

Playing Around with Śakuntalā: Translating Sanskrit Drama for Performance

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This paper presents an argument for a particular approach to translating Sanskrit drama for an audience unfamiliar with the conventions of classical Indian theatre, such as *rasa* theory. It illustrates the approach through an analysis of a well-known verse in Act Four of Kālidāsa's *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*.

In 2002 the Norwegian Book Clubs published a list of 100 book titles, dubbed a 'Library of World Literature'. It had been compiled by asking 100 prominent authors from 54 different countries to nominate ten books that, in their opinion, are the 'best and most central works in world literature'.¹ One of the Indian works² on the list is a fourth- or fifth-century CE Sanskrit drama by Kālidāsa, *The Recognition of Śakuntalā* (*Abhijñānaśākuntalam*). Whatever else this inclusion signifies, it shows that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there persists an awareness, at least among well-known authors, that Kālidāsa's play should be regarded as an important work of world literature. There are, however, good reasons to assume that, with the possible exception of some of the Indian writers consulted, none of those who chose the work had read it in its original language (Sanskrit).³ Like many other volumes in this 'Library', *Śakuntalā* is therefore in what Susan Sontag called the 'repertory' of literary translation: that is to say, it is among the works that are deemed 'major' enough to be 'regularly redone' – because previous translations now seem 'too free, not accurate enough'; or are 'thought to contain too many errors; or the idiom, which seemed transparent to the contemporaries of a translation, now seems dated'.⁴

Just as few of those prominent authors polled by the Norwegian Book Clubs are likely to have encountered *Śakuntalā* in anything but translation, fewer still are liable to have seen it performed on stage, whatever the language employed. For although the play

¹ See <http://www.bokklubben.no/SamboWeb/side.do?dokId=65500&klubbid=WB> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/may/08/books.booksnews> (posted on Wednesday 8 May 2002; both accessed on Friday 4 March 2011).

² The other Indian works are the two Sanskrit leviathans, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (England/India), and, with a shared attribution of origin (India/Iran/Iraq/Egypt), *A Thousand and One Nights*.

³ In fact 'Sanskrit' plays are composed in two languages – classical Sanskrit, and Prākṛit (the collective name for a group of North Indian dialects).

⁴ Susan Sontag, 'The World as India: the St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation', in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), p. 162.

belongs to the very limited repertory of works translated and retranslated from the Sanskrit, if we take ‘repertory’ to mean works that are not just produced once, but regularly revived, then *Śakuntalā* is not, and never has been, part of the performing repertory of any theatre outside India.⁵ Even in India, the play is produced infrequently. Its reputation as a pinnacle of world literature therefore derives not so much from its stage history but from its poetry. For connoisseurs of Sanskrit literature – an exclusive club at any time – Kālidāsa’s play has, for probably at least a thousand years, been regarded primarily as an anthology of exemplary verse. Its author is, after all, the great poet-playwright of the Sanskrit tradition – a characterisation which, in the Anglophone world, has earned him the predictable but condescending epithet, the ‘Indian Shakespeare’.

There is a certain irony to the fact that it was the first – and one of the most accomplished – of those to translate *Śakuntalā* into a European language, Sir William Jones (1746–94), who helped to establish this comparison. The play’s reputation in Europe – and its certain, but hardly calculable, contribution to Romanticism (‘influence’ seems too inflated a claim) – derives predominantly from Jones’s appreciation of its poetic qualities. He was less confident about its dramatic value, expressing the opinion, in his preface, that

if *Sacotalá* should ever be acted in India, where alone it could be acted with perfect knowledge of Indian dresses, manners, and scenery, the piece might easily be reduced to five acts of a moderate length, by throwing the third act into the second, and the sixth into the fifth; for it must be confessed that the whole of Dushmanta’s conversation with his buffoon, and great part of his courtship in the hermitage, might be omitted without any injury to the drama.⁶

