Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 76 (2022)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Plumbing the depths : reading Bhavabhti in seventeenth-century Kerala

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1035035

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Plumbing the depths: reading Bhavabhūti in seventeenth-century Kerala

https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2021-0036
Received August 31, 2021; accepted January 31, 2022; published online July 4, 2022

Abstract: Nārāyaṇa, a student of Mēlputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, wrote a commentary on Rāma's Last Act (*Uttararāmacaritam*) by Bhavabhūti that "must be counted among the more careful and perceptive ever produced for a Sanskrit play" (Pollock). This essay examines the ways in which Nārāyaṇa related local meanings (of words, phrases, sentences, and verses) to the themes of the play as a whole, which Nārāyaṇa called its "deeper meanings." Nārāyaṇa belongs to a tradition of literary commentary in Kerala that combined a sensitivity to and appreciation for dramatic art with deep scholarly knowledge. His attention to the complex emotions of the play's characters, and to the development of heart-rending motifs—reliving the past, betrayed intimacy, the involution and intensification of experience—allows readers to appreciate Bhavabhūti's play as one of the greatest portrayals of the experience of love in world literature.

Keywords: affect; Bhavabhūti; commentary; criticism; Kerala; theater

1 Depth of meaning[1]

"Deep" (*gambhīra-*) is the word that Nārāyaṇa, the commentator on *Rāma's Last Act* (*Uttararāmacaritam*), often uses to describe the poetry of

1 Anand is the primary author of the fifth section ("Reading subtext"), and Andrew is the primary author of the rest, although the article as a whole reflects our shared understanding, gained through two years of reading Nārāyaṇa's commentary together (2018–2020), translating key passages, and several notes and discussions between us. It also reflects, we hope, the joy of reading together, especially the work of an unusually sensitive reader. References to Nārāyaṇa commentary (and his version of the text) are from Sankara Rama Sastri (1932), to which all page numbers refer unless noted otherwise. We use Pollock's (2007) translation of *Rāma's Last Act*

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Bhavabhūti.[2] For centuries, as one anonymous admirer put it, Bhavabhūti's poetry had produced an "indescribable delight within" (*kam apy antarmōdaṁ*).[3] But not until Nārāyaṇa did someone try to explain what was so delightful about *Rāma's Last Act*. Nārāyaṇa was the first student of the famous scholar and poet Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri of Mēlputtūr, and lived in the early seventeenth century.[4] In this paper we will focus on a specific kind of depth that Nārāyaṇa perceptively identifies in Bhavabhūti's play, and a form of deep reading that he practices in his commentary. In Nārāyaṇa's introduction, he says that he "wanted to take a deep dive into the ocean of Bhavabhūti's work that surges with the poet's *rasa*."[5] We will in turn dive into his commentary.

Deep reading is not to be taken for granted in a Sanskrit commentary. Their purposes are often explicitly and narrowly pedagogical. But in Kerala, between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, commentaries had become vehicles of sophisticated literary criticism. A wide swath of Sanskrit literature received the Kerala treatment, including Vaiṣṇava hymns, short-form poems like Kālidāsa's *Cloud Messenger* (*Mēghadūtaḥ*), and longer narratives like the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

It was the stage play, however, that afforded the greatest scope for analysis and criticism. This is hardly a surprise. Stage plays continued to be performed in Kerala, long after performance traditions had died out in other regions. Many Sanskrit works on dramaturgy and related disciplines, from poetics to Prakrit grammar, were studied in Kerala, and in quite a few cases—most famously that of Abhinavagupta's commentary on the *Treatise on Theater* (*Nāṭyaśāstram*)—it was in Kerala alone that these works survived. The interaction between scholastic and performance traditions forms the background of many of the innovative works of criticism in this period, such as the anonymous *Discussion of 'Śakuntalā'* (*Abhijñānaśākuntala-carcā*). Sometimes this interaction takes center stage, as it were: *Goading the Actors* (*Naṭāṅkuśaḥ*) is a diatribe, by a scholastic critic, against the innovations introduced

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throughout this paper, sometimes with small modifications. We cite Sanskrit text in the ISO-15919 system of transliteration, even when the source edition uses a different system, for compatibility with other Indian languages besides Sanskrit. We give personal names with diacritics (in contrast to the style of Pollock's translation) and we translate the titles of Sanskrit works and give the Sanskrit title in parentheses on first occurrence.

2 Mostly in the verses he uses to close each act, e.g. on p. 146 (act 3) and p. 273 (act 7). Nārāyaṇa was not alone in this impression. Another commentator, Vīrarāghava, similarly talked of the "depth" of the poet's ideas (*bhāvasya tu gabhīratvāt*) and speech (*gambhīrō girāṁ bharaḥ*, both from Ratnam Aiyar and Parab 1903: 178).

3 Kosambi and Gokhale 1957: 292 (v. 1698).

4 Colophon: [...] *śrīnārāyaṇakavivaraprathamāntēvāsi* [...] (p. 274); see Kunjunni Raja 1980: 149. Nārāyaṇa was a Nambudiri Brahmin from Vaḷarkṣagrāma (Veḷḷāṅṅallūr).

5 [...] *śrībhavabhūtihṛdrasaparīvāhē nibandhāmbudhau yat satyaṁ vijigāhiṣaiva* [...] (p. 2).

by Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers. An intimate knowledge of and experience with the stage play, supplemented by a wide range of literary and scientific references, is evident in the many commentaries produced in this period: Pūrṇasarasvatī on Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī and Mādhava* (*Mālatīmādhavam*), Mānavikrama and Viṣṇu on Murāri's *Rāma Beyond Price* (*Anargharāghavam*), Nārāyaṇa on Mahēndravarman's *The Hermit and the Harlot* (*Bhagavadajjukam*), Abhirāma on Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*, Siṁhadāsa and Anantadāsa on Rājaśēkhara's *Karpūramañjarī*, Sāhityamalla on the same poet's *Pierced Statue* (*Viddhaśālabhañjikam*), Govindāmṛta on *The Rise of Wisdom Moon* (*Prabōdhacandrōdayaḥ*), and anonymous commentaries on the *Śakuntalā* and the *Crown Jewel of Amazement* (*Āścaryacūḍāmaṇiḥ*).[6]

A commentator's task, in the broadest terms, is to allow someone else to understand the meanings of a text. But meanings, of course, exist on multiple levels. There are the meanings of individual words and phrases, then the meanings of sentences and turns of discourse. We can also, more controversially, speak of the meanings of the forms and devices that structure a text. In the case of a stage play, these may be the division into acts, or the forms of emplotment described in works of dramaturgy, or instances of foreshadowing or ring composition.[7] Beyond these elements of structure, we can then ask about the meaning of the work as a whole. In Indian criticism, questions of meaning at the level of the work are usually framed in terms of *rasa*, a kind of emotional tenor.[8] Ānandavardhana's influential view was that *rasa* should organize a literary work from the top down, or in other words, a literary work was most successful when every single aspect of it—from its sonic qualities to its plot and characterization—played a role in the development of a specific *rasa*.[9] As some modern critics have noted, however, the language of *rasa* itself, and the identification of "stable emotions," "stimulant factors," "transitory emotions" and so on that it implies, is not necessarily the most suitable language for eliciting the ways in which the emotional tenor of a work is developed. We will argue here, based on Nārāyaṇa's reading, that the powerful emotional effects of *Rāma's Last Act* depend on more abstract elements of meaning, which we will call "themes," that suffuse the work as a whole. We take these themes to be the "deeper meanings" that appear in the title of Nārāyaṇa's commentary, *Lamp for the Deeper Meanings* (*Bhāvārthadīpikā*).[10]

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6 Kunjunni Raja 1980: 245. See Mainkar 1971 for several of these works.

7 On emplotment, see Kane 1983.

8 For a survey of some of the discourse around this all-important term, see Pollock 2016.

9 McCrea 2008 (see especially ch. 4, "Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* and the Teleology of Poetic Language").

