APPRECIATION OF SANSKRIT DRAMA IN KALAYUG

Dr. M. Christopher Byrski

Common experience teaches us that each phenomenon consists of essence and of non-essentials. Ancient Indian theatre and its dramatic literature is no exception to this rule. Elsewhere I have tried to find an answer to the question concerning its essence. This answer in its final form is brief: *natya* is *yajna* in as much as life is *yajna* and all whatever is—is *yajna*. Thus, I hope, I have a key with which to understand the essence of the ancient Indian theatre and of its literature, *i.e.*, drama. If all this is granted, I still am left with the tantalising problem of such "essential" non-essentials as the long list of Sanskrit dramas and their proper evaluation. Several years of teaching Sanskrit drama at the Department of Indology, University of Warsaw, revealed to me the weakness inherent in the way Sanskrit drama is usually expounded. This pattern has been so forcefully established by such scholars as M. Winternitz, A.B. Keith, S.K. De and others, that it is by no means easy to challenge it. Yet I am fully convinced that the time is ripe for such a challenge. It seems to me that the battle should be fought for a completely new set of criteria—or at least substantially modified ones—to apply to the evaluation of a dramatic text. My principal objection to those hitherto applied is that they are haphazard, inadequate, emotional, often incongruous, and mostly utterly subjective. I shall try to substantiate this view, as well as offer some positive suggestions. And indeed, since Sanskrit literary criticism as a whole developed in the first place out of the study of theatrical arts, my suggestions may also be relevant in this entire field.

A well known Polish scholar, J. Krzyzanowski, writes in his *Science of Literature* that: "Literary criticism which is unable to be so fresh and sensitive to view literary works through the eyes of their first critics is not worth

A paper submitted to the International Sanskrit Conference, Delhi, March 1971 entitled Some Aspects Of Sanskrit Literary Criticism.

much." This formula applied to the literary criticism which has accumulated around Sanskrit drama could perhaps lead to too negative a conclusion. The pronouncements regarding this problem made by such scholars as Winternitz and Keith are not altogether in accordance with their practice. Certainly Winternitz stresses that, in order properly to estimate an Indian literary work, it is necessary "to immerse oneself in the spirit of India if only for a while and believe all that Indians believe." But discussing Indian aesthetics, the same scholar seems basically to contradict this earlier statement. For he says, with regard to the *Natyasastra*, that "we have in front of us a decidedly barren science, which is dealing more with classification and schematisation than with an investigation of facts and formulations of principles." When it is no longer a question of paying mere lip-service to Indian literature but making a radical change in the entire manner of reasoning, this is how Winternitz understands his "immersing in the spirit of India"! Nevertheless it would be unjust to discredit all existing criticism only because it is defective. Let me therefore try, before I shall restate my reservations, to analyse what has been achieved in this field.

As a starting point let us use the formulation of the criteria of literary criticism given by Krzyzanowski. In Chapter VIII of his "*Science of Literature*" he says that the criticism of a literary work in its entirety must apply sociological, historical, aesthetic (or formal) and ethical criteria. By sociological criteria Krzyzanowski understands "the duration in time and territorial range of its appreciation." By historical—"the problem of originality, and the problem of setting a given writer against the background of his literary tradition as well as defining his attitude towards it." But in the case of Sanskrit drama this group of criteria has to be applied very cautiously indeed : for, again according to Krzyzanowski, "it is necessary to consider a historical indicator, i.e., the fundamental attitude of the epoch towards literary tradition and the way it understands the problem of originality." Further, by aesthetic criteria the same author understands "the aesthetic peculiarities of formal nature" and "the factors which shape the outer form of the literary work in relation to its inner structure." Finally—by ethical criteria—he understands "the appreciation of a literary work based on the assumption that it always is an expression of some reactions to life. The more they are general, universal, and unconnected with the existences of a particular moment which has given birth to the work in question, the broader, deeper and more universal will be the response they evoke."