This uncertainty about its stageworthiness was reiterated in Germany, France and Italy, as Jones’s 1789 version was carried, by way of retranslation, into continental Europe. Schiller, for one, thought the play unstageable in the West.⁷

The question of the dramatic or undramatic nature of *Śakuntalā* was, of course, begged. Europe had long-established theories, derived from Aristotle and the classical world, which rested on the conviction that conflict and change are, by definition, central to any drama.⁸ Sanskrit drama, by way of contrast, involves, to use Dorothy Figueira’s characterisation, ‘neither conflict nor contrast of character ... [since] the Indian

⁵ At the time of writing, neither of the two great subsidised theatres in the UK – the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre – has ever mounted a production of *Śakuntalā*.

⁶ Sir William Jones (trans.), *Sacotalá, or, The Fatal Ring: an Indian Drama by Cālidās* (Calcutta: Joseph Cooper, 1789), ‘Translator’s Preface’, p. v.

⁷ See Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Translating the Orient: the Reception of Śākuntalā in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 191. See n. 10, below, for the use of the term ‘West’.

⁸ See Figueira, *Translating the Orient*, p. 190.

dramatist's art consists of evoking the most sentiment with the least action possible'.⁹ In other words, it is not really 'drama' at all in European terms. Nevertheless, as the West eventually discovered, Sanskrit theatre had its own Aristotle and its own *Poetics* in Bharata and his *Nāṭyaśāstra* or *Drama Manual* (c. 200 CE, or later). And in this dramaturgy, it was neither plot (i.e. action) nor catharsis which was central to drama, but the deliberate and studied creation of a specific emotional and aesthetic effect on the audience.

This effect was analysed in terms of *rasa* theory. *Rasa* literally means 'juice' or 'flavour' – so the essential metaphor is one of tasting. Who has the experience of tasting? The audience. Who provides it? The playwright in combination with the performers. How is it done? According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* the precise purpose of all worthwhile drama is the creation, out of the principal emotions evoked within the play, of a harmonious and complementary whole; and this in turn engenders a related, but impersonal, and universalised, experience of joy and bliss in the audience. It is the particular combination of poetry, action, plot, movement, sound, and gesture which brings about this *rasa*. But it does not happen spontaneously: the poetry has to be good enough, the actors have to be good enough, and, above all, the audience has to be good enough. In other words, an audience of *cognoscenti*, educated in the subtleties of this aesthetic, have their common response conditioned, both by the specifics of the performance and by the dominant emotion or emotions that persist throughout it.

Academic acquaintance with *rasa* theory has, however, done nothing to resolve the supposed problem of staging *Śakuntalā* in the West.¹⁰ If anything, it has strengthened the perception that the play, as originally intended, can only be properly appreciated in the context of an Indian performance, and only there by suitably acculturated connoisseurs.¹¹ Although it is easy to see the reasons for this attitude – in an obvious way, Bharata is the unapologetic author of it himself – it nevertheless assumes a particularly narrow, not to say dogmatic understanding of what might be dramatically interesting to a Western audience. This is reflected in the fact that, as far as I know, no performance of *Śakuntalā* in English has been anything but heavily cut.

The play is certainly long: its seven acts take their time in retelling a story from the *Mahābhārata* about the love affair between *Śakuntalā*, a young woman brought up in the forest, and King Duśyanta (Jones's 'Dushmanta'), who encounters her when out hunting. Through the mechanism of a curse, he fails to remember her when she turns up at his court heavily pregnant with their child. Eventually, after the return of his memory, and much remorse on the part of the king, there is a joyful, celestial resolution. While it is understandable that, for practical reasons, a Western production of the play might have to work with an abridged translation, it is unfortunate that all such pruning to date

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The terms 'West' and 'Western' are used in this article to signify the geographical and historical contexts in which the political and material cultures of Western Europe have been, or have come to be, dominant. In the theatrical context, the terms refer to a tradition that, at least in theory, traces its origins back to classical Greece.