10 The term *bhāvārthaḥ* has senses that go beyond its constituents (*bhāva-* = "being," "emotion," "existence," *artha-* = "meaning," "purpose," "aim"). It was used by Jain commentators, including Haribhadra (8th c. CE), to identify the "real purport" or "inner meaning" of a text, as opposed to its literal meaning.

Nārāyaṇa, like most commentators, models a process of understanding for the reader, whereby one starts with literal word meanings and descends to progressively deeper levels of meaning:

> Without understanding the literal meanings (*vācyārtha-*),
> it would be a far cry to determine the overall meaning (*tātparya-*),
> to say nothing of those deeper meanings (*ākūta-*)
> buried in the poet's signature expressions.[11]

But this descent only takes us halfway around the hermeneutic circle. It is, after all, in light of the deeper meanings of the text (*bhāvān gūḍhān*, v. 20, p. 2) that the overall meaning of individual phrases and verses can be understood. In this way the reader must access the depths of Bhavabhūti's thematic and affective concerns before ascending once again to understand his "signature expressions." Or, to repurpose the titular metaphor of the commentary, these concerns act as a lamp that illuminates all of the other levels of meaning. In this essay, we will examine this illumination at all stages in the hierarchy of meaning: first at the level of words and phrases, which Nārāyaṇa consistently rephrases to elicit their broader thematic significance and emotional tenor; then at the level of individual verses, which Nārāyaṇa interprets to resonate with the play's larger thematic concerns; and then at larger levels of structure. But this is not all: at certain key moments, Nārāyaṇa notes where the meanings that are internal to the play are undermined by an understanding of reality that comes from elsewhere. In these moments of metalepsis, Nārāyaṇa broaches an altogether different reading strategy, where an external set of references holds the key for the interpretation of the play. This is a strategy that he almost certainly learned from the earlier commentator Pūrṇasarasvatī, who sees the characters of Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī and Mādhava* as typical of certain ethical and spiritual orientations. And Nārāyaṇa develops this strategy in greater detail in another commentary, on *The Hermit and the Harlot* (*Bhagavadajjukam*), attributed to the Pallava king Mahēndravarman.

What, specifically, are the "deeper meanings" of Bhavabhūti's play? Almost any reader will acknowledge that *Rāma's Last Act* is centrally concerned with a specific form of remembrance: not just remembering the past, but experiencing it again and again. The emotions of the present—guilt and grief, in Rāma's case—are layered on those of the past—intimacy and trust—and create, by their combination, complex and volatile affective states. Among the major themes of *Rāma's Last Act* one must include, then, *reliving* the past. The first half of the play is essentially a meditation on this theme: Rāma is first made to relive the time that he spent in

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11 *vācyārthabōdhavirahē dūrē tātparyanirṇayaḥ ~ vacanaprauḍhidurbōdhēṣv ākūtēṣu tu kā kathā* ~~ (v. 12, p. 2).

Pañcavaṭī with Sītā when he walks through the painting gallery in the first act; then, in the second act, he is lured back to Pañcavaṭī in quest to punish the low-caste ascetic Śambūka; and in the third, on his way back to Ayōdhyā after visiting Agastya's hermitage, Rāma travels once again through Pañcavaṭī, where his memories—and the ghostly presence of Sītā—reach a literal fever pitch of intensity.

We can take an example from the second act, where Rāma looks upon Janasthāna and says: "I relive the events that once occurred as if they were right before my eyes."[12] Nārāyaṇa perceptively notes that the counterfactual reading induced by "as if" does not apply to the main verb, "relive" (*anubhavāmi*). For Rāma really does experience those events. As Nārāyaṇa explains, here and elsewhere, "reliving" the past is like a recognition ("*this thing* I am experiencing now is *that thing* I experienced previously"), except that the "that" part slips away (*vigalita-tad-aṁśa-*), and all that remains is the vivid experience of an object without reference to past time.[13] Nārāyaṇa attends to the figures of speech in this verse, and sees in them a reflection of this thematic concern with reliving the past. First he notes that the use of two verbs ("I gaze ... I relive") meets the definition of the figure of speech called "joining comparables" (*tulyayōgitā*), so that the action of reliving is presented as equivalent to the action of gazing—the relevant sense here, of course, being its immediacy. Second, he notes that the use of "as if" indicates the use of the figure called "seeing-as" (*utprēkṣā*), and argues, in an aside, that "seeing-as" need not involve the imputation of sentient psychological states onto non-sentient beings.

But it is what Nārāyaṇa says next that is really remarkable. Often Nārāyaṇa will introduce a bit of dialogue with a long explanation of the character's emotional state, including any relevant portions of the narrative. Setting up the root text is a standard technique in Sanskrit commentaries (informally called *avataraṇikās*), but Nārāyaṇa's setups are quite unique, and evoke the long *nirvahaṇam* or "flashback" on the occasion of a character's entrance in Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances. Here is how he introduces Rāma's next comment:

> Rehearsing (*anusandadhāna-*) every single thing that had happened, as if he were immersing himself in them again and again (*nimajjanōnmajjananyāyēna*), from the moment Kaikēyī was instigated by Mantharā, to abandoning his beloved wife, Rāma reflects on how Sītā had determined to follow him into the terrifying forest, though she could not tolerate even the slightest filament of the softest flower falling upon her, and it becomes clear that her love for

12 *paśyāmi ca janasthānam* [...] *pratyakṣam iva vṛttāntān pūrvān anubhavāmi ca* (2.17, Pollock 2007: 150–151).

13 ***anubhavāmi*** *vigalitatadaṁśatayā pratyēmi* (p. 81).

> him was extraordinary. Troubled in his heart more than ever, he says, **"She really loved me."**[14]

Nārāyaṇa's setup contextualizes Rāma's remark by connecting it to several thematic concerns of Bhavabhūti's. One is the "reliving" of past experience that Rāma had just mentioned, framed here as a process of "rehearsal" of one's memories. This process is conscious, although Rāma may not have conscious control over it. Nārāyaṇa compares it to dunking oneself in a body of water repeatedly. This "dunking principle" (*nimajjanōnmajjananyāya-*) could easily be applied to much of the first half of the play, where characters are repeatedly pulled back into their pasts, triggered by familiar sights, sounds, and other traces. The other major thematic concern is the emotional intensification that results from this process. In *Rāma's Last Act*, characters cannot really "relive" the past, because the past is irrevocably changed by the present. The layering, involution, and repetition of experience produces emotions that are bewilderingly intense.

Rāma goes on to say: "Here are those very forests, for heaven's sake. What could be more terrifying than this?"[15] Nārāyaṇa's first maneuver is to take the proximal demonstratives ("here" and "this"), as he will usually do, as indicating a failure of verbal reference: "it is beyond what the senses can apprehend and what speech can express."[16] While this strategy is probably inspired by other commentators (see below, p. 14), it recognizes Bhavabhūti's global concern with the impossibility of expressing certain emotional states. The deixis of "here" and "this," in other words, is not merely spatial or temporal; by saying "here are those forests," Rāma is pointing to an unspeakable effect that they have on him in the present. Secondly, Nārāyaṇa notes that "this" (in the phrase "what could be more terrifying *than this*?") is singular, and hence cannot refer to the forests, which had just been mentioned.[17]

Nārāyaṇa systematically notes passages in the play where characters relive their past. It bears mentioning that this theme of "reliving," of a present experience transporting us into the past, has important metapoetic implications. Nārāyaṇa does not say so explicitly, although he comes close in one passage in the play's first act. When Sītā looks upon a painting wherein she is depicted entering the Southern Forests, she says "I see it with my own eyes."[18] The setup Nārāyaṇa provides is as follows:

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14 *atha mantharāprōtsāhitakēkayēśvarasutāprathamanibandhanān priyatamāparityāgaparyantān sarvān api vṛttāntān nimajjanōnmajjananyāyēnānusandadhānō raghupatir mṛdulataraśirīṣakusumakēsaralavaparipatanam apy asahamānāyāḥ sītāyāḥ ghōrataravanavāsānuvṛttivyavasāyēna parisphuṭaṁ svaviṣayam anurāgātiśayam anucintya nitarāṁ parimūḍhahṛdaya āha* — ***priyarāmēti*** (p. 81).