Out of the confrontation of this formulae with the criticism which has grown around Sanskrit drama the following conclusions may be drawn: traditional criticism operates mainly with sociological and, above all, with historical criteria—quite often ignoring the indigenous literary tradition and its attitude towards originality. The remaining two groups of criteria—when applied at all—tend to be applied too haphazardly. Moreover, in the case of European scholars, they are applied from the modern,

western point of view: while in the case of Indian scholars, they are applied either in full accord with western standards or, by the very fact of entering into argument with them, accepting their basic premises. It can be safely said that western scholars either ignore the achievements of Sanskrit literary criticism or dismiss it after totally inadequate enquiry. On the other hand, Indian scholars tend to apply these standards in fragmentary and disorderly fashion or allow them to lapse into complete disuse. It is interesting to note that scholars like Wilson, Winternitz, Keith, De and some others, while making a detailed study of the history of aesthetics (often in separate handsome volumes) fail to apply its criteria while actually evaluating the dramas themselves. Indeed some of the statements made by Winternitz and Keith may lead us to believe that they have not fully understood certain aspects of traditional aesthetics. On the other hand, De while writing a complete volume on the history of aesthetics overlooks its achievements to such an extent that he never makes an attempt to use them or even to explain this neglect.

Evidently then both Indian and Western scholars show the same bias towards sociological and historical aspects of the subject while neglecting its aesthetic and ethical ones. Nevertheless it must be admitted that this bias led to considerable achievement in the spheres of criticism usually neglected by traditional Indian scholarship. There have been careful and painstaking investigations of Krzyzanowski's "duration in time and territorial range of appreciation" as well as of chronology and of the degree of originality of individual authors. The purpose of modern criticism has been precise historical and linguistic analysis: and it is thanks to its historical and sociological bias that we can today attempt the chronological presentation of Sanskrit drama. But if we still cannot—especially in the West—reconcile ourselves to peculiarities of style, diction, ethics and in behavioural patterns pictured by the Sanskrit dramas, it is because we still are, it seems, unable to look at them through the eyes of their first critics. We constantly admit that such an attitude is necessary and yet we reject "the eyes" which they have left to us in the form of their ancient aesthetics. Consequently declarations like Winternitz's about immersing oneself in the spirit of India leave the impression of being purely emotional.

In order to make my point clearer let me try—at least briefly—to review the opinions of the acknowledged authorities about one particular Sanskrit drama. True to our principles, let us choose our representative work with the eyes of the earliest (if not exactly contemporary) critic: *kavyasu natakam ramyam tatra ramya Sakuntala*".

Sakunatala is not separately discussed in Wilson's *The Theatre of the Hindus.* But in the course of considering other plays he says that *Sakunatala* cannot give a proper idea of Indian theatre. According to him, it is a mythical and pastoral play which he praises for frank descriptions, tenderness of feelings, delicate beauty of thought and the highest elegance of style. Finally

he remarks that the heroine of this drama is interesting. A. Macdonell showers even more generous epithets upon this drama praising it for "the richness of creative fancy... skill in the expression of tender feeling.., undisturbed harmony of the poetic sentiment..." He concludes that in the drama "every passion is softened without being enfeebled. The ardour of love never goes beyond aesthetic bounds, it never maddens to wild jealousy or hate. The torments of sorrow are toned down to profound and touching melancholy. It is here at last that the Indian genius found the law of moderation in poetry...Kalidasa stands highest in poetical refinement, in tenderness and depth of feeling."

Winternitz tackles the task with great precision. He first discusses the reception of the play in Germany and then he remarks that Kalidasa is the greatest poet. In this context he quotes Goethe's opinion which in itself is the best example of what we could call "critical impressionism". It is to Goethe that we owe such resounding epithets as: unfathomable depth, summit of talent, presentation of natural order, the best way of life, the purest moral endeavour, the most sober divine meditation, etc., etc., Further Winternitz, in analysing the sources of the story, holds that it is the finest work of art that man can imagine. Remarks concerning the popularity of *Sankuntala* in India are followed by the critic's opinion that in Kalidasa's poetry there is no dramatic element, such as it is understood in the West. Next he adds that "whoever would try to measure the depths of this consciously attempted fable-like drama with the yard-stick of Greek tragedy, would be unable to recognise its unequalled beauty!" Alas, in spite of his professions, the critic does not apply any yard-stick other than that of Greek theatre and confines himself to imploring the reader to an admiration for this magnificent work. Finally, after saying that *Sakuntala* has to be narrative in form, he gets on to safer ground in discussing the reception of the play in Europe and listing its Indian versions.

