses of Sanskrit plays usually invoke the blessings of Śiva, dancer of the cosmic dance of creation and destruction as well as patron god of the drama. In this verse, Kālidāsa praises Śiva as the cosmic divinity pervading the universe in his eight manifest forms—the five elements (ether, air, fire, water, and earth), the sun and moon, and the sacrificing priest.

## Prologue

DIRECTOR: [*Looking backstage.*] If you are in costume now, madam, please come on stage!

ACTRESS: I'm here, sir.<sup>4</sup>

DIRECTOR: Our audience is learned. We shall play Kālidāsa's new drama called *Śakuntalā and the Ring of Recollection*. Let the players take their parts to heart!

ACTRESS: With you directing, sir, nothing will be lost.

DIRECTOR: Madam, the truth is:

I find no performance perfect  
until the critics are pleased;  
the better trained we are  
the more we doubt ourselves.

ACTRESS: So true . . . now tell me what to do first!

DIRECTOR: What captures an audience better than a song?

Sing about the new summer season and its pleasures:

To plunge in fresh waters  
swept by scented forest winds  
and dream in soft shadows  
of the day's ripened charms.

ACTRESS: [*Singing.*]

Sensuous women  
in summer love  
weave  
flower earrings  
from fragile petals  
of mimosa  
while wild bees  
kiss them gently.<sup>5</sup>

DIRECTOR: Well sung, madam! Your melody enchants the audience. The silent theater is like a painting. What drama should we play to please it?

ACTRESS: But didn't you just direct us to perform a new play called *Śakuntalā and the Ring of Recollection*?

DIRECTOR: Madam, I'm conscious again! For a moment I forgot.

The mood of your song's melody  
carried me off by force,  
just as the swift dark antelope  
enchanted King Duśyanta.

[*They both exit; the prologue ends. Then the KING enters with his charioteer, in a chariot, a bow and arrow in his hand, hunting an antelope.*]

4. The prologues to many plays present the actress as the director's wife. 5. Such verses are sung by women in Prakrit and set to a melody, whereas the Sanskrit *kāvya* verses of the play are recited or sung to a simple tune that follows the rhythmic pattern of the verse quarter. The women's songs generally feature nature descriptions or the nuances of love in natural settings.

CHARIOTEER: [*Watching the KING and the antelope.*]

I see this black buck move  
as you draw your bow  
and I see the wild bowman Śiva,  
hunting the dark antelope.<sup>6</sup>

KING: Driver, this antelope has drawn us far into the forest. There he is again:

The graceful turn of his neck  
as he glances back at our speeding car,  
the haunches folded into his chest  
in fear of my speeding arrow,  
the open mouth dropping  
half-chewed grass on our path—  
watch how he leaps, bounding on air,  
barely touching the earth.

[*He shows surprise.*]

Why is it so hard to keep him in sight?

CHARIOTEER: Sir, the ground was rough. I tightened the reins to slow the chariot and the buck raced ahead. Now that the path is smooth, he won't be hard to catch.

KING: Slacken the reins!

CHARIOTEER: As you command, sir. [*He mimes the speeding chariot.*]  
Look!

Their legs extend as I slacken the reins,  
plumes and manes set in the wind, ears angle back;  
our horses outrun their own clouds of dust,  
straining to match the antelope's speed.

KING: These horses would outrace the steeds of the sun.<sup>7</sup>

What is small suddenly looms large,  
split forms seem to reunite,  
bent shapes straighten before my eyes—  
from the chariot's speed  
nothing ever stays distant or near.

CHARIOTEER: The antelope is an easy target now. [*He mimes the fixing of an arrow.*]

VOICE OFFSTAGE: Stop! Stop, king! This antelope belongs to our hermitage! Don't kill him!

CHARIOTEER: [*Listening and watching.*] Sir, two ascetics are protecting the black buck from your arrow's deadly aim.

KING: [*Showing confusion.*] Rein in the horses!

CHARIOTEER: It is done!

[*He mimes the chariot's halt. Then a MONK enters with TWO PUPILS, his hand raised.*]

6. The comparison is based on an ancient myth of Śiva's pursuit of the creator god Prajāpati, who had taken the form of an antelope. The verse flatters the king. 7. The seven horses that draw the sun god's chariot.

MONK: King, this antelope belongs to our hermitage.

Withdraw your well-aimed arrow! Your weapon should rescue vic-  
tims, not destroy the innocent!

KING: I withdraw it. [*He does as he says.*]

MONK: An act worthy of the Puru dynasty's shining light!

Your birth honors  
the dynasty of the moon!<sup>8</sup>  
May you beget a son  
to turn the wheel of your empire!<sup>9</sup>

THE TWO PUPILS: [*Raising their arms.*] May you beget a son to turn  
the wheel of your empire!

KING: [*Bowing.*] I welcome your blessing.

MONK: King, we were going to gather firewood.<sup>1</sup> From here you can  
see the hermitage<sup>2</sup> of our master Kaṇva on the bank of the Mālini  
river. If your work permits, enter and accept our hospitality.

When you see the peaceful rites of devoted ascetics,  
you will know how well your scarred arm protects us.<sup>3</sup>

KING: Is the master of the community there now?

MONK: He went to Somatīrtha,<sup>4</sup> the holy shrine of the moon, and put  
his daughter Śakuntalā in charge of receiving guests. Some evil  
threatens her, it seems.

KING: Then I shall see her. She will know my devotion and commend  
me to the great sage.

MONK: We shall leave you now.

[*He exits with his pupils.*]

KING: Driver, urge the horses on! The sight of this holy hermitage will  
purify us.

CHARIOTEER: As you command, sir. [*He mimes the chariot's speed.*]

KING: [*Looking around.*] Without being told one can see that this is a  
grove where ascetics live.

CHARIOTEER: How?

KING: Don't you see—

Wild rice grains under trees  
where parrots nest in hollow trunks,  
stones stained by the dark oil  
of crushed iṅgudī nuts,<sup>5</sup>  
trusting deer who hear human voices  
yet don't break their gait,  
and paths from ponds streaked  
by water from wet bark cloth.<sup>6</sup>

CHARIOTEER: It is perfect.

8. Known as the "lunar dynasty," because it traces its descent to the moon god. 9. Any ancient Indian emperor is a *cakravartin*, a turner of the wheel of empire. 1. For the fire rituals and Vedic sacrifices performed at the hermitage. 2. It includes men and women and is organized like an extended family. 3. One of a king's chief duties is to protect hermits and ascetics. 4. A place of pilgrimage in western India. 5. These nuts are pressed by forest dwellers for oil. 6. Forest dwellers wear a cloth made of tree bark.