15 *ētāni nāma kāntārāṇi. kim ataḥ bhayānakaṁ syāt.* (Pollock 2007: 150–151, modified because he does not translate *ataḥ*; note also his text reads *ētāni tāni*).

16 *vāgindriyātivartinīty arthaḥ* (p. 81).

17 We ourselves are not convinced that *ataḥ* must always have singular reference.

18 *pekkhāmi … attaṇō akkhīhiṁ* (p. 31).

> When I first came to live in the woods, I was absolutely delighted to enter the Southern Forest because of this kind treatment that was so characteristic of my husband, and so helpful to me [viz. shading me with palm leaves]. And now, even though that experience is nothing but an image in the gallery, and even though it happened long ago, I am experiencing it (*anubhavāmi*) as if it were happening right now, since there is no apparent difference between reality and representation (*bimbapratibimbayōr abhēdapratibhāsāt*).[19]

When we watch a play, we are experiencing a "representation," although not a straightforwardly mimetic one, as Bhaṭṭa Tauta reminds us in his famous critique of Śrī Śaṅkuka.[20] But in some subjective aspect, the distinction "slips away," to use a phrase that Nārāyaṇa also uses of the blurred distinction between present and past experience. Here Sītā, in Nārāyaṇa's reading, feels the distinction slipping away in terms of "appearance" (*pratibhāsa-*) and, consequently, "experience" (*anubhava-*). But just moments later, when Lakṣmaṇa sees a painting of Śūrpaṇakhā, the same phenomenon—the capacity of a representation of the past to trigger experience in the same way as a present reality—leads to an embarrassing "upswelling of fury" (*amarṣavēgam*), as Nārāyaṇa says.[21] Representations *of* a past reality can have effects *in* a present reality.[22]

That the underlying themes of *Rāma's Last Act* might have metapoetic implications is hardly surprising. Scholars have rightly noted Bhavabhūti's propensity for making metapoetic statements using the language of *rasa*.[23] Nārāyaṇa noted the same tendency, and like modern scholars, he tried to reconcile it with the prevailing view of Sanskrit literary criticism that good poetry will "show" its *rasa* rather than "tell" it. In a crucial verse that introduces the play's most emotionally intense act (3.1), the river spirit Muralā says:

> Rama has been filled with the *rasa* of pity (*karuṇō rasaḥ*),
> kept hidden by his profound demeanor,
> the sharp pain of it held deep within
> like a clay pot baking in embers.[24]

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19 *vanavāsē hi pūrvaṁ paramānukūlapriyatamaparicitatathāvidhōpacārapuraskārēṇa dakṣiṇāraṇyapravēśād ānandaparavaśā param abhūvam. idānīṁ punar anubhūtasya tasya pratibimbagatatvē 'pi bimbapratibimbayōr abhēdapratibhāsād atikrāntam api tathāvidhaṁ dakṣiṇāraṇyapravēśam ētatkālīnam ivānubhavāmīti bhāvaḥ* (pp. 31–32).

20 Pollock 2016: 183–187.

21 p. 34.

22 Compare the stanza in Bilvamaṅgala's *Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛtam* (2.72 [Wilson 1975]), in which young Kṛṣṇa listens to the bedtime stories of Rāma, his former incarnation. The moment Rāvaṇa kidnaps Sītā in the story, Kṛṣṇa suddenly jumps up and yells out to Lakṣmaṇa for his bow.

23 Pollock 2007: 38–44; Tubb 2014: 401, 410.

24 Pollock 2007: 165; *anirbhinnō gabhīratvād antargūḍhaghanavyathaḥ ~ puṭapākapratīkāśō rāmasya karuṇō rasaḥ ~~*.

Nārāyaṇa's first attempt at explaining this verse simply notes that Rāma's grief (*śōkaḥ*) has been transformed into the *rasa* of pity (*karuṇaḥ*) thanks to the "commonization" of other aesthetic factors (*vibhāvādi-*), according to the "standard model" of aesthetics found in Mammaṭa's *Illumination of Literature* (*Kāvyaprakāśaḥ*).[25] But he hesitates, because Mammaṭa had said that *rasa* cannot be expressed in words, "not even in your dreams." The word *rasa* here must therefore be used in a loose sense, referring not to the audience's experience, but rather to Rāma's grief. And although emotions in a character, too, really ought to be "shown" and not "told," nevertheless Nārāyaṇa perceptively finds a warrant for the poet's choice here: Rāma's grief *cannot* actually be shown, and certainly not by means of the aesthetic factors that typically suggest grief (such as torpor, wailing, and so on), because Rāma has intentionally suppressed those reactions, as the verse expressly indicates.[26] From here, we could take one further step, although Nārāyaṇa himself did not do so: Bhavabhūti's pointed use of language to describe the inner states of his characters comes from an insistence on the *interiority* of emotional experience, and a sense that external signs—including, finally, language itself—will fail to convey its true depth and complexity.

We do not want to overstate the role that *rasa* plays as a critical category in Nārāyaṇa's commentary. Grief and longing, in the form of the *rasa*s called "the pitiful" (*karuṇaḥ*) and "the erotic thwarted" (*vipralambhaśr̥ṅgāraḥ*), have top billing in the play. But Nārāyaṇa is interested, too, in the more fundamental affective states with which both of these *rasa*s are associated. The play itself thematizes the indeterminacy of *rasa*s: Can we call what Rāma feels for Sītā "grief" if we know she isn't really dead? Does Rāma himself really think that Sītā is dead? Nārāyana, however, points to a particular quality that unifies the emotional landscapes of the pitiful and the erotic thwarted. Both of them are "sweet" (*mādhuryam*), in the specific sense of "heart-rending" that Ānandavardhana had assigned to this term (*ardratām yāti … adhikam manaḥ*). When justifying

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25 *ēṣōktiḥ dhīrōdāttaguṇagaṇōpalakṣitasya raghunāthasya tathāvidhaḥ śōkāvēgaḥ sādhāraṇīkr̥tanikhilavibhāvādiparikaraḥ sakalapramātr̥janasthāyicittavr̥ttyāsvādāparaparyāyakaruṇarasaparipāṭīm anupraviṣṭa iti dyōtanārtham. tathaiva sakalapramātr̥gatasyābhivyaktāvasthasyaiva sthāyinō ratyādikasya vigalitavēdyāntaratvēna rasanīyatvād rasatvōpapattēḥ* (p. 93)*:* "This statement serves the purpose of indicating that Rāma, who is known to have all the qualities of the 'steadfast and noble' type of hero, is so agitated by his sorrow that the whole complement of aesthetic elements is 'commonized' and this sorrow reaches the stage of the pitiful *rasa*, in other words when all of the viewers savor their own stable internal states; for it is only then, when its state is manifest, that the stable emotion such as desire within all of the viewers is 'tasted,' since all other objects of knowledge have fallen away, and it can then become a *rasa* ('taste')."

26 *svaśabdēna śr̥ṅgārādiśabdēna vā 'bhidhēyatvaṁ niṣiddham iti vibhāvādivirahād abhivyajyamānasya rāmabhadrasya sthāyinaḥ karuṇarasaśabdābhyām atrābhidhānaṁ "rasādilakṣaṇas tv arthaḥ svapnē 'pi na vācya" ity ālaṅkārikaparivr̥ḍhasya kāvyaprakāśakārasya vacanēna na viruddham iti bōddhavyam* (pp. 93–94).