¹¹ It may be doubted whether such an audience any longer exists, even in India.

has been based on the assumption that action and plot take precedence over other considerations, and therefore that the play can be reconstituted on Aristotelian lines without significant damage. Since the intention is to speed up and streamline the action, what constitutes the main brake on this acceleration, the poetry of the play's emotionally reflective monologues, is the primary target. The consequence of this is that the major vehicle of *rasa* which survives on the page (music and movement being naturally absent) is excised in advance of the performance. Little wonder then that, despite the best efforts of actors and directors, audiences and theatre critics in the West are inclined to see the play as an exotic pantomime or, at best, an historical curiosity. Even when prepared to accept it as the supreme work of Sanskrit drama, they are still liable to conclude that *Śakuntalā* does not amount to very much – certainly not when compared with the 'English Shakespeare'.

Is there anything the translator can do to ameliorate this kind of reception? Planning my own version for Oxford World's Classics,¹² I was determined to produce a translation that would not only be performable – i.e., provide the basis for productions in tune with current performance styles – but that would also attempt to convey, however inadequately, something of the play's literary quality, and so its flavour or *rasa*. For this approach to have a chance of success, however, it was necessary to form a clear conception, at the outset, of my intended audience, and of the ways in which it differed from its original counterpart.

In the Indian context, a Sanskrit drama is leisurely: the audience needs time to savour its *rasa*, and so it takes time to perform. If dance and continual hand, face and body gestures are added in, it takes even longer. Originally, Sanskrit plays may have often been performed in instalments, or at least over a whole night, like the Kathakali dance dramas performed in South India today. Particular acts would certainly have been performed on their own at the request of patrons.¹³ Clearly, audiences were expected to see a production time and time again, deepening their experience at each performance, relishing or tasting slight and subtle variations on a well-known theme. By way of contrast, most members of a modern Western audience will only see a production once, and are not connoisseurs in that sense.¹⁴ The one thing needed by connoisseurs (and here I mean nothing more than an acculturated audience) is time – repeated close contact with a story that, in one sense, is soon already well-known. But what can be derived from such contact is not instantly realised: it requires 'training', in the sense of habituation and concentrated exposure – a point made by the great Kashmiri theologian Abhinavagupta in the tenth century CE. Describing the most sensitive readers of poetry (*kāvya*) – the 'connoisseurs' – he writes:

¹² W. J. Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā: a Play in Seven Acts*, by Kālidāsa (including 'Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata*') (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; new edn 2008).

¹³ The Bengali recension of *The Recognition of Śakuntalā* probably had material added by Kālidāsa, or someone else, for precisely that purpose.

¹⁴ There are, of course, those who return to see the same production of *Les Misérables*, or other musicals, time after time; but there would have to be a major cultural revolution for a production of a Sanskrit drama in translation to attract that kind of attention.

The sensitive readers are those whose mirror-like minds are made crystal clear by their *constant practice* of the reading of poetry in such a way that their minds become identified with whatever is described in poetry.¹⁵

Anuśilana – the Sanskrit word translated by ‘constant practice’ – also has the sense of ‘constant repetition’: there is something mantra-like about it. And in fact, according to Abhinavagupta, the true connoisseur is more than half-way to spiritual enlightenment.

This is certainly distant from the conditions that apply for most contemporary Western audiences. Ticket prices, and the economics of modern theatre, do not encourage connoisseurship in this sense. The translator can hardly be blamed, therefore, if she or he settles for a performance of the imagination, one which takes place in the mind of a reader – a novelisation of the drama which avoids considering the staging of these plays altogether. Rashly, perhaps, I took a different line and tried to recreate something that might actually be performable within the conventions of Western theatre. But to do that I had to counter, to some extent, the connoisseurs’ approach.