KING: [*Having gone a little inside.*] We should not disturb the grove!  
Stop the chariot and let me get down!

CHARIOTEER: I'm holding the reins. You can dismount now, sir.

KING: [*Dismounting.*] One should not enter an ascetics' grove in  
hunting gear. Take these! [*He gives up his ornaments and his bow.*]  
Driver, rub down the horses while I pay my respects to the residents  
of the hermitage!

CHARIOTEER: Yes, sir! [*He exits.*]

KING: This gateway marks the sacred ground. I will enter.  
[*He enters, indicating he feels an omen.*]

The hermitage is a tranquil place,  
yet my arm is quivering . . .  
do I feel a false omen of love  
or does fate have doors everywhere?

VOICE OFFSTAGE: This way, friends!

KING: [*Straining to listen.*] I think I hear voices to the right of the  
grove. I'll find out.

[*Walking around and looking.*]

Young female ascetics with watering pots cradled on their hips are  
coming to water the saplings. [*He mimes it in precise detail.*] This  
view of them is sweet.

These forest women have beauty  
rarely seen inside royal palaces—  
the wild forest vines far surpass  
creepers in my pleasure garden.

I'll hide in the shadows and wait.

[*ŚAKUNTALĀ and her two friends enter, acting as described.*]

ŚAKUNTALĀ: This way, friends!

ANASŪYĀ: I think Father Kaṇva cares more about the trees in the her-  
mitage than he cares about you. You're as delicate as a jasmine, yet  
he orders you to water the trees.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Anasūyā, it's more than Father Kaṇva's order. I feel a sis-  
ter's love for them. [*She mimes the watering of trees.*]

KING: [*To himself.*] Is this Kaṇva's daughter? The sage does show poor  
judgment in imposing the rules of the hermitage on her.

The sage who hopes to subdue  
her sensuous body by penances  
is trying to cut firewood  
with a blade of blue-lotus leaf.

Let it be! I can watch her closely from here in the trees.

[*He does so.*]

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Anasūyā, I can't breathe! Our friend Priyamvadā tied my  
bark dress too tightly! Loosen it a bit!

ANASŪYĀ: As you say. [*She loosens it.*]

PRIYAMVADĀ: [*Laughing.*] Blame your youth for swelling your breasts.  
Why blame me?

KING: This bark dress fits her body badly, but it ornaments her beauty . . .

A tangle of duckweed adorns a lotus,  
a dark spot heightens the moon's glow,  
the bark dress increases her charm—  
beauty finds its ornaments anywhere.

170

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Looking in front of her.*] The new branches on this mimosa tree are like fingers moving in the wind, calling to me. I must go to it! [*Saying this, she walks around.*]

PRIYAṂVADĀ: Wait, Śakuntalā! Stay there a minute! When you stand by this mimosa tree, it seems to be guarding a creeper.

175

ŚAKUNTALĀ: That's why your name means "Sweet-talk."<sup>7</sup>

KING: "Sweet-talk" yes, but Priyamvadā speaks the truth about Śakuntalā:

Her lips are fresh red buds,  
her arms are tendrils,  
impatient youth is poised  
to blossom in her limbs.

180

ANASŪYĀ: Śakuntalā, this is the jasmine creeper who chose the mango tree in marriage,<sup>8</sup> the one you named "Forestlight." Have you forgotten her?

185

ŚAKUNTALĀ: I would be forgetting myself? [*She approaches the creeper and examines it.*] The creeper and the tree are twined together in perfect harmony. Forestlight has just flowered and the new mango shoots are made for her pleasure.

190

PRIYAṂVADĀ: [*Smiling.*] Anasūyā, don't you know why Śakuntalā looks so lovingly at Forestlight?

ANASŪYĀ: I can't guess.

PRIYAṂVADĀ: The marriage of Forestlight to her tree makes her long to have a husband too.

195

ŚAKUNTALĀ: You're just speaking your own secret wish. [*Saying this, she pours water from the jar.*]

KING: Could her social class be different from her father's?<sup>9</sup> There's no doubt!

She was born to be a warrior's bride,  
for my noble heart desires her—  
when good men face doubt,  
inner feelings are truth's only measure.

200

Still, I must learn everything about her.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Flustered.*] The splashing water has alarmed a bee. He is

7. The characters of the two friends correspond to their names: Anasūyā (Without Envy) is a serious, straightforward, decisive young woman, while Priyamvadā (Sweet Talker) loves to tease and laugh and has a way with words. As noted above, the women speak Prakrit, whereas the king and other upper-class male characters speak Sanskrit. 8. In calling the jasmine creeper *svayaṃvara-vadhā* ("bride by her own choice"), Anasūyā refers to the public ceremony called *svayaṃvara* ("choosing one's own bride-groom") in which women of the warrior class chose their own husbands, thus foreshadowing Śakuntalā's own action later in the play. 9. Marrying outside one's class in the fourfold Hindu scheme of classes (*varṇa*) is forbidden. As the sage Kaṇva's daughter, Śakuntalā would be a brahman, and the king, being of the *kṣatriya* (warrior) class, would not be allowed to marry her.

flying from the jasmine to my face. [*She dances to show the bee's attack.*]

205

KING: [*Looking longingly.*]

Bee, you touch the quivering  
corners of her frightened eyes,  
you hover softly near  
to whisper secrets in her ear;  
a hand brushes you away,  
but you drink her lips' treasure—  
while the truth we seek defeats us,  
you are truly blessed.

210

ŚAKUNTALĀ: This dreadful bee won't stop. I must escape. [*She steps to one side, glancing about.*] Oh! He's pursuing me. . . . Save me! Please save me! This mad bee is chasing me!

215

BOTH FRIENDS: [*Laughing.*] How can we save you? Call King Duṣyanta. The grove is under his protection.

KING: Here's my chance. Have no fear . . . [*With this half-spoken, he stops and speaks to himself.*] Then she will know that I am the king. . . . Still, I shall speak.

220

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Stopping after a few steps.*] Why is he still following me?

KING: [*Approaching quickly.*]

While a Puru king rules the earth  
to punish evildoers,  
who dares to molest  
these innocent young ascetics?

225

[*Seeing the KING, all act flustered.*]

ANASŪYĀ: Sir, there's no real danger. Our friend was frightened when a bee attacked her. [*She points to ŚAKUNTALĀ.*]

KING: [*Approaching ŚAKUNTALĀ.*] Does your ascetic practice go well? [*ŚAKUNTALĀ stands speechless.*]

ANASŪYĀ: It does now that we have a special guest. Śakuntalā, go to our hut and bring the ripe fruits. We'll use this water to bathe his feet.<sup>1</sup>

230

KING: Your kind speech is hospitality enough.