Bhavabhūti's decision to write a play about Rāma's abandonment of Sītā, which at first glance is a depressing, embarrassing, and inauspicious topic, Nārāyaṇa quotes Ānandavardhana's comment that the two *rasa*s of "the erotic thwarted" and "the pitiful" are those wherein this "heart-rending" effect is at its absolute highest. Bhavabhūti thus selected an episode which would reveal Rāma and Sītā's love for each other in the most intense way possible.[27] Nārāyaṇa notes in his introduction the heart-rending effect that the play had on him as a reader: "It is easy to slip up at every word (or: step) when your heart just melts at the sweetness of the way this master poet writes."[28]

The "heart-rending" effect of the play on the audience is an example of the principle that we discussed above: there is no apparent difference between reality and representation. Throughout the play, it is the characters' hearts that are rent. This takes us to one further theme of *Rāma's Last Act*: that of familiarity (*paricaya-*). Bhavabhūti uses this word very often, and Nārāyaṇa notes its connection in these contexts with intimacy (*visrambha-*) and trust (*viśvāsa-*).[29] Familiarity produces a sense of ease and comfort. But it outlasts it. When characters encounter people, places and things with which they are familiar, they do not "relive" the past exactly as they had experienced it. Rather than experiencing a sense of ease and comfort, they are reminded precisely of its absence. Hence Rāma says (3.32): "These long-familiar sights are utterly undoing me."[30]

Finally, we will mention one theme that is implicated in most of those we've already mentioned: reliving the past, heart-rending affects and familiarity. That is repetition, or as we will call it, "thickening." The idea is that successive iterations of an experience will form a kind of feedback loop with prior iterations, heightening the intensity of each subsequent experience. Each of Bhavabhūti's characters insistently finds their experiences mirrored, represented, and replicated, and in a "swelling tide of feeling… approaches the limits of consciousness."[31] In our view, iteration of this sort is the central organizing concept of *Rāma's Last Act*. It plays a role both in the structure of the plot (Rāma is forced, for example, to return to Janasthāna not once but twice), the device of the portrait gallery in the first act

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27 *nāyikānāyakayōr apītarētarānurāgasphuṭīkaraṇasyaiva rasikajanarasāyanatvāt, tasya ca vipralambhaparamakāṣṭhāyām ēva saṁbhavāt, priyatamāparityāgasamabhivyañjitasya ca karuṇasya prakarṣavattvāc ca sītāparityāgarūpam itivṛttaṁ rasikajanaśikhāmaṇir bhavabhūtiḥ paryagrahīt. uktaṁ ca—'śṛṅgārē vipralambhākhyē karuṇē ca prakarṣavat ~ mādhuryam ārdratāṁ yāti yatas tatrādhikaṁ manaḥ' iti* (p. 4). The quotation is *Light on Resonance* (*Dhvanyālōkaḥ*) 2.8.

28 v. 11: *kavivaryōktimādhuryamasṛṇīkṛtacētasām ~ sulabhāni bhavēyur naḥ skhalitāni padē padē ~~* (p. 2).

29 See pp. 127, 130, 135, 201, 241.

30 Pollock 2007: 209 (*ciraparicitās tē tē bhāvāḥ paridravayanti mām*).

31 Shulman 2001: 262.

and the play within a play in the seventh, in the unique "responsion" of the play's construction (discussed in greater detail below), and in a great deal of the descriptive "background" of the play's events.

Consider, for example, a verse from the play's second act. Right at the beginning of this act, Rāma kills Śambūka as punishment for practicing religious austerities without the entitlement afforded by birth in the three upper castes. That distasteful deed is over in moments. Once slain, Śambūka becomes a divine being who, for the remainder of the act, plays the role of Rāma's tour guide. He points out to Rāma that they are in the Daṇḍaka forest, where Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa spent a good part of their exile. When Rāma begins to become wistful about that time, Śambūka points out the various appealing sights and sounds of the region. He says (2.21):

> On the mountains there are caves
> where bear cubs have their lairs,
> and their growls are amplified
> by their resounding echo;
> amplified as well is the scent
> of succulent *śallakī* leaves,
> cool and sharp and tangy, torn
> from stems and scattered by elephants.[32]

The phrase that Pollock renders as "amplified by their resounding echo" says, more literally, that the growls (*ambūkṛtāni*) of the bear-cubs in the caves, amplified by their own echoes (*anurasitagurūṇi*), take on a kind of "thickness" (*dadhati … styānam*). The word "thickness" (*styānam*) appears in a different form in the second half of the verse. While it literally refers to something becoming solid, becoming thicker, denser, and more compact, in this verse it is used of things that cannot literally become solid, of sounds in the first half and of smells in the second. And the "thickening" itself is thickened, in the specific sense we sketched above, by virtue of its doubling in this verse.

We cannot say whether Bhavabhūti intended, with this passage, to give a name to the kind of iteration that happens throughout *Rāma's Last Act* and at various levels. For us, it is difficult to not see an image of his own poetics in this verse, or in a later verse (5.6) that describes "the twanging sound from [Lava's] bow that's amplified (*ujjṛmbhayan*) by the deep roar of war drums—a cacophony vaster than elephant herds trumpeting in mountain caves."[33] Indeed, in view of this

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32 Pollock 2007: 153 (*dadhati kuharabhājām atra bhallūkayūnām anurasitagurūṇi styānam ambūkṛtāni ~ śiśirakaṭukaṣāyaḥ styāyatē śallakīnām ibhadalitavikīrṇagranthiniṣyandagandhaḥ ~~*).

33 Pollock 2007: 287: *āgarjadgirikuñjakuñjaraghaṭāvistīrṇakarṇajvaraṁ jyānirghōṣam amanda-dundubhiravair ādhmātam ujjṛmbhayan.*

phrase, and the magical *jṛmbhaka* weapons around which the plot of the play ostensibly revolves, "proliferation" (*jṛmbhaṇam*) might even be a better description than "thickening" (*styānam*) of Bhavabhūti's poetics.[34] Several aspects of Bhavabhūti's style can be seen in terms of a "proliferation" in this sense, including, for example, his propensity to cram as many emotions as possible into every stage direction.[35]

Although Nārāyaṇa does not go as far as we do in wringing metapoetic significance out of these expressions, he is sensitive to the density of meanings that form the background to every statement in *Rāma's Last Act*, to an "an entire world of visions, memories, wishes, fantasies, perceptions... obsessive projections, lost chunks of stories—everything, in short, that must have existed in the awareness of each of its characters and that can be conjured up by the actor as he shapes or kneads the empty space around him."[36] These complex internal states, along with the recurrent themes and motifs discussed above, constitute the "deeper meanings" that Nārāyaṇa is concerned to expose in his commentary. As we noted, these meanings are reflected at the level of individual words and expressions, at the level of the verse, and at higher levels of structure. We will now review the way that Nārāyaṇa handles this upwelling of meaning at each of these levels in turn.

2 Reading words

One of Nārāyaṇa's goals is to explicate the "overall meaning" (*tātparyam*) of Bhavabhūti's expressions. This is a technical term of Indian theories of language, found throughout Mīmāṁsā, Nyāya, and Alaṅkāraśāstra. It is the "all-things-considered" meaning, which takes context and presuppositions into account, in contrast to the "literal meaning."[37] One domain of language where this contrast is particularly pronounced is that of indexical expressions: words that require some reference to context in order for their reference to be fixed, including

34 The name of the weapons is only mentioned once in passing in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.27.8). We believe Bhavabhūti chose these weapons to be the focal point of his play because of their name. Note, too, that the ultimate source of the weapons, according to the play, was Kṛśāśva, which happens to be the name of the author of a set of rules for actors (according to *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 4.3.111).

35 See, for example, *salajjāsmitasnēhakaruṇam* (p. 247; "with an embarrassed smile, affection, and pity," Pollock 2007: 353).