An Indian scholar, S.K. De, begins his remarks about *Sakuntala* by writing that among other works of Kalidasa it "reveals a rare balance of mind, which harmonises the artistic sense with the poetic, and results in the practice of singular moderation," Besides, according to him *Sakuntala* is the full-blown flower of Kalidasa's genius and in it we have a unique alliance of his poetic and dramatic gifts. "As a dramatist Kalidasa succeeds mainly by his poetic power in two respects: he is master of poetic emotion which he can skillfully harmonise with character and action, and he has the poetic sense of balance and restraint which a dramatist must show if he would win success.." Then De offers one of his most bombastic remarks: "we see to best effect Kalidasa's method of unfolding a character, as a flower unfolds its petals in rain and sunshine...there is temperance in the depth of passion, and perspicuity and inevitableness in action and expression, but above all this drama surpasses by its essential poetic quality of style and treatment." These and many more sonorous adjectives are used in order to describe this drama.

A.B. Keith opens his analysis of the *Sakuntala* by saying that "it certainly represents the perfection of Kalidasa's art." After this statement the critic summarises the play and then discusses different Indian versions of it. He ends with the following remarks: "Sakuntala's dawning love is depicted with perfect skill..The king is a worthy hero..His love for his son is charmingly depicted..Sakuntala has suffered tribulation of spirit and gained in depth and beauty of nature..The other characters are models of skilful presentation..Kanva is a delightful figure..The companions of the heroine are painted with delicate taste, both are devoted body and soul to their mistress, but Ansuya is serious and sensible, Priyamvada talkative and gay.. Kalidasa excels in depicting the emotions of love..he is hardly less expert in pathos..the fourth act of the *Sakuntala* is a model of tender sorrow and loving kindness..The humor of the *Vidusaka* is never coarse." Finally the critic writes: "Admirable as is Kalidasa's work, it would be unjust to ignore the fact that in his dramas as in his epics he shows no interest in the great problems of life and destiny..he was incapable of viewing the world as a tragic scene, of feeling any synpathy for the hard lot of the majority of men, or appreciating the reign of injustice in the world. It was impossible to him to go beyond his narrow range.." It has to be admitted that at the same time Keith gives an expert analysis (from the European point of view) of the style and language of the *Sakuntala*: he even accepts certain elements of Indian rhetoric itself—but only because he is forced to do so by the very nature of the Sanskrit language. Yet a strong feeling persists that somewhere the critic must have missed the point.

Unfortunately one of the most recent popular studies of Saskrit literature—Krishna Chaitanya's—offers equally vague statements. For instance: "The play opens with the picture of exultant manhood...Her beauty is tender, fresh and unspoilt like the woodland creepers she affectionately tends every day..Kalidasa's poetic powers are at their best in this play..they are conserved and blended with profoundly moral perception."

In Hindi the situation appears to be almost the name. Thus B. Upadhyaya's *Samskrt Sahitya ka itihas*, which is very popular with college students, adopts the same approach. The important point at which it differs from the criticism written in English is the date of Kalidasa. Apart from that there are also some other differences—and in the comparison Hindi criticism does not always come off the worst. It scores in being substantially based on the categories of traditional aesthetics and to a certain extent, traditional ethics (Although current ethics seem to exert a stronger pull—for instance (*gandhara vivaha*), The advantage of arranging the whole criticism under partly traditional captions like plot, characters beauty (*saundarya-bhavna*), sentiment, and message is nullified by the subjectiveness of the opinions expressed thereby.