One of my strategies was to speed up the delivery of what was already, for a Western audience, a long, seven-act play – not by cutting the text (and so pre-empting the possibility of a rasic effect), but by driving the action forward through a particular approach to the translation of *Śakuntalā*’s verse passages.¹⁶ *Śakuntalā*, like other classical Indian dramas, establishes its dramatic rhythm by alternating between prose and verse in two linguistic registers (Sanskrit and Prākṛit). Metre is derived from patterns of light and heavy syllables; in English verse, metre is mostly, but not exclusively, derived from patterns of stress. Sanskrit verse is unrhymed; English verse is rhymed or not, as the form dictates and the poet chooses. In *Śakuntalā*, Kālidāsa employs 33 different verse forms; and while it might have been possible to have found 33 different English verse forms to mirror the variety in the original, that would certainly have run the risk of turning the play into an anthology. In addition, in order to create an identifiable mood and rhythm for the piece in English, I wanted a more unified tone across verses, especially those spoken by the same character. I also rejected the possibility of flattening the verse into a uniform prose, even into that apparent hybrid, ‘rhythmic prose’, which also sometimes looks like verse on the page.

What I attempted, instead, was to suggest the verse, and its range of differing metres (and to some extent the difference between Sanskrit and Prākṛit verses), by using rhyme (sometimes), half-rhyme (frequently), assonance, alliteration, and, at the very least, by looking for something more pronounced than a simple prose rhythm. This was

¹⁵ Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyāloka-Locana* 1.1 (trans. B. K. Matilal), in Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Word and the World: India’s Contribution to the Study of Language* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 177 (italics added).

¹⁶ To be effective, such a speeding up also relied on the assumption that, apart from the usual gestures and maybe some naturalistic mime, the actors would not, as they spoke the lines, require any extra time to accommodate the full panoply of coded gestures used in traditional performances of this material, some of which rely on the prescriptions of Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

My general aim in translating verse is compression, again predicated on a certain non-traditional style of performance. In this case, the original Sanskrit has 76 syllables; my translation comes in at 56 – and here I am using a syllable count as a guide to the relative time it takes to speak a passage, regardless of its specific metrical pattern. In fact, I could have delivered the significant content even more concisely, in 48 syllables, but I shall explain shortly why I chose not to do that. A survey of some other translations¹⁹ of the same verse reveals two that exceed the Sanskrit original in length, and others which go in the same direction I took, although I have not yet found one more compressed than my own.

M. R. Kale's 1898 translation is the most literal, as well as the earliest of the translations I looked at (in some places it is not grammatical English at all); mine may well be the least literal. Here is Kale's translation, followed by mine.

Kale (1898):

At the thought that Śakuntalā is to go away to-day, my heart is smitten with grief; my throat is choked owing to the flow of tears suppressed; and my sight is heavy through anxiety. Such (so great), indeed, through affection (for Śakuntalā), is this affliction of me that dwells in a forest, how much then must householders be tormented by the fresh (hitherto unexperienced) pangs of separation from their daughters?

(87 syllables, not counting the material in brackets)

Johnson (2001):

Śakuntalā must leave today –
My sight grows dark with what may come,
My throat is choked, my heart contracts,
A hard ascetic cracked by love.
Then what must worldly fathers feel,
A child departing in this way?
Śakuntalā must leave today.

(56 syllables, including the 8 syllables of the repeated line)

What I wanted, essentially, was to relocate the emotional heft of the verse. In the original it is embedded in the speaker's *description* of his own sorrowful emotional state, which he then projects onto fathers in general. I did not want to change the emotion itself, but I

¹⁹ The translations consulted, in order of publication: M. R. Kale (ed. and trans.), *The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, repr. of 10th edn, 1994; 1st edn 1898); Coulson, *Three Sanskrit Plays*; Barbara Stoler Miller (ed. and trans.), *Theatre of Memory: the Plays of Kālidāsa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Chandra Rajan (trans.), *Kālidāsa: the Loom of Time* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990); Lyne Bansat-Boudon (ed. and trans.), *Le Théâtre de Kālidāsa* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); and Somadeva Vasudeva (ed. and trans.), *The Recognition of Shakúntala* (New York: New York University Press / JJC Foundation, 2006).