PRIYAṂVADĀ: Please sit in the cool shadows of this shade tree and rest, sir.

235

KING: You must also be tired from your work.

ANASŪYĀ: Śakuntalā, we should respect our guest. Let's sit down. [*All sit.*]

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*To herself.*] When I see him, why do I feel an emotion that the forest seems to forbid?

KING: [*Looking at each of the girls.*] Youth and beauty complement your friendship.

240

PRIYAṂVADĀ: [*In a stage whisper.*] Anasūyā, who is he? He's so polite, fine looking, and pleasing to hear. He has the marks of royalty.

1. A traditionally mandated rite of hospitality.

ANASŪYĀ: I'm curious too, friend. I'll just ask him. [*Aloud.*] Sir, your kind speech inspires trust. What family of royal sages do you adorn? What country mourns your absence? Why does a man of refinement subject himself to the discomfort of visiting an ascetics' grove?<sup>2</sup>

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*To herself.*] Heart, don't faint! Anasūyā speaks your thoughts.

KING: [*To himself.*] Should I reveal myself now or conceal who I am? I'll say it this way: [*Aloud.*] Lady, I have been appointed by the Puru king as the officer in charge of religious matters. I have come to this sacred forest to assure that your holy rites proceed unhindered.

ANASŪYĀ: Our religious life has a guardian now.  
[*ŚAKUNTALĀ mimes the embarrassment of erotic emotion.*]

BOTH FRIENDS: [*Observing the behavior of ŚAKUNTALĀ and the KING; in a stage whisper.*] Śakuntalā, if only your father were here now!

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Angrily.*] What if he were?

BOTH FRIENDS: He would honor this distinguished guest with what he values most in life.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Quiet! Such words hint at your hearts' conspiracy. I won't listen.

KING: Ladies, I want to ask about your friend.

BOTH FRIENDS: Your request honors us, sir.

KING: Sage Kaṇva has always been celibate, but you call your friend his daughter. How can this be?

ANASŪYĀ: Please listen, sir. There was a powerful royal sage<sup>3</sup> of the Kauśika clan . . .

KING: I am listening.

ANASŪYĀ: He begot our friend, but Kaṇva is her father because he cared for her when she was abandoned.

KING: "Abandoned"? The word makes me curious. I want to hear her story from the beginning.

ANASŪYĀ: Please listen, sir. Once when this great sage was practicing terrible austerities on the bank of the Gautamī river, he became so powerful that the jealous gods sent a nymph named Menakā to break his self-control.<sup>4</sup>

KING: The gods dread men who meditate.

ANASŪYĀ: When springtime came to the forest with all its charm, the sage saw her intoxicating beauty . . .

KING: I understand what happened then. She is the nymph's daughter.

ANASŪYĀ: Yes.

KING: It had to be!

No mortal woman could give birth to such beauty—  
lightning does not flash out of the earth.

2. Anasūyā uses the formal, florid style of courtly conversation. 3. Viśvāmitra, who was born in the warrior class but acquired the spiritual powers of a brahman sage. 4. A standard theme in classical Indian mythology, appearing in the narratives of the life of the Buddha as well. The gods feel threatened by the supernatural powers that ascetics amass through self-denial.

[*ŚAKUNTALĀ stands with her face bowed. The KING continues speaking to himself.*]

My desire is not hopeless. Yet, when I hear her friends teasing her about a bridegroom, a new fear divides my heart. 285

PRIYAMVADĀ: [*Smiling, looking at ŚAKUNTALĀ, then turning to the KING.*] Sir, you seem to want to say more.

[*ŚAKUNTALĀ makes a threatening gesture with her finger.*]

KING: You judge correctly. In my eagerness to learn more about your pious lives, I have another question.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Don't hesitate! Ascetics can be questioned frankly. 290

KING: I want to know this about your friend:

Will she keep the vow of hermit life  
only until she marries . . .  
or will she always exchange  
loving looks with deer in the forest? 295

PRIYAMVADĀ: Sir, even in her religious life, she is subject to her father, but he does intend to give her to a suitable husband.

KING: [*To himself.*] His wish is not hard to fulfill.

Heart, indulge your desire—  
now that doubt is dispelled,  
the fire you feared to touch  
is a jewel in your hands. 300

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Showing anger.*] Anasūyā, I'm leaving!

ANASŪYĀ: Why?

ŚAKUNTALĀ: I'm going to tell Mother Gautamī that Priyamvadā is talking nonsense. 305

ANASŪYĀ: Friend, it's wrong to neglect a distinguished guest and leave as you like.<sup>5</sup>

[*ŚAKUNTALĀ starts to go without answering.*]

KING: [*Wanting to seize her, but holding back, he speaks to himself.*]  
A lover dare not act on his impulsive thoughts!

I wanted to follow the sage's daughter,  
but decorum abruptly pulled me back;  
I set out and returned again  
without moving my feet from this spot. 310

PRIYAMVADĀ: [*Stopping ŚAKUNTALĀ.*] It's wrong of you to go!

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Bending her brow into a frown.*] Give me a reason why! 315

PRIYAMVADĀ: You promised to water two trees for me. Come here and pay your debt before you go! [*She stops her by force.*]

KING: But she seems exhausted from watering the trees:

Her shoulders droop, her palms  
are red from the watering pot—  
even now, breathless sighs  
make her breasts shake; 320

5. Śakuntalā's failure here foreshadows her neglect of this duty and its consequences later in the play.

beads of sweat on her face  
wilt the flower at her ear;  
her hand holds back  
disheveled locks of hair.

Here, I'll pay her debt!

[*He offers his ring. Both friends recite the syllables of the name on the seal and stare at each other.*]<sup>6</sup>

Don't mistake me for what I am not! This is a gift from the king to identify me as his royal official.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Then the ring should never leave your finger. Your word has already paid her debt. [*She laughs a little.*] Śakuntalā, you are freed by this kind man . . . or perhaps by the king. Go now!

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*To herself.*] If I am able to . . . [*Aloud.*] Who are you to keep me or release me?

KING: [*Watching ŚAKUNTALĀ.*] Can she feel toward me what I feel toward her? Or is my desire fulfilled?

She won't respond directly to my words,  
but she listens when I speak;  
she won't turn to look at me,  
but her eyes can't rest anywhere else.

VOICE OFFSTAGE: Ascetics, be prepared to protect the creatures of our forest grove! King Duṣyanta is hunting nearby!

Dust raised by his horses' hooves  
falls like a cloud of locusts swarming  
at sunset over branches of trees  
where wet bark garments hang.