Let me close this very brief and obviously incomplete review of the more commonly known, comprehensive works in the field of Sanskrit drama or Sanskrit literature in general. In spite of its brevity I feel that my ana-

lysis does show a prevailing tendency. The remarks made at the beginning can now be restated with greater emphasis. A lot has been done in the sphere of the historical and sociological criteria. These aspects need not be discussed here in detail since they are the core of all contemporary criticism. One might even say that almost everything has been done in this sphere and there can be further progress only if new source material comes to light. But aesthetic and ethical appreciation is still dominated by bombastic generalisation, affected "impressionism", sentimental effusion and, occasionally, tedious journalism.

So far I have only dealt with the negative aspects of the entire problem. But now the question of positive proposals arises. Since hitherto *Sakuntala* has been our testing stone, I shall continue to take this play as an example but due to the limited length of this paper my arguments will have to be presented in a rather sketchy way.

The tools for the formal evaluation of a play have been always ready at hand. Occasionally, and at random, they are picked up by different critics. Yet I am not aware of any effort to apply them consistently. The most important of them is in my view the concept of the five *sandhis*. It seems that this concept has been somewhat misunderstood as far back as the *Dasarupaka*. This is, of course, not a proper place to discuss this problem in detail. I have done so elsewhere. It is enough to say that *sandhis* are the spans of the *itivrtta* (plot), and in this context what should be investigated is their duration, their interrelationship, the way they are bound together into one whole, and their relative importance in the play. They are the most convenient means by which to test the harmony of composition of a particular play. Intimately connected with this problem is the concept of *rasa*. It was Bharatmuni who said that a poet should apply the *sandhyan gas* in such a way that they evoke the proper aesthetic response. Thus the *rasa* aspect of of a play should be discussed after the *sandhis* (or along with them) and only after its dependence on the *sandhis* is clearly understood. It should not be discussed by means of picking out at random odd fragments of text; but it should be discussed as a continuous experience, changing and developing in the course of the plot. Only after these two aspects (*sandhi* and *rasa*) have been thoroughly investigated can the critic proceed to discover other means the author uses to achieve his result.

The next step, in my opinion, would be the investigation of the style of the play, of its merits, shortcomings, embellishments, etc. Here we come to this question: should a play be judged not only by means of standards promulgated in the *Natyasastra* but also from the particular point of view of individual aestheticians (for instance from the point of view of *dhvani* theory)? I would say "yes" to this question—provided the critic himself shares the particular view. It will then be his subjective opinion which may come into play only after exhaustive application of objective standards.

There is only enough space in this paper to present a few of the results of such an investigation of the *Sakuntala*. In the absence of the entire

critical apparatus they may sound less convincing. Nevertheless I would claim that they are less ephemeral than purely subjective impressions—especially as they can easily be checked., rechecked and corrected if necessary by applying the aforementioned concepts (provided, of course, that literary critics will accept them).

But let me try to give substance to the above assertion. The hero's desire to attain the goal is the dominating motif of Act I. We learn about the particular nature of this desire and this goal through the words of the two hermits who bless the king by wishing him a son and successor. The appearance on the stage of Sakuntala and her meeting with the hero intensifies this motif and also adds a distinct erotic hue. Thus begins the play which is not so much a love-comedy as a drama of unfulfilled fatherhood. Act II continues the name motif but simultaneously introduces another one which is a consequence of the initial desire—namely, the motif of effort (*yatna*). And here we enter the second *sandhi*, i.e., *pratimukha*. The king either through his own initiative and/or with the help of propitious circumstances makes a concrete effort in order to fulfil his desire which has now also become Sankuntala's. He assumes an incognito, sends his companions home and, in order to defend the hermits from evil demons, he remains in the hermitage. The effort made on the part of Sakuntala is very delicately embodied in her letter writing. Only one who has never written a love letter without being sure of its reception can question this being an effort This motif continues until the incident of Act III when it transpires from the conversation of her friends that the *gandharva* marriage has been contracted and that Sakuntala has found a deserving husband. In this way this way the second *sandhi* ends and the third *garbha* begins: here also begins the leitmotif which is hope of attainment. The hero and the heroine are married. Sakuntala has conceived. Her foster-father Kanva accepted the union, blessed it, and sent off the pregnant heroine to join her lawful husband. This span of action has already been anticipated by the blessings of the hermits. But now it is the most prominent motif which lasts till the the second scene of Act V, here the king, on seeing the pregnant heroine is constrained by curse of Durvasas to ask bluntly: "*kim idam upanystam*?"