did want a more enacted and characterised expression of it. The achieved difference may be marginal, but my translation does, to some extent, deliberately work against some of the principles of Sanskrit aesthetics or *rasa* theory. To begin with, simply in terms of duration, it does not allow for so much tasting of the emotion – it would not suit the connoisseur. More importantly, I took a pragmatic decision to relocate the emotion to a place where those trained in the Western performance tradition (actor and audience) might have a better hope of finding it. And I attempted to do this by getting as much emotional force as possible into the *active* realisation that Śakuntalā *will – must – leave* today. In the first instance, this involved changing what is a reflective, future tense in the original – *yāsyati* (‘she will leave’) – to an ineluctable *must*.²⁰ Next, I rendered what Sanskritists will recognise as the ‘*iti* clause’ – *yāsyaty adya Śakuntaleti [Śakuntalā iti]* – into direct speech, ‘Śakuntalā must leave today’, where some others chose the indirect: ‘My heart is touched with sadness since Śakuntalā must go today’ (Miller), ‘At the thought that Śakuntalā is to go away to-day, my heart is smitten with grief’ (Kale), “‘Today departs Shakuntala,” realizing this my heart is touched by yearning’ (Vasudeva), and so on.

The indirection of these previous translations is, in fact, quite in tune with the basic intention of the original: it is Kaṇva’s *savouring* of the sorrowful emotion associated with the pathetic *rasa*, on behalf of the audience, that is at the heart of this – a savouring that takes the form of ‘I am thinking to myself that Śakuntalā will leave today, and because of that I am sad.’ The cause of his sadness – Śakuntalā leaving – is in some ways the least important element. And it is taken a step further, since by the end of the verse in the original, the strength of Kaṇva’s personal emotion, however strongly or mildly expressed, has been further generalised, in good *rasa*-like fashion, to worldly fathers. This famous verse is therefore not in the play to tell us about Kaṇva’s character; it is there to induce a certain, situation-bred aesthetic response in the audience. In a sense, Kaṇva tells us, the ‘worldly fathers’ in the audience, what to feel. We don’t make the connection directly, so it is generalised for us too. We are invited to savour it.

This aesthetic seems to me unlikely to have the same effect on a Western audience of non-connoisseurs, who tend to empathise with characters rather than generalised emotions. In my translation, I therefore wanted to bring the emotion back to the character. At first I could not see how to do this, but then, with the help of a rhyme, I realised that Kaṇva should repeat his initial assertion, where there is no repeat in the original. What is happening to *him* finally sinks in at the end of the verse.

What justification is there for taking what, to many, may seem like an heretical liberty? In most Western drama, the actor finds the emotion in the line, and then enacts it through the language – where the language, and therefore the emotion, belong to the character. The emotion is – precisely – ‘characterised’. In Sanskrit drama, on the other hand, the emotion is *generalised*: the whole point is to detach it from the character – to depersonalise it. So the chief character (the hero or *nāyaka*) is both the medium of the emotion, and its connoisseur, the *rasika*. The ultimate aim is to enable the *rasa*. This

²⁰ Miller does something similar.

understanding lies behind the assertion by some Western academics that ‘characters’ in Sanskrit dramas are stereotypes²¹ – because the important thing is not the development of character, but the *rasa* generated by the media of language and gesture. The ideal, in fact, is that in the experience of the performance, the differences between character, actor, and audience should disappear, or be transcended in the aesthetic experience – the *rasa* which has been created.

I am not arguing for the impossibility of *rasa* in Western theatre: in fact I believe I have attended performances of Western dramas where something very similar has occurred (although this is necessarily subjective). My point is that, to get to a similar end in a different language and a different cultural context, it may be necessary to employ a dissimilar means – i.e., different performance techniques, and translations in the service of those techniques. It is not so much poetry that gets lost in translation, as *rasa*. And if the translator goes looking for it in the target language in what seem like the same or similar places, it is likely to remain lost.