36 Shulman 2012.

37 See Ollett, this volume.

demonstratives ("that," "this," "here," "now," etc.). Commentators will often specify the *referents* of anaphoric pronouns like *idam* ("this") and *tat* ("that"). But Nārāyaṇa practices a very specific form of "indexical resolution."[38]

First of all, Nārāyaṇa is familiar with the more technical aspects of the theory of indexical usage, which he almost certainly knew from the work of Mahimabhaṭṭa. According to Mahima, the demonstrative word *tat* ("that") ought to be used only when it has a *definite* referent that is known to the listener. This can happen, in turn, when (a) its reference is fixed by a relative clause; (b) its referent is already well-known to the listener (*prasiddhaviṣaya-*); (c) its referent is something of which the listener has direct experience (*anubhūtaviṣaya-*); or (d) its referent is evoked previously in the discourse (*prakrāntaviṣaya-*).[39] Nārāyaṇa will explain which of these conditions apply in order to license the demonstrative. But merely identifying a demonstrative's referent and licensing conditions is rarely enough for Nārāyaṇa. Since he is interested in the play's "deeper" meanings, he often goes a step further, and identifies the affects underlying a character's use of indexical expressions. Let us look at two examples.

In the very first line Rāma speaks in the play, he says to Sītā, "it wasn't easy for *those* elders to leave us."[40] Why does Rāma say "those"? Nārāyaṇa offers two explanations. One possibility is that Rāma refers to some specific elders "who left us to return to their own town." But he considers the possibility that "those" simply refers to Janaka, Sītā's father, whom we know from the prologue has just left, and whom we assume to have been mentioned previously in one of Rāma's attempts to console Sītā, presumably just before the curtain rises on Rāma and Sītā. Hence it will "refer" to Janaka, but even more than that, it will "evoke" (*parāmarśaka-*) the boundless affection for Janaka that Rāma had observed in Sītā.[41]

Later in the first act, when reminded of the early days of their married life, Rāma says, "those days are gone."[42] This is clearly a case where the demonstrative "those" is licensed by the fact that its referent has been directly experienced, as Nārāyaṇa notes. But he once again takes several further steps:

> The word "those" refers to the days that were previously experienced, the first beginnings of a succession of pleasures that just accumulated without interruption. The plural suggests that

38 The term is from Levinson 2000: 177.

39 Dwivedī 1964: 199.

40 Pollock 2007: 75, with "those" added; Pollock translates *tē hi guravō na śaknuvanty asmān vimōktum* (p. 74), whereas Nārāyaṇa reads *ta ēva guravō na śaknuvanty asmān vihātum* (p. 14).

41 *ya ēvāsmān vihāyētaḥ svanagaraṁ prati prasthitā iti sidhyati. sītāparisāntvanavacanaprakrāntajanakaviṣayatvāt tacchabdasya tattadavasthāparidṛṣṭasnēhavaivaśyaparāmarśakō vātra tacchabdaḥ* (p. 14).

42 Pollock 2007: 87 translates "days now gone forever" (*tē hi nō divasā gatāḥ*, p. 27).

> they were increasingly delightful because all of their desires kept being fulfilled. And the past tense form ("gone") suggests sadness at the fact that those days have not continued into the present.[43]

The use of this one word, "those," thus invites Nārāyaṇa to reflect on almost all of the themes that we identified above: reliving the past, yet at the same time being affectively cut off from it, and the thickening or intensification of experience.

If words like "that" are linked with definiteness, and therefore with the contents of experience, then what about words like "this"? We might be inclined to see these sets of words as simply distal and proximal variants of the "same" demonstrative. But the tradition Nārāyaṇa followed, which once again harks back to Mahima, did not see them this way. For this tradition, words like "this" (*ētat*, *idam*, and also *adaḥ*) are "true" demonstratives, which linguistically encode a kind of pointing or demonstration. Hence whereas "that" refers to something that is *already* present in the discursive context, "this" is a linguistic attempt to *get something into* the discursive context. True demonstratives therefore hold out the possibility of *referential failure*. Bhavabhūti is interested in, if not obsessed with, the various ways in which language might fail to adequately represent feelings, and hence readers of Bhavabhūti, including Nārāyaṇa, have taken a special interest in moments of referential failure.[44]

Pūrṇasarasvatī dutifully noted expressions indicative of referential failure in his commentary on Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī and Mādhava*: when Mādhava says, for example, "some fever this is that tortures me as it spreads," he says that "some" (*kō 'pi*) indicates that it is unspeakable (*anirdēśyaḥ*), and "this" indicates that "it can only be understood from experience" (*anubhavaikagamyaḥ*).[45] The latter is Pūrṇasarasvatī's standard explanation for true demonstratives in Bhavabhūti's play. Nārāyaṇa follows Pūrṇasarasvatī quite closely in this regard. Phrases such as "like this" (*īdṛśa-*) or "this" (*ētat-*) are regularly explained as pointing to something that "can only be known from experience."[46] Similarly, expressions such as "like that" (*tādṛśa-*/*tādṛś-*) suggest to Nārāyaṇa that what the speaker is trying to refer to is "beyond any conceivable comparison" or "inconceivable beyond the realm of speech or the senses."[47]

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43 *tacchabdēna nirantarasamudīyamānasukhaparamparānidānabhūtāḥ pūrvānubhūtā divasāḥ parāmṛśyantē. bahuvacanēna tattadīpsitasampattyā tēṣām uparyupariramaṇīyatvaṁ vyajyatē. ktapratyayēna ca punarāvṛttiśūnyatayā viṣādō vyajyatē* (p. 27).

44 See Tubb 2014: 395, 398–399.

45 Mahādēva Śāstrī 1953: 101: *prasarati parimāthī kō 'py ayaṁ dēhadāhaḥ*, and Pūrṇasarasvatī's comment, *kō 'py ity anirdēśyaḥ, ayam anubhavaikagamyaḥ*.

46 See p. 88 (*idam anubhavaikagamyam*), 114 (*īdṛśī anubhavaikagamyā*), 119 (*īdṛśaḥ anubhavamātragamyaḥ*), 201 (*ētasmin anubhavaikagamyānubhāvē*); see also our discussion of *ataḥ* above (p. 6).

47 See p. 114 (*tādṛśam upamānacintātikrāntam*), p. 153 (*tādṛk asaṁbhāvanīyatayā vāgindriyāviṣayam*).

Thus Nārāyaṇa, like Pūrṇasarasvatī, sees demonstratives not just as ways of "referring to" (*nirdiś-*) things, but also as ways of *avoiding* the mention of those same things. When Kausalyā says in the fourth act that "these dreams are all shattered," Nārāyaṇa notes that "the word 'these' refers, among other things, to being reunited with Sītā, but they are not mentioned by name because she is hesitant to bring up things that will never happen."[48] A similar kind of avoidance happens right before this, when Ṛśyasṛṅga is reported to have said, "what had to happen has happened." Here, as Nārāyaṇa points out, the speaker is obviously trying to avoid explicitly referring to (*nirdiś-*) Rāma's abandonment of Sītā, due to the pain that it would cause Kausalyā.[49]

Nārāyaṇa's attempt to read individual words in context goes far beyond indexical expressions narrowly construed. A word like "king" might not change its referent across different contexts of use, but it certainly has shades of meaning that are activated in certain contexts. When Rāma gives an attendant the fatal command to have Sītā dropped off in the woods, he prefaces it by saying, "this novice king Rāma has an order for you."[50] Nārāyaṇa's expansion of this brief but portentous phrase is worth quoting:

> "This": he is about to do something cruel. "Novice": a beginner, since he has resolved to do something bad. "King": since he is devoted to winning over the hearts of the people (according to the standard explanation for the word "king," *lōkaṁ rañjayatīti rājā*), he is not in a position to distinguish between what could and could not have happened. "Rāma": he has taken birth [as Rāma] for no other reason than to experience suffering. Now here the word "Rāma" is not really necessary, so its literal meaning [i.e., referring to the person of Rāma] is set aside, and it is shifted to another meaning. Hence this is the type of suggestion wherein the literal meaning is shifted to another sense.[51]

Nārāyaṇa goes on to quote Ānandavardhana's *Light on Resonance* (*Dhvanyālōkaḥ*) 2.1, which defines this type of suggestion. Ānandavardhana's own example of this, immediately following the quoted passage, is another instance where Rāma talks

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48 *ēta iti buddhisthā ayōdhyāgamanarāmabhadramukhadarśanasītālābhādayō nirdiśyantē, alabhyavastuparikīrtanakātaryāt saṁjñayā parigaṇanābhāvaḥ* (p. 168); we again have modified Pollock's translation of Kausalyā's line (p. 259).