Now the third *sandhi* ends and the sequence of situations which are dominated by the frustration of the attainment begins. As I mentioned, this was anticipated by the Durvasas incident. But what was only a slight apprehension now grows into a real despair. Abandoned, Sakuntala dies—though the Indian tradition disguises it as taking refuge in heaven. The recovery of the ring which restores the king's memory thrusts him down into a pit of abysmal despair. He continues in this state until near the end of Act VI when a messenger from heaven, Matali, appears and implores the king to come to rescue of the gods in their fight with the demons. He invites him to mount the chariot of Indra. This chariot in fact sounds a tragic note: for we must remember that in Indian tradition a heavenly chariot often symbolises death (eg.: dying Duryodhana of the *Urubhanga* has a vision of a

heavenly chariot coming to fetch him to heaven, and Dasaratha of the *Pratimanataka* having heard rumblings of a chariot takes it for the chariot of death). Could we assume that Kalidasa intends to suggest if not death at least a radical change of existence for Dusyanta? Now the intention of the author of the Sakuntala becomes clear. For, unlike Greek tragedy, in Indian drama the end of earthly existence not only does not imply man's final defeat but should not even be called death. Even today the most common appellation of the event is "*svargavasa*"! Sakuntala and Dusyanta will unite in heaven and reincarnate on earth to fulfil their cycle of existence so cruelly (or benevolently?) interrupted by an adverse fate. Act VII delivers the action of the play out of its tragic impasse and the series of situations of this act constitutes the fifth *sandhi*: *nirvahana*—in which the principal motif is the attainment of the goal. Dusyanta recovers his wife., though only in heaven, and finds the desire of his heart—his son! The blessings of the hermits have come to fulfilment and the play ends in integration of the desiring and the desired!

Sakuntala is a very harmoniously built drama. The *sandhis* never end abruptly but smoothly merge into each other. In this way each *sandhi* carries suggestions of the other four so that instead of "Univocality" the play presents a succession of harmonised chords. So harmonious a sequence of events should evoke in a spectator an equally harmonious unfolding of emotional response. By identifying himself with what happens on the stage, he will be carried through a whole gamut of diverse sentiments. Finally he will experience perfect unity and fulfilment—which according to the *Natyasastra* is none other but the sentiment of wonder itself.

To begin with Kalidasa chooses two spheres of emotional response: heroism and love, with a light admixture of laughter. In the *Sakuntala* the rapid flow of heroic emotion comes to an abrupt stop at the outskirts of the hermitage. Before the next dominant emotion sets in with full force there is an emotional hiatus which makes its onset even more dramatic. The next two *sandhis* show the emotion of love growing in strength. Nevertheless there is simultaneously an undercurrent of apprehension which culminates in Durvasas' curse. This brings in a lightening-streak of violent sentiment which seems emotionally to anticipate later developments. By the end of the third *sandhi* the action steadily increases in pathetic sentiment, climaxed in the scene of Sakuntala's departure. The sentiment of laughter meanwhile appears only in occasional flashes. The very nature of the fourth *sandhi* demands a radical change in the emotional charge. In the *Sakuntala* this change is achieved in the scenes at Dusyanta's court and consists of a very rapid intensification of the pathetic sentiment. This sentiment appears on two occasions: once in the words of Sakuntala and the second time in the despair of the hero (the pathos of these scenes is purposely contrasted with the laughter of the fisherman's incident). The last *sandhi* shows the slow rise of the sentiment of wonder which in full accordance with the directive of Bharatamuni ends the play together with reverberations of the pathetic and the heroic.