From the Elizabethans to Pinter, much of the best Western drama relies on, and gets its dramatic effect from, ambiguity (Jonathan Bate has written about this in relation to Shakespeare)²². For the audience, it mirrors our experience of life – our uncertainties and ambivalence about situations and people. There is no ambiguity in that sense – in the sense of what we are supposed to feel – in *Śakuntalā*. In fact, a comparison of the play with its source story in the *Mahābhārata*²³ shows that Kālidāsa deliberately removes all possible ambiguities. As far as the audience is concerned, there is nothing hidden in the character or situation: everything is in the emotion and the *rasa*, in the intensity and perfection of the meeting of language and emotion in performance. In short, it is not like life as it is lived at all: it is idealised, and like its main linguistic medium, Sanskrit, it is refined, even artificial.²⁴ There is never any doubt about what we are supposed to feel, because we are told in language, gesture and music precisely what it is that we should be or need to be feeling. The only problem is having sufficient sensibility and sensitivity to understand – that is to say, experience – this language of *rasa* and emotion. And that requires training as well as an inherent susceptibility. As I have suggested, it is this lack of ambiguity, this emotional directness, that accounts for the feeling of transparency – the feeling that there is nothing hidden, that everything is on the surface of the language – when we encounter such plays in translation. Without the requisite training or acculturation, what we are left with is the shadow of the poetry, notoriously difficult to translate at a similar level of achievement.

²¹ See, for instance, the discussion in Robert E. Goodwin’s *The Playworld of Sanskrit Drama* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), p. x.

²² Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997).

²³ For a translation, see Johnson, *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, pp. 109–37. See also Saswati Sengupta and Deepika Tandon (eds), *Revisiting Abhijñānāśakuntalam: Love, Lineage and Language in Kālidāsa’s Nāṭaka* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), esp. Alf Hildebeitel, ‘The First Reading of “Śakuntalā”: a Window on the Original and the Second Reading by Kālidāsa’ (pp. 17–37), and Simon Brodbeck, ‘The Rejection of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata*: Dynastic Considerations’ (pp. 219–37).

²⁴ One of the meanings of the word *saṃskṛta* (‘Sanskrit’) is ‘refined’.

By way of contrast, it seems that Shakespeare translates amazingly well, if his worldwide popularity is anything to go by. And again, that is precisely because the ambiguity of his characters and their situations translates well (an ambiguity expressed through language, of course, but to some extent separable from its immediate form). In contrast, Kālidāsa, another great poet and playwright, removed from his cultural environment, can seem unexceptional, transparent – pantomimic even. The remedy, in so far as there is one, is to configure as close a match as possible between a particular style of translation and a particular style of performance. Only then is there a chance that the emotional charge, or *rasa*, can be released.

So when I translated *Śakuntalā*, what counts as ‘authenticity’ in performance, and what original performances may or may not have been like, were not major questions for me. Rather, I wanted to produce a performable version that would work in vastly altered cultural circumstances. It was intended to be realised in a language-rich (i.e. poetry-focused) production, with movement and mime based on stage directions. It would include music and song where required, but would otherwise avoid any ‘authentic’, dance-like elements.²⁵ However, of the four productions which have used my translation to date, only one has attempted to complement it in this way, and that too was heavily cut. This provides a salutary reminder that, although translators may attempt, through the choices they make in translation, to shape the style of potential productions, they ultimately have no more direct control over a play’s actual performance than the absent, foreign, and often long-dead playwright.²⁶ In that, if nothing else, Kālidāsa and his translators are equals.

²⁵ I.e. the full panoply of coded gestures used in traditional performances – see n. 16, above.

²⁶ This need to shape and, sometimes, deliberately to distort the performance explains the common practice of adaptation in the theatre: a contemporary playwright or director, often with little or no knowledge of the source language, works either from a ‘literal’, or from (seldom acknowledged) previous translations, to generate a performing script. The underlying assumption in these cases – that translators who know the source languages are likely to have no conception of contemporary performing styles when translating: that their translations will always be, at best, literary, and reek of the past – may sometimes be true, but just as often demonstrates a startling ignorance about the process of translation.