In terror of the chariots, an elephant  
charged into the hermitage  
and scattered the herd of black antelope,  
like a demon foe of our penances—  
his tusks garlanded with branches  
from a tree crushed by his weight,  
his feet tangled in vines  
that tether him like chains.

[*Hearing this, all the girls are agitated.*]

KING: [*To himself.*] Oh! My palace men are searching for me and wrecking the grove. I'll have to go back.

BOTH FRIENDS: Sir, we're all upset by this news. Please let us go to our hut.

KING: [*Showing confusion.*] Go, please. We will try to protect the hermitage.

[*They all stand to go.*]

BOTH FRIENDS: Sir, we're ashamed that our bad hospitality is our only excuse to invite you back.

KING: Not at all. I am honored to have seen you.

6. A clear indication that women were part of the literate courtly culture of classical India.

[*ŚAKUNTALĀ exits with her two friends, looking back at the KING, lingering artfully.*]

I have little desire to return to the city. I'll join my men and have them camp near the grove. I can't control my feelings for Śakuntalā.

My body turns to go,  
my heart pulls me back,  
like a silk banner  
buffeted by the wind.

[*All exit.*]

## Act II

[*The BUFFOON enters, despondent.*]

BUFFOON: [*Sighing.*] My bad luck! I'm tired of playing sidekick to a king who's hooked on hunting.<sup>7</sup> "There's a deer!" "There's a boar!" "There's a tiger!" Even in the summer midday heat we chase from jungle to jungle on paths where trees give barely any shade. We drink stinking water from mountain streams foul with rusty leaves. At odd hours we eat nasty meals of spit-roasted meat. Even at night I can't sleep. My joints ache from galloping on that horse. Then at the crack of dawn, I'm woken rudely by a noise piercing the forest. Those sons of bitches hunt their birds then. The torture doesn't end—now I have sores on top of my bruises. Yesterday, we lagged behind. The king chased a buck into the hermitage. As luck would have it, an ascetic's daughter called Śakuntalā caught his eye. Now he isn't even thinking of going back to the city. This very dawn I found him wide-eyed, mooning about her. What a fate! I must see him after his bath. [*He walks around, looking.*] Here comes my friend now, wearing garlands of wild flowers. Greek women carry his bow in their hands.<sup>8</sup> Good! I'll stand here pretending my arms and legs are broken. Maybe then I'll get some rest.

[*He stands leaning on his staff. The KING enters with his retinue, as described.*]

KING: [*To himself.*]

My beloved will not be easy to win,  
but signs of emotion revealed her heart—  
even when love seems hopeless,  
mutual longing keeps passion alive.

[*He smiles.*] A suitor who measures his beloved's state of mind by his own desire is a fool.

7. The brahman *vidūṣaka* (buffoon), though the king's constant companion, differs from him in every respect, from his obsession with creature comforts and his cowardice to his coarse language. A caricature of the learned brahman and Sanskrit scholar, the buffoon speaks only Prakrit and is incapable of versifying. 8. In Kālidāsa's plays the king's bow bearers are identified as *yavanī* ("Greek women"). North Indian kings of the Gupta age and earlier employed Bactrian Greek women as bodyguards and bow bearers.

She threw tender glances  
though her eyes were cast down,  
her heavy hips swayed  
in slow seductive movements,  
she answered in anger  
when her friend said, "Don't go!"  
and I felt it was all for my sake . . .  
but a lover sees in his own way.

BUFFOON: [*Still in the same position.*] Dear friend, since my hands  
can't move to greet you, I have to salute you with my voice.

KING: How did you cripple your limbs?

BUFFOON: Why do you ask why I cry after throwing dust in my eyes  
yourself?

KING: I don't understand.

BUFFOON: Dear friend, when a straight reed is twisted into a crooked  
reed, is it by its own power, or is it the river current?<sup>9</sup>

KING: The river current is the cause.

BUFFOON: And so it is with me.

KING: How so?

BUFFOON: You neglect the business of being a king and live like a  
woodsman in this awful camp. Chasing after wild beasts every day  
jolts my joints and muscles till I can't control my own limbs any-  
more. I beg you to let me rest for just one day!

KING: [*To himself.*] He says what I also feel. When I remember Ka-  
va's daughter, the thought of hunting disgusts me.

I can't draw my bowstring  
to shoot arrows at deer  
who live with my love  
and teach her tender glances.<sup>1</sup>

BUFFOON: Sir, you have something on your mind. I'm crying in a  
wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

KING: [*Smiling.*] Yes, it is wrong to ignore my friend's plea.

BUFFOON: Live long! [*He starts to go.*]

KING: Dear friend, stay! Hear what I have to say!

BUFFOON: At your command, sir!

KING: When you have rested, I need your help in some work that you  
will enjoy.

BUFFOON: Is it eating sweets? I'm game!

KING: I shall tell you. Who stands guard?

GUARD: [*Entering.*] At your command, sir!

KING: Raivataka! Summon the general!

[*The GUARD exits and reenters with the GENERAL.*]

GUARD: The king is looking this way, waiting to give you his orders.  
Approach him, sir!

9. Like Shakespeare's fools, the buffoon likes to speak in riddles. 1. A comparison of women's eyes with the eyes of deer, conventional in Sanskrit poetry. 2. A paraphrase of the Sanskrit proverbial expression *aranyaruditam* ("a cry in the wilderness"); this is an expression of his puzzlement at the king's behavior.

GENERAL: [*Looking at the KING.*] Hunting is said to be a vice,<sup>3</sup> but our  
king prospers.

Drawing the bow only hardens his chest,  
he suffers the sun's scorching rays unburned,  
hard muscles mask his body's lean state—  
like a wild elephant, his energy sustains him.

[*He approaches the KING.*] Victory, my lord! We've already tracked  
some wild beasts. Why the delay?

KING: Mādhavya's<sup>4</sup> censure of hunting has dampened my spirit.

GENERAL: [*In a stage whisper, to the BUFFOON.*] Friend, you stick to  
your opposition! I'll try to restore our king's good sense. [*Aloud.*]  
This fool is talking nonsense. Here is the king as proof:

A hunter's belly is taut and lean,  
his slender body craves exertion;  
he penetrates the spirit of creatures  
overcome by fear and rage;  
his bowmanship is proved  
by arrows striking a moving target—  
hunting is falsely called a vice.  
What sport can rival it?

BUFFOON: [*Angrily.*] The king has come to his senses. If you keep  
chasing from forest to forest, you'll fall into the jaws of an old bear  
hungry for a human nose . . .