The above analysis is too brief to be more than a suggestion regarding a possible method of criticism. It may be and should be questioned and corrected. But I would argue that once the method is accepted, discussion need no longer be limited to an exchange of subjective opinions but can lead to ever more precise and minute analysis and description of the emotional contents of a play.

I am not yet quite ready to undertake a detailed discussion of the styles, merits, blemishes, embellishments, etc., as the criteria of literary criticism. Hence I am omitting them for the time being—and also presuming that at least the last three do not require special investigation since they alone have been used in this capacity for centuries. The only remark which I would venture at this stage is that these aspects should not only be exemplified by text-places chosen at random but also that at least one larger portion of the text should be selected for careful analysis of its meaning, structure, expression (i.e., *guna*, *alamkara*, etc.) and the relation between them. If necessary such an analysis should be undertaken for the entire text.

It is now time to consider the last group of criteria, i.e., the ideological ones. The first and foremost task here is to find out how Indian tradition formulates the social and psychological conditions towards human fulfilment. If we survey for this purpose the entire sphere of the Hindu *dharma* we shall find there a concept which is of capital importance for literary criticism. The *purusharthas* lay down certain conditions for human fulfilment. Since a play is a representation of life it follows that the fulfilment of its *karya* (action) must be judged in the light of these conditions. *Karya* is an action prompted by desire, carried on through effort, dwelling in hope of and achievement, suffering frustration an ending in in the light of its relationship to the four *purusharthas*—for they express the fullness of human life. Therefore the traditional *upadesa*, i.e., the moral import of a play should be judged by the intensity of its reflection of one or more of the *purusharthas.*

To make these remarks more concrete, let us once again take recourse to the *Sakuntala.* The achievement aimed for in this play—the common opinion invariably says—is the fulfilment of love in the union of Sakuntala and Dusyanta. Yet if this is so, then why does the play not end with the *dharva vivaha*? The first consumated meeting of the lovers is the climax of an action which has their union as its sole purpose. But this union does not end the play so it cannot be its achievement. As I have said above the achievement of the play which comes right at the end is a son for Dusyanta. Thus the climax comes exactly where it should come, i.e., at the *nirvahana sandhi.* Therefore we can now finally define the play from the point of view of its achievement as a drama of unfulfilled fatherhood. If then *putralabha* is the goal of the play, there can be little doubt that the first *purushartha—dharma*—is the principal one in this case. Yet at the same time it is quite evident that the principal factor through which this is attained is

love. Consequently we may describe the play in question as being *dharma-pradhana* and *kamasrita*. Now having defined it in these general terms, we may try to determine the attitude which the playwright manifests towards such a goal. Till the arrival of the heroine at Dusyanta's court little happens out of the ordinary. Both the departure of Sakuntala from her father's house as well as an apparent neglect of her by the king seem to indicate an ordinary love-story. It is only with the rejection of the hermit's daughter that the action takes a very unexpected and meaningful turn. Sakuntala dies of despair! No amount of soft-pedalling will conceal this fact. But what is death for those who believe in reincarnation? It is an interim *avar-gaxasa*! This is exactly what happens to Sakuntala. And not only to her: the despairing king is also invited to heaven by the gods and the symbol of final departure that we know so well from elsewhere—a chariot of the gods—is despatched to fetch him. True to Bharatmuni's injunction, Kalidasa does not show death on the stage but only departure to heaven. It is there that both Sakuntala and Dusyanta will enjoy the fruits of their union.

So in this light how can we finally describe the message of the play?—That the end of earthly existence does not mean an ultimate defeat, but if man is engaged in the pursuit of his *dharma*, he will overcome not only an adverse fate but death itself will come to him as a loving invitation of gods to share their world till yet one more return to the earth.

DR. CHRISTOPHER M. BYRSKI, Indologist, University of Warsaw, Poland, See "Sangeet Natak" 5