49 Pollock 2007: 257 (*bhavitavyaṁ* [not read by Pollock] *tathēty upajātam ēva*); *sītāparityajanam iti śēṣaḥ, kaṣṭataratvād ēva nāmnā nirdēśābhāvaḥ* (p. 168).

50 Pollock 2007: 115, with "this" added (*ēṣa tē nūtanō rājā rāmaḥ samājñāpayati*); Sankara Rama Sastri 1932: 53 does not read *tē* (nor does Nārāyaṇa).

51 *ēṣaḥ nṛśaṁsakarmasamudyuktaḥ nūtanaḥ asadvyavasāyād abhinavaḥ rājā lōkacittārādhanaparatayā śakyāśakyavivēkaśūnyaḥ rāmaḥ duḥkhānubhavāyaiva labdhajanmā. atra rāmaśabdō nirupayōgitayā mukhyārtham unmucyārthāntaram abhisaṁkrāmatīty arthāntarasaṁkramitavācyō 'yaṁ dhvanibhēdaḥ* (pp. 53–54). For a similar example, see p. 110 (on Vāsantī's remark *kathaṁ dēvō raghunandanaḥ*).

about himself ("I am Rāma and can bear it all").[52] Now Rāma, as a character, is particularly prone to making statements about himself, especially in the third person. And conversely, this type of suggestion is associated rather closely, thanks to Ānandavardhana, with these statements of Rāma's. We read the general phenomenon as a kind of metalepsis, where Rāma serves as a model of conduct, not to *readers* or *viewers* of the story, but to *characters* within the story, and most strikingly, to Rāma himself. (This metalepsis is made possible by Rāma's insistent cultivation of reputation, which creates an ideal "Rāma" onto whom the real Rāma of the story is, to use Ānandavardhana's words, "shifted.") In this particular example, however, Nārāyaṇa takes "Rāma" to mean the person who is bound to experience grief as a result of his decision to abandon Sītā. This is a contextual reading that takes account, in particular, of the immediately preceding word: Rāma is a "king," and his royal obligations put him in ethically impossible situations.

As this example shows, names like "Rāma" can have different meanings that are activated in different contexts. One other example pertains to the character most widely known as "Axe-Rāma," Paraśurāma. The negotiations around this highly ambivalent character have played out, in part, through his names, one of which he shares with the hero of the Rāmāyaṇa. Bhavabhūti, in what is almost certainly a metaliterary reflection on this ambivalence, stages a debate between Lava and Candrakētu about Paraśurāma's greatness, and hence about the greatness of Rāma, who defeated him in a one-on-one fight. In the course of criticizing Paraśurāma for violating the prerogatives of caste, Lava calls him Jāmadagnya. Nārāyaṇa reads this itself as a criticism, since it names him as the son of the famously ill-tempered and vindictive Jamadagni, and thereby makes him a party to his father's sins of uxoricide and infanticide. Candrakētu, in rebutting this criticism, calls him Bhṛgunandana, "the delight of Bhṛgu's line," which Nārāyaṇa takes to indicate that he is "untouched" by those sins.[53]

Finally, we come to words that have no referential function whatsoever, quite unlike the demonstrative words with which we began this section. Particles, including exclamations, do not have a referential meaning—there is nothing that is the direct reference of the word "alas," for instance—but they do clearly index the speaker's emotional state. These "discourse markers" (including *nu*, *khalu*, *ahō*, *hanta*, etc.) are glossed with a word that indicates the *general* affective or cognitive

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52 *avivakṣitavācyō yas tatra vācyaṁ bhaved dhvanau ~ arthāntarē saṁkramitam atyantaṁ vā tiraskṛtam ~~* (quoted on p. 54). The citation is *Light on Resonance* 2.1, translated in Ingalls, Masson and Patwardhan 1990: 202. The example is translated on Ingalls, Masson and Patwardhan 1990: 204.

53 *jāmadagnyaḥ aśāntatanayaḥ. anēna mātṛvadhabhrūṇahatyādipātakasambandhitā prakāśyatē* [...] *bhṛgunandana ity anēna pātakasaṁsparśābhāvō vyajyatē* (p. 214).

condition that occasions its use.[54] Nārāyaṇa goes further, however, in providing much more *specific* conditions. One example is when Rāma says, in verse 6.33, "Where again will I ever find … such unanimity of two hearts?"[55] The collection of particles used here (*kva nu khalu*) indicates to Nārāyaṇa not just "wondering" (*vitarkē*), but specifically "wondering that derives from the impossibility of imagining that it could ever be attained again."[56] Another example comes from the second act, when Rāma's realization that he is in Pañcavaṭī occasions a long monologue. Toward the end, he says (2.28): "How can evil Rāma … either behold Pañcavaṭī or pass by without paying his respects?"[57] Now it is clear enough that a question is being asked here. But it is not a rhetorical question, in Nārāyaṇa's reading. The question arises because Rāma is actually incapable, in his current emotional state, of resolving to do either one of these contradictory actions.[58] Beholding Pañcavaṭī would cause him great pain because it will remind him of Sītā, whom he cruelly abandoned, but passing it by would dishonor her memory, and also perhaps deprive him of a pain he wants to feel.

Nārāyaṇa pays particular attention to exclamations. This makes sense, since Nārāyaṇa is interested in the emotions of the play's characters, and exclamations usually index a particularly intense emotion. Thus in many cases he will provide a long "setup" for just a single word. The forest-spirit Vāsantī, for example, prefaces what has become a famous verse (*vajrād api kaṭhōrāṇi* etc., 2.7) with an exclamation of disappointed surprise, *hanta bhōḥ* (loosely equivalent to "My god" or "Jesus Christ" in vernacular English). Why is Vāsantī surprised?

> Because she had been imagining how very cruel Rāma must have been to have abandoned Sītā like that, but then she hears that Rāma had performed a sacrifice with a replica of this very Sītā. Even Brahmā's wisdom could hardly fathom the mind (*cittavṛtti-*) of Rāma in his

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54 We limit our discussion here to "discourse markers" (really "discourse particles") in the sense of Schiffrin 1987. These comments do not apply to the inclusive particle *api* and the exclusive particle *ēva*, or to coordinating particles.

55 Pollock 2007: 351 (*kva nu khalu tad aikyaṁ hṛdayayōḥ*).

56 *kva nu khalv iti bhūyaḥprāptyasambhāvanānuprāṇitē vitarkē nipātasamudāyaḥ* (p. 245). The traditional analysis of particles has several shortcomings, one of which, on evidence here, is that the specific contribution of individual particles to the overall meaning is often not discussed. Here the *kva* ("where?") is where we get the overall sense of "wondering," but *nu* adds an element of polarity reflected in Pollock's translation ("ever"), which is reinforced by *khalu*, which indicates a degree of obviousness.

57 Pollock 2007: 159 (*rāmaḥ kathaṁ pāpaḥ pañcavaṭīṁ vilōkayatu vā gacchatv asambhāvya vā*). Note that Rāma refers to himself in the third person, as we have come to expect (see p. 15 above). Here too Nārāyaṇa understands "Rāma" not to refer exclusively to the bearer of the name, but to an "inconsiderate" (*asamīkṣyakārī*) person (p. 89). This is an understatement, given that Rāma just previously admitted to killing his beloved (*nāśitapriyatamaḥ*).