KING: My noble general, we are near a hermitage; your words cannot  
please me now.

Let horned buffaloes plunge into muddy pools!  
Let herds of deer huddle in the shade to eat grass!  
Let fearless wild boars crush fragrant swamp grass!  
Let my bowstring lie slack and my bow at rest!

GENERAL: Whatever gives the king pleasure.

KING: Withdraw the men who are in the forest now and forbid my  
soldiers to disturb the grove!

Ascetics devoted to peace  
possess a fiery hidden power,  
like smooth crystal sunstones  
that reflect the sun's scorching rays.

GENERAL: Whatever you command, sir!

BUFFOON: Your arguments for keeping up the hunt fall on deaf ears!  
[*The GENERAL exits.*]

KING: [*Looking at his RETINUE.*] You women, take away my hunting  
gear! Raivataka, don't neglect your duty!

RETINUE: As the king commands!

[*They exit.*]

3. The censure of hunting in Hindu law reflects the influence of the theory of *karma* rebirth and the impact of nonviolent creeds. 4. The buffoon's.

BUFFOON: Sir, now that the flies are cleared out, sit on a stone bench under this shady canopy. Then I'll find a comfortable seat too.

KING: Go ahead!

BUFFOON: You first, sir!

[Both walk about, then sit down.]

KING: Mādhavya, you haven't really used your eyes because you haven't seen true beauty.

BUFFOON: But you're right in front of me, sir!

KING: Everyone is partial to what he knows well, but I'm speaking about Śakuntalā, the jewel of the hermitage.

BUFFOON: [To himself.] I won't give him a chance! [Aloud.] Dear friend, it seems that you're pursuing an ascetic's daughter.

KING: Friend, the heart of a Puru king wouldn't crave a forbidden fruit . . .

The sage's child is a nymph's daughter,  
rescued by him after she was abandoned,  
like a fragile jasmine blossom  
broken and caught on a sunflower pod.

BUFFOON: [Laughing.] You're like the man who loses his taste for dates and prefers sour tamarind!<sup>5</sup> How can you abandon the gorgeous gems of your palace?

KING: You speak this way because you haven't seen her.

BUFFOON: She must be delectable if you're so enticed!

KING: Friend, what is the use of all this talk?

The divine creator imagined perfection  
and shaped her ideal form in his mind—  
when I recall the beauty his power wrought,  
she shines like a gemstone among my jewels.

BUFFOON: So she's the reason you reject the other beauties!

KING: She stays in my mind:

A flower no one has smelled,  
a bud no fingers have plucked,  
an uncut jewel, honey untasted,  
unbroken fruit of holy deeds—  
I don't know who is destined  
to enjoy her flawless beauty.

BUFFOON: Then you should rescue her quickly! Don't let her fall into the arms of some ascetic who greases his head with ingudī oil!

KING: She is someone else's ward and her guardian is away.

BUFFOON: What kind of passion did her eyes betray?

KING: Ascetics are timid by nature:

Her eyes were cast down in my presence,  
but she found an excuse to smile—  
modesty barely contained the love  
she could neither reveal nor conceal.

5. A fruit, the extract of which is used to flavor Indian sauces.

BUFFOON: Did you expect her to climb into your lap when she'd barely seen you?

KING: When we parted her feelings for me showed despite her modesty.

"A blade of kuśa grass<sup>6</sup>  
pricked my foot,"  
the girl said for no reason  
after walking a few steps away;  
then she pretended to free  
her bark dress from branches  
where it was not caught  
and shyly glanced at me.

BUFFOON: Stock up on food for a long trip! I can see you've turned that ascetics' grove into a pleasure garden.

KING: Friend, some of the ascetics recognize me. What excuse can we find to return to the hermitage?

BUFFOON: What excuse? Aren't you the king? Collect a sixth of their wild rice as tax!

KING: Fool! These ascetics pay tribute that pleases me more than mounds of jewels.

Tribute that kings collect  
from members of society decays,  
but the share of austerity  
that ascetics give lasts forever.<sup>7</sup>

VOICE OFFSTAGE: Good, we have succeeded!

KING: [Listening.] These are the steady, calm voices of ascetics.

GUARD: [Entering.] Victory, sir! Two boy ascetics are waiting near the gate.

KING: Let them enter without delay!

GUARD: I'll show them in. [He exits; reenters with the boys.] Here you are!

FIRST BOY: His majestic body inspires trust. It is natural when a king is virtually a sage.<sup>8</sup>

His palace is a hermitage  
with its infinite pleasures,  
the discipline of protecting men  
imposes austerities every day—  
pairs of celestial bards praise  
his perfect self-control,  
adding the royal word "king"  
to "sage," his sacred title.

SECOND BOY: Gautama, is this Duṣyanta, the friend of Indra?<sup>9</sup>

FIRST BOY: Of course!

6. Used in Hindu sacred rites. 7. The king values the sacred power that the sages amass through self-denial. 8. While Duṣyanta may appear worldly to a modern audience, his sacred royal office, his respect for the sages, and his disciplined adherence to the standards of *dharma* make him, in the sages' eyes, a person of tremendous self-control. 9. His friendship with Indra underscores the king's status as the earthly counterpart of the king of the gods.

SECOND BOY:

It is no surprise that this arm of iron  
rules the whole earth bounded by dark seas—  
when demons harass the gods, victory's hope  
rests on his bow and Indra's thunderbolt.

BOTH BOYS: [*Coming near.*] Victory to you, king!KING: [*Rising from his seat.*] I salute you both!BOTH BOYS: To your success, sir! [*They offer fruits.*]KING: [*Accepting their offering.*] I am ready to listen.BOTH BOYS: The ascetics know that you are camped nearby and send  
a petition to you.

KING: What do they request?

BOTH BOYS: Demons are taking advantage of Sage Kaṇva's absence  
to harass us.<sup>1</sup> You must come with your charioteer to protect the  
hermitage for a few days!

KING: I am honored to oblige.

BUFFOON: [*In a stage whisper.*] Your wish is fulfilled!KING: [*Smiling.*] Raivataka, call my charioteer! Tell him to bring the  
chariot and my bow!GUARD: As the king commands! [*He exits.*]BOTH BOYS: [*Showing delight.*]

Following your ancestral duties  
suits your noble form—  
the Puru kings are ordained  
to dispel their subjects' fear.

KING: [*Bowing.*] You two return! I shall follow.BOTH BOYS: Be victorious! [*They exit.*]

KING: Māḍhavya, are you curious to see Śakuntalā?

BUFFOON: At first there was a flood, but now with this news of demons,  
not a drop is left.

KING: Don't be afraid! Won't you be with me?