58 *katham iti manasō vidhēyīkaraṇāpaṭutvajanitavitarkē* (p. 89).

> truly incomparable greatness. To corroborate this with a general statement she says: "My god..." Here the group of particles (viz. *hanta bhōḥ*) indicates her disappointed surprise (*anuśaya-*) with having thought that she could understand something that, in fact, cannot be understood at all.[59]

This is a particularly compelling example of Nārāyaṇa's sensitivity, since he captures the affects that the story of Rāma generates in others—in Vāsantī here, although she stands in for readers and spectators like us—while at the same time reflecting on one of the play's key themes: the difficulty, indeed impossibility, of bringing internal states to full expression.

We conclude this section with one example where, in accordance with the poetics of "thickening" we identified previously, particles are used in quick succession, and the affects they index build up into an emotional crescendo. In the sixth act, Kuśa, who has not yet been definitely identified as Rāma's son, recites two verses from a long poem that his teacher, Vālmīki, has been composing about Rāma. These verses just happen to be about the love that Rāma and Sītā felt for each other. These verses from the "Rāmāyaṇa," by the way, seem to prefigure Bhavabhūti's poetics of inexpressibility, since they declare that only Rāma and Sītā themselves know the extent of their love for each other—but they only "seem to," because Bhavabhūti has in fact rewritten a crucial verse of the Rāmāyaṇa.[60] In response, Rāma speaks a series of short sentences, each of which begins with a particle. We give Pollock's translation:

> How awful! (*kaṣṭam!*) Another savage blow to my heart's soft core. Oh (*hā*) my queen, this is how it really was. Alas (*ahō*) for the affairs of life, their incoherent, upside-down events, that lack all *rasa*, that end in frustrated love, that bring only burning pain.[61]

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59 *atha tathāvidhapriyatamāparityāgānusārēṇa rāmabhadrasyātinṛśaṁsatām utprēkṣya punar api sītāpratikṛtisahāyatayaiva kratvanuṣṭhānaśravaṇād anitarasādhāraṇamahimnaḥ tasya cittavṛttiparijñānāya śatadhṛtēr api manīṣā na pārayatīti sāmānyēna samarthayati—hanta bhō iti. atra durbōdhē vastuni subōdhatāpratyayajanitānuśayē nipātasamudāyaḥ* (p. 72).

60 *hṛdayaṁ tv ēva jānāti prītiyōgaṁ parasparam* (p. 244). Pollock (2007: 431) compares *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.75.15–16 (Bhatt 1960). Verse 16 is very different from the verse Kuśa quotes, and indeed it has a completely opposite message, insofar as it refers to the "manifestation" of what is concealed inside (*antarjātaṁ api vyaktam ākhyāti hṛdayaṁ hṛdā*). We believe Bhavabhūti included these two verses as a "test" of his readers: the first verse obviously recalls the sequence that ends the first *kāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but the second is an original take on the same theme that integrates Bhavabhūti's poetics of inexpressibility. Nārāyaṇa evidently failed this test, since he did not know where in the first *kāṇḍa* these verses were taken from (shown by his gloss of *anyatamē* as *kasminn api*—the 76th *sarga* is indeed the "last" in the Critical Edition—as already noted by Pollock 2007: 431).

61 Pollock 2007: 351 (*kaṣṭam! atidāruṇō hṛdayamarmōdghātaḥ. hā dēvi ēvaṁ kila tad āsīt. ahō niranvayaviparyāsavirasavṛttayō vipralambhaparyavasāyinas tāpayanti saṁsāravṛttāntaḥ*). Sankararama Sastri 1932: 244 reads the last sentence as *ahō niranvayaviparyāsavṛttivipralambhāḥ stutiparyavasāyinas tāvakāḥ saṁsāravṛttāntāḥ.*

The last sentence is beset with textual and interpretive difficulties, but we focus here on the three exclamations. Nārāyaṇa understands *kaṣṭam* in the sense of "pain" and "unbearability," and *hā*, interestingly, as a "response" associated with the emotion of despair.[62] But these emotions build up to a pitch with *ahō*, which is generally associated with affects related to pain (*khēdē*) and surprise (*vismayē*). This "building up" is thematized in Nārāyaṇa's explanation:

> Rāma keeps rehearsing (*muhur muhur anusandhānāt*) his past experience—when the first buds of Sītā's incomparable love and affection for him blossomed into their profound intimacy—which was triggered by the recitation of the previous two stanzas. His heart is, as a result, helpless to resist the unbearable pain generated in that moment, and since he cannot even momentarily pull himself together, he says in despair (*saviṣādam*)—"**Oh!**"[63]

Nārāyaṇa's comment clearly shows that the pain (*kṛcchram*) and despair (*viṣādaḥ*) indicated by the previous two exclamations has now developed into a state of depressive paralysis. It is memory that is responsible for this development, which Nārāyaṇa describes precisely and effectively, as he usually does. In eliciting the role that memory plays in Rāma's breakdown, he also ties this moment to several key themes, including intensification through repetition (here "rehearsal," *anusandhānam*) and the betrayal of intimacy (*visrambhaḥ*).

3 Reading verses

Nārāyaṇa's greatest strength as a commentator is his ability to read individual verses, or bits of prose dialogue, in light of the play's "deeper" meanings, the themes that run throughout the play. In this enterprise, he combines his careful reading of individual words, discussed above, with attention to how the various parts of a verse fit together, and that too on several different levels.

As a first example, which deploys several of the strategies discussed in the previous section, we can consider a passage in the fourth act. There Kausalyā has just fainted upon seeing Janaka after many years. Arundhatī speculates (4.12) that she had fainted because all of her fond memories came rushing back at the sight of Janaka, which "bewildered" her (*vimūḍhā*) in the grim circumstances of the present. In response, Janaka blames himself for being aloof from his sister-in-law, and speaks the following verse (4.13).

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62 *kaṣṭam iti kṛcchrē asahyatāyāṁ vā* […] *hā viṣādānubhāvaḥ* (p. 244).

63 *ēvaṁ ślōkadvayapaṭhanād udbuddhānām ātmanā pūrvam anubhūtānāṁ sītāyā niratiśayaprītipraṇayavaśōnmiṣitānāṁ tattādṛśavisrambhavilasitānāṁ muhurmuhuranusandhānāt tatkṣaṇapravṛttadussahataravēdanāvivaśahṛdayaḥ kṣaṇamātram api svōcchvasitam asahamānaḥ saviṣādam āha—**ahō** iti* (p. 244).

> Esteemed kinsman, dear friend, my very heart,
> my joy incarnate, the whole point of existence,
> my body and soul and whatever else is dearer —
> what wasn't he to me, glorious king Daśaratha?[64]

At first glance, this verse seems to just be a hyperbolic appreciation of Kausalyā's deceased husband, something we would be more likely to encounter at a funeral than in one of Bhavabhūti's plays. But each phrase in the verse includes the demonstrative *tat*. This verse thus mirrors the structure of Arundhatī's, and thus we are invited to read it as a chain, not just of identifications, but of specific memories. Moreover, we might wonder whether this is *merely* a random assemblage of memories, or whether there is some significance to the memories being arranged in precisely this way.