BUFFOON: Then I'll be safe from any demon . . .

GUARD: [*Entering.*] The chariot is ready to take you to victory . . . but  
Karabhaka has just come from the city with a message from the  
queen.

KING: Did my mother send him?

GUARD: She did.

KING: Have him enter then.

GUARD: Yes. [*He exits; reenters with KARABHAKA.*] Here is the king.  
Approach!KARABHAKA: Victory, sir! Victory! The queen has ordered a ceremony  
four days from now to mark the end of her fast. Your Majesty will  
surely give us the honor of his presence.KING: The ascetics' business keeps me here and my mother's com-  
mand calls me there. I must find a way to avoid neglecting either!

1. The motif of a royal hero slaying demons who destroy the sacred rituals of forest sages, as seen in the *Rāmāyana* (p. 576), is traditional.

BUFFOON: Hang yourself between them the way Triśaṅku<sup>2</sup> hung  
between heaven and earth.

KING: I'm really confused . . .

My mind is split in two  
by these conflicting duties,  
like a river current split  
by boulders in its course.

[*Thinking.*] Friend, my mother has treated you like a son. You must  
go back and report that I've set my heart on fulfilling my duty to  
the ascetics. You fulfill my filial duty to the queen.

BUFFOON: You don't really think I'm afraid of demons?

KING: [*Smiling.*] My brave brahman, how could you be?

BUFFOON: Then I can travel like the king's younger brother.

KING: We really should not disturb the grove! Take my whole entou-  
rage with you!

BUFFOON: Now I've turned into the crown prince!

KING: [*To himself.*] This fellow is absent-minded. At any time he may  
tell the palace women about my passion. I'll tell him this: [*Taking  
the BUFFOON by the hand, he speaks aloud.*] Dear friend, I'm going  
to the hermitage out of reverence for the sages. I really feel no  
desire for the young ascetic Śakuntalā.

What do I share with a rustic girl  
reared among fawns, unskilled in love?  
Don't mistake what I muttered  
in jest for the real truth, friend!

[*All exit.*]

## Act III

[*A disciple of KAṆVA enters, carrying kuśa grass for a sacrificial rite.*]DISCIPLE: King Duśyanta is certainly powerful. Since he entered the  
hermitage, our rites have not been hindered.

Why talk of fixing arrows?  
The mere twang of his bowstring  
clears away menacing demons  
as if his bow roared with death.

I'll gather some more grass for the priests to spread on the sacrificial  
altar. [*Walking around and looking, he calls aloud.*] Priyāṇvadā,  
for whom are you bringing the ointment of fragrant lotus root fibers  
and leaves? [*Listening.*] What are you saying? Śakuntalā is suffering  
from heat exhaustion? They're for rubbing on her body? Priyāṇ-  
vadā, take care of her! She is the breath of Father Kaṇva's life.  
I'll give Gautamī this water from the sacrifice to use for soothing  
her.

2. A mythic king who was left suspended between heaven and earth in a contest of power between the  
sage Viśvāmītra and the gods.

[*He exits; the interlude ends. Then the KING enters, suffering from love, deep in thought, sighing.*]

KING:

I know the power ascetics have  
and the rules that bind her,  
but I cannot abandon my heart  
now that she has taken it.

[*Showing the pain of love.*] Love, why do you and the moon both  
contrive to deceive lovers by first gaining our trust?

Arrows of flowers and cool moon rays  
are both deadly for men like me—  
the moon shoots fire through icy rays  
and you hurl thunderbolts of flowers.

[*Walking around.*] Now that the rites are concluded and the priests  
have dismissed me, where can I rest from the weariness of this  
work? [*Sighing.*] There is no refuge but the sight of my love. I must  
find her. [*Looking up at the sun.*] Śakuntalā usually spends the  
heat of the day with her friends in a bower of vines on the Mālinī  
riverbank. I shall go there. [*Walking around, miming the touch of  
breeze.*] This place is enchanted by the wind.

A breeze fragrant with lotus pollen  
and moist from the Mālinī waves  
can be held in soothing embrace  
by my love-scorched arms.

[*Walking around and looking.*]

I see fresh footprints  
on white sand in the clearing,  
deeply pressed at the heel  
by the sway of full hips.

I'll just look through the branches. [*Walking around, looking, he  
becomes joyous.*] My eyes have found bliss! The girl I desire is lying  
on a stone couch strewn with flowers, attended by her two friends.  
I'll eavesdrop as they confide in one another. [*He stands watching,  
ŚAKUNTALĀ appears as described, with her two friends.*]

BOTH FRIENDS: [*Fanning her affectionately.*] Śakuntalā, does the  
breeze from this lotus leaf please you?

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Are you fanning me?

[*The friends trade looks, miming dismay.*]

KING: [*Deliberating.*] Śakuntalā seems to be in great physical pain. Is  
it the heat or is it what is in my own heart? [*Miming ardent desire.*]  
My doubts are unfounded!

Her breasts are smeared with lotus balm,  
her lotus-fiber bracelet hangs limp,  
her beautiful body glows in pain—  
love burns young women like summer heat  
but its guilt makes them more charming.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: [*In a stage whisper.*] Anasūyā, Śakuntalā has been pining  
since she first saw the king. Could he be the cause of her sickness?

ANASŪYĀ: She must be suffering from lovesickness. I'll ask her . . .  
[*Aloud.*] Friend, I have something to ask you. Your pain seems so  
deep . . .

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Raising herself halfway.*] What do you want to say?

ANASŪYĀ: Śakuntalā, though we don't know what it is to be in love,  
your condition reminds us of lovers we have heard about in stories.  
Can you tell us the cause of your pain? Unless we understand your  
illness, we can't begin to find a cure.

KING: Anasūyā expresses my own thoughts.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Even though I want to, suddenly I can't make myself tell  
you.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: Śakuntalā, my friend Anasūyā means well. Don't you see  
how sick you are? Your limbs are wasting away. Only the shadow  
of your beauty remains . . .

KING: What Priyamvadā says is true:

Her cheeks are deeply sunken,  
her breasts' full shape is gone,  
her waist is thin, her shoulders bent,  
and the color has left her skin—  
tormented by love,  
she is sad but beautiful to see,  
like a jasmine creeper  
when hot wind shrivels its leaves.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Friends, who else can I tell? May I burden you?

BOTH FRIENDS: We insist! Sharing sorrow with loving friends makes it  
bearable.

KING:

Friends who share her joy and sorrow  
discover the love concealed in her heart—  
though she looked back longingly at me,  
now I am afraid to hear her response.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Friend, since my eyes first saw the guardian of the her-  
mits' retreat, I've felt such strong desire for him!

KING: I have heard what I want to hear.

My tormentor, the god of love,  
has soothed my fever himself,  
like the heat of late summer  
allayed by early rain clouds.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: If you two think it's right, then help me to win the king's  
pity. Otherwise, you'll soon pour sesame oil and water<sup>3</sup> on my  
corpse . . .

KING: Her words destroy my doubt.

3. Offerings to the dead in Hindu funeral rites. Śakuntalā and her friends have learned of the king's  
real identity, because the hermits have asked him to guard their hermitage from demons.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: [*In a stage whisper.*] She's so dangerously in love that there's no time to lose. Since her heart is set on the ornament of the Puru dynasty, we should rejoice that she desires him.

ANASŪYĀ: What you say is true.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: [*Aloud.*] Friend, by good fortune your desire is in harmony with nature. A great river can only descend to the ocean. A jasmine creeper can only twine around a mango tree.

KING: Why is this surprising when the twin stars of spring serve the crescent moon?<sup>4</sup>

ANASŪYĀ: What means do we have to fulfill our friend's desire secretly and quickly?

PRIYĀMVADĀ: "Secretly" demands some effort. "Quickly" is easy.

ANASŪYĀ: How so?

PRIYĀMVADĀ: The king was charmed by her loving look; he seems thin these days from sleepless nights.

KING: It's true . . .

This golden armlet  
slips to my wrist  
without touching the scars  
my bowstring has made;  
its gemstones are faded  
by tears of secret pain  
that every night wets my arm  
where I bury my face.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: [*Thinking.*] Compose a love letter and I'll hide it in a flower. I'll deliver it to his hand on the pretext of bringing an offering to the deity.

ANASŪYĀ: This subtle plan pleases me. What does Śakuntalā say?

ŚAKUNTALĀ: I'll try my friend's plan.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: Then compose a poem to declare your love!

ŚAKUNTALĀ: I'm thinking, but my heart trembles with fear that he'll reject me.

KING: [*Delighted.*]

The man you fear will reject you  
waits longing to love you, timid girl—  
a suitor may lose or be lucky,  
but the goddess always wins.

BOTH FRIENDS: Why do you belittle your own virtues? Who would cover his body with a piece of cloth to keep off cool autumn moonlight?

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Smiling.*] I'm trying to follow your advice. [*She sits thinking.*]

KING: As I gaze at her, my eyes forget to blink.

She arches an eyebrow,  
struggling to compose the verse—

4. The king refers metaphorically to the two friends attending Śakuntalā as stars attending a young moon that is waning.

the down rises on her cheek,  
showing the passion she feels.<sup>5</sup>

ŚAKUNTALĀ: I've thought of a verse, but I have nothing to write it on.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: Engrave the letters with your nail on this lotus leaf! It's as delicate as a parrot's breast.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Miming what PRIYĀMVADĀ described.*] Listen and tell me this makes sense!

BOTH FRIENDS: We're both paying attention.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Singing.*]

I don't know

your heart,

but day and night

for wanting you,

love violently

tortures

my limbs,

cruel man.

KING: [*Suddenly revealing himself.*]

Love torments you, slender girl,

but he completely consumes me—

daylight spares the lotus pond

while it destroys the moon.

BOTH FRIENDS: [*Looking, rising with delight.*] Welcome to the swift success of love's desire!

[ŚAKUNTALĀ tries to rise.]

KING: Don't exert yourself!

Limbs lying among crushed petals

like fragile lotus stalks

are too weakened by pain

to perform ceremonious acts.

ANASŪYĀ: Then let the king sit on this stone bench!

[The KING sits; ŚAKUNTALĀ rises in embarrassment.]

PRIYĀMVADĀ: The passion of two young lovers is clear. My affection for our friend makes me speak out again now.<sup>6</sup>

KING: Noble lady, don't hesitate! It is painful to keep silent when one must speak.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: We're told that it is the king's duty to ease the pain of his suffering subjects.

KING: My duty, exactly!

PRIYĀMVADĀ: Since she first saw you, our dear friend has been reduced to this sad condition. You must protect her and save her life.

KING: Noble lady, our affection is shared and I am honored by all you say.

5. "Thrilling" of the cheek is held to be a sign of inner emotion which the actress is supposed to be able to represent. 6. Śakuntalā's modesty and good breeding prevent her from making her own declaration of love.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Looking at PRIYĀMVADĀ.*] Why are you keeping the king here? He must be anxious to return to his palace.

KING:

If you think that my lost heart  
could love anyone but you,  
a fatal blow strikes a man  
already wounded by love's arrows!

ANASŪYĀ: We've heard that kings have many loves. Will our dear friend become a sorrow to her family after you've spent time with her?

KING: Noble lady, enough of this!

Despite my many wives,  
on two the royal line rests—  
sea-bound earth  
and your friend.<sup>7</sup>

BOTH FRIENDS: You reassure us.

PRIYĀMVADĀ: [*Casting a glance.*] Anasūyā, this fawn is looking for its mother. Let's take it to her!

[*They both begin to leave.*]

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Come back! Don't leave me unprotected!

BOTH FRIENDS: The protector of the earth is at your side.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Why have they gone?

KING: Don't be alarmed! I am your servant.

Shall I set moist winds in motion  
with lotus-leaf fans to cool your pain,  
or rest your soft red lotus feet<sup>8</sup>  
on my lap to stroke them, my love

ŚAKUNTALĀ: I cannot sin against those I respect!

[*Standing as if she wants to leave.*]

KING: Beautiful Śakuntalā, the day is still hot.

Why should your frail limbs  
leave this couch of flowers  
shielded by lotus leaves  
to wander in the heat?

[*Saying this, he forces her to turn around.*]

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Puru king, control yourself! Though I'm burning with love, how can I give myself to you?

KING: Don't fear your elders! The father of your family knows the law. When he finds out, he will not blame you.

The daughters of royal sages often marry  
in secret<sup>9</sup> and then their fathers bless them.

7. Royal polygamy was common in ancient India; it served to make and cement political alliances. Here the king speaks of the conventional ideal of a ruler's two "chief queens": the royal consort, whose son will inherit the kingdom, and the earth, personified as the king's spouse. 8. A common metaphor for feet in Indian verse. 9. The *gāndharva* form of marriage, a secret marriage of mutual consent was permitted for the warrior class. By the beginning of Act IV this has taken place.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Release me! I must ask my friends' advice!

KING: Yes, I shall release you.

ŚAKUNTALĀ: When?

KING:

Only let my thirsting mouth  
gently drink from your lips,  
the way a bee sips nectar  
from a fragile virgin blossom.

220

[*Saying this, he tries to raise her face. ŚAKUNTALĀ evades him with a dance.*]

VOICE OFFSTAGE: Red goose,<sup>1</sup> bid farewell to your gander! Night has arrived!

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*Flustered.*] Puru king, Mother Gautamī is surely coming to ask about my health. Hide behind this tree! 225

KING: Yes.

[*He conceals himself and waits. Then GAUTAMĪ enters with a vessel in her hand, accompanied by ŚAKUNTALĀ's two friends.*]

BOTH FRIENDS: This way, Mother Gautamī!

GAUTAMĪ: [*Approaching ŚAKUNTALĀ.*] Child, does the fever in your limbs burn less? 230

ŚAKUNTALĀ: Madam, I do feel better.

GAUTAMĪ: Kuśa grass and water will soothe your body. [*She sprinkles ŚAKUNTALĀ's head.*] Child, the day is ended. Come, let's go back to our hut! [*She starts to go.*]

ŚAKUNTALĀ: [*To herself.*] My heart, even when your desire was within reach, you were bound by fear. Now you'll suffer the torment of separation and regret. [*Stopping after a few steps, she speaks aloud.*] Bower of creepers, refuge from my torment, I say goodbye until our joy can be renewed . . . [*Sorrowfully, ŚAKUNTALĀ exits with the other women.*] 235

KING: [*Coming out of hiding.*] Fulfillment of desire is fraught with obstacles. 240

Why didn't I kiss her face  
as it bent near my shoulder,  
her fingers shielding lips  
that stammered lovely warning?

Should I go now? Or shall I stay here in this bower of creepers that my love enjoyed and then left? 245

I see the flowers her body pressed  
on this bench of stone,  
the letter her nails inscribed  
on the faded lotus leaf,  
the lotus-fiber bracelet  
that slipped from her wrist—  
my eyes are prisoners  
in this empty house of reeds. 250

1. Also known as the sheldrake (*cakravāka*). In Sanskrit poetry, separated lovers are symbolized by these birds, subject to a curse that separates them from their mates every night.

VOICE IN THE AIR: King!

When the evening rituals begin,  
shadows of flesh-eating demons swarm  
like amber clouds of twilight,  
raising terror at the altar of fire.

KING: I am coming.  
[*He exits.*]

### Act IV

[*The two friends enter, miming the gathering of flowers.*]

ANASŪYĀ: Priyamvadā, I'm delighted that Śakuntalā chose a suitable husband for herself, but I still feel anxious.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Why?

ANASŪYĀ: When the king finished the sacrifice, the sages thanked him and he left. Now that he has returned to his palace women in the city, will he remember us here?

PRIYAMVADĀ: Have faith! He's so handsome, he can't be evil. But I don't know what Father Kaṇva will think when he hears about what happened.

ANASŪYĀ: I predict that he'll give his approval.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Why?

ANASŪYĀ: He's always planned to give his daughter to a worthy husband. If fate accomplished it so quickly, Father Kaṇva won't object.

PRIYAMVADĀ: [*Looking at the basket of flowers.*] We've gathered enough flowers for the offering ceremony.

ANASŪYĀ: Shouldn't we worship the goddess who guards Śakuntalā?

PRIYAMVADĀ: I have just begun. [*She begins the rite.*]

VOICE OFFSTAGE: I am here!

ANASŪYĀ: [*Listening.*] Friend, a guest is announcing himself.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Śakuntalā is in her hut nearby, but her heart is far away.

ANASŪYĀ: You're right! Enough of these flowers!

[*They begin to leave.*]

VOICE OFFSTAGE: So . . . you slight a guest . . .

Since you blindly ignore  
a great sage like me,  
the lover you worship  
with mindless devotion  
will not remember you,  
even when awakened—  
like a drunkard who forgets  
a story he just composed!

PRIYAMVADĀ: Oh! What a terrible turn of events! Śakuntalā's distraction has offended someone she should have greeted. [*Looking ahead.*] Not just an ordinary person, but the angry sage Durvāsas himself cursed her and went away in a frenzy of quivering, mad gestures. What else but fire has such power to burn?

ANASŪYĀ: Go! Bow at his feet and make him return while I prepare the water for washing his feet!

PRIYAMVADĀ: As you say. [*She exits.*]

ANASŪYĀ: [*After a few steps, she mimes stumbling.*] Oh! The basket of flowers fell from my hand when I stumbled in my haste to go. [*She mimes the gathering of flowers.*]

PRIYAMVADĀ: [*Entering.*] He's so terribly cruel! No one could pacify him! But I was able to soften him a little.

ANASŪYĀ: Even that is a great feat with him! Tell me more!

PRIYAMVADĀ: When he refused to return, I begged him to forgive a daughter's first offense, since she didn't understand the power of his austerity.

ANASŪYĀ: Then? Then?

PRIYAMVADĀ: He refused to change his word, but he promised that when the king sees the ring of recollection, the curse will end. Then he vanished.

ANASŪYĀ: Now we can breathe again. When he left, the king himself gave her the ring engraved with his name. Śakuntalā will have her own means of ending the curse.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Come friend! We should finish the holy rite we're performing for her.

[*The two walk around, looking.*]

Anasūyā, look! With her face resting on her hand, our dear friend looks like a picture. She is thinking about her husband's leaving, with no thought for herself, much less for a guest.

ANASŪYĀ: Priyamvadā, we two must keep all this a secret between us.

Our friend is fragile by nature; she needs our protection.

PRIYAMVADĀ: Who would sprinkle a jasmine with scalding water?

[*They both exit; the interlude ends. Then a DISCIPLE of KAṆVA enters, just awakened from sleep.*]

DISCIPLE: Father Kaṇva has just returned from his pilgrimage and wants to know the exact time. I'll go into a clearing to see what remains of the night. [*Walking around and looking.*] It is dawn.

The moon sets over the western mountain  
as the sun rises in dawn's red trail—  
rising and setting, these two bright powers  
portend the rise and fall of men.

When the moon disappears, night lotuses  
are but dull souvenirs of its beauty—  
when her lover disappears, the sorrow  
is too painful for a frail girl to bear.

ANASŪYĀ: [*Throwing aside the curtain and entering.*]<sup>2</sup> Even a person withdrawn from worldly life knows that the king has treated Śakuntalā badly.

DISCIPLE: I'll inform Father Kaṇva that it's time for the fire oblation.

2. The *javanikā* ("impeller"), a curtain hung over two doors separating the backstage area from the stage of the ancient Indian playhouse. An agitated entrance was indicated when, as here, a character entered the stage by throwing aside the curtain.