Nārāyaṇa announces his approach of this verse before he begins his commentary:

> What is described in this verse is a sequence of cognitions that arose previously with reference to Daśaratha, starting from Sītā's selection of Rāma as her husband, and progressing to Janaka's greater and greater familiarity with Daśaratha (*paricayakrama-*) in various conditions. Since he is remembering Daśaratha's good qualities, each one more special than the last, the word *tat* in each sentence refers back to something Janaka has experienced.[65]

This is indeed a compelling reading, since the verse does appear to tell the story of how Daśaratha and Janaka's friendship develops through time, starting from being in-laws (*sambandhin-*), then friends, then sources of joy to each other. Nārāyaṇa has a bit of trouble applying this logic to every phrase in the verse, but he tries nevertheless: the "body" is more fundamental than "the whole point of existence" because it is in fact the basis without which the profound love expressed by the latter phrase cannot exist.[66] For the idea the soul is more dear to a person than the body, Nārāyaṇa produces an apposite quotation from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.[67]

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64 Pollock 2007: 253 (*sa sambandhī ślāghyaḥ priyasuhṛd asau tac ca hṛdayaṁ sa cānandaḥ sākṣād api ca nikhilaṁ jīvitaphalam ~ śarīraṁ jīvō vā yad akhilam atō 'nyatpriyataraṁ mahārājaḥ śrīmān kim iva mama nāsīd daśarathaḥ ~~*).

65 *anēna ca ślōkēna svayaṁvarataḥ prabhṛti paricayakramavaśād uttarōttaraṁ tattadavasthāsu daśarathaviṣayatayā pūrvam upajātaḥ pratītikramō varṇyatē. tattadguṇavaiśiṣṭyānusmaraṇād ēva prativākyam anubhūtaparāmarśakaḥ tacchabdaḥ* (p. 163). He does, however, note that *sa* in *sa cānandaḥ* has a "shifted" sense, referring to a special kind of joy that is not based on heedlessness (*sa iti pramādarahitatādyartham abhisaṁkrāmati*, p. 163).

66 *ēvam asya hētuphalarūpābhilaṣitātmakatām upapādya paramaprēmāspadatayā punar api prādhānyam upapādayati—**śarīram** iti. itarēṣāṁ punas tadarthatvam ēvēti bhāvaḥ* (pp. 163–164).

67 *Bhāgavata* 10.14.54 (Jalan 1964), cited on p. 164.

Nārāyaṇa's approach effectively ties this verse to the larger themes of memory and familiarity, discussed above. Moreover, Nārāyaṇa shows here that he is committed to reading each verse as a unified whole, which means taking seriously the order of its constituents, and puzzling out the relationship that they have to each other. His idea that each of Daśaratha's qualities is "more special than the last," for example, leads him to interpret the phrase *api ca*, which we would normally understand as a plain conjunction ("and" or "moreover"; Pollock leaves it untranslated), as having some contrastive force ("in fact").[68] This strategy—of trying to make explicit the implicit transitions between parts of a verse, in view of an understanding of the verse as a whole—is one that Nārāyaṇa applies again and again, as we will see.

Nārāyaṇa notes the figures of identification (*rūpakam*) and overstatement (*atiśayōktiḥ*) in this verse, although we would not really miss anything important about the verse if we read past them. Figuration, however, is elsewhere very important to Nārāyaṇa's goal of determining the "overall meaning" of Bhavabhūti's expressions. This is because Bhavabhūti repeatedly deploys certain figures of speech in order to convey the confusion and turmoil that his characters experience. We briefly discussed 2.17 above (p. 5), where the figures of "joining comparables" (*tulyayōgitā*) and "seeing-as" (*utprēkṣā*) are combined. In what follows, we will survey several examples of a figure that Bhavabhūti has made his own.

The third act of the play, titled "The Shadow" (*chāyā*), is its emotional center. Here we find Rāma wandering through Pañcavaṭī—for the third time, if you're counting—with "no companion besides his grief" (*śōkamātradvitīyasya*). Or so he thinks. Sītā has been brought to the same place, but she remains in a spectral form. She trails Rāma like an unseen shadow (*chāyā*). Sītā, for her part, is trailed by the river Tamasā, also invisible to Rāma, while Rāma is trailed by an old acquaintance, a forest goddess named Vāsantī. The focus of this act is not on the forward motion of the plot, but the complex internal states of Rāma and Sītā. Vāsantī almost sadistically directs Rāma's attention to sights and sounds that trigger his memories of Sītā, and Sītā's spectral presence undermines the distinction between his recollection of the past and experience of the present. And at the same time, Tamasā helps Sītā to articulate her conflicting feelings toward Rāma. The act is interspersed with verses that speak of Rāma and Sītā's intense emotional turmoil. And many of these verses use what we will call here "a chain of approximations," one of Bhavabhūti's trademarks.[69]

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68 *apicēti viśēṣē* (p. 163).

69 See Tubb 2014: 400–401.

Nārāyaṇa was not the first to appreciate the form and function of this device in Bhavabhūti's plays. That credit must go to an earlier commentator from Kerala, Pūrṇasarasvatī, in his reading of a famous verse from Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī and Mādhava* (5.10, *līnēva*...). The basic idea is this: the verse presents a series of images that are each intended to approximate the way a character feels ("she is dissolved, as it were, in my heart; reflected, as it were; engraved, as it were," etc.), and while no relationship between images is stated, Pūrṇasarasvatī prefers to read them as chained, such that each successive image is introduced upon the failure of the preceding image to adequately represent the character's feelings. He explains that each image reinforces the vividness with which Mādhava "sees" Mālatī without seeing her; a reflection can disappear, writing can be erased, an engraving can fade, and so on, until finally she is woven into the very threads of his thoughts. In providing such a reading, Pūrṇasarasvatī notes that it is not only more fun for the commentator to interpret the images as chained, but it offers an overarching purpose to an otherwise "pointless proliferation" of images.[70] We use the word "approximation" for the figure of *utprēkṣā*, technically a "seeing-as," in which the poet or character imagines one thing as something else, explicitly flagged as imagination with the phrase *iva* or "as it were." For these approximations highlight the inadequacy or failure of even vivid poetic language to express complex or intense emotions. This is a theme that runs throughout Bhavabhūti's work.[71]

Nārāyaṇa, almost certainly influenced by Pūrṇasarasvatī, keeps an eye out for verses where, in his words, one approximation "sets up" (*utthāpakaḥ*) another one, which arises in consequence of the earlier approximation's being thrown into doubt.[72] This formal observation follows from a more general appreciation of Bhavabhūti's poetics of emotional ineffability: when we are confused and overwhelmed, we struggle to know exactly what is going on, and in order to make sense of our experience, we reach for successive analogies to approximate it.[73] Nārāyaṇa hence employs this interpretive strategy in a wide variety of contexts, not only when we have an explicit "chain of approximations," but also, for instance, when we have a chain of contradictions.

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70 Pūrṇasarasvatī on *Mālatīmādhava* 5.10; see Mahādēva Śāstrī 1953: 268 (*anayā pūrvapūrvākāṅkṣānivāritayōtprēkṣāśṛṅkhalayā* [...] *atiśayitō 'rthaḥ sahṛdayahṛdayahārī samarpyatē. parasparanirapēkṣatayā vyākhyānē kaś camatkāraḥ? utprēkṣābāhulyaṁ nirarthakam āpadyēta*).

71 Expressions of indeterminacy, such as "a certain something" (*ko 'pi*), "perhaps this, or maybe that" (*vā ... vā*), or "beyond definition" (*paricchēdātītaḥ*) are everywhere in Bhavabhūti. Cf. *Rāma's Last Act* 1.35–36, 3.39, 6.11, and *Mālatī and Mādhava* 1.33–34.

72 *sa* [i.e., *utprēkṣālaṅkāraḥ*] *ca saṁdēhānuprāṇitānām utprēkṣāntarāṇām utthāpakaḥ* (p. 237, in reference to 6.22, a good example of the figure).

73 *jijñāsitaṁ cārtham indriyasaṁmōhavaśād anavadhāraṇīyatayaiva tādṛśapratītyutpādakatattadātmakatayōtprēkṣatē* (p. 236).

Consider Nārāyaṇa's explanation of 3.31, when Vāsantī asks Rāma to think about what happened to Sītā when he had her dropped in the forest:

> My heart breaks in sheer agony,
> but doesn't split apart,
> my crippled body is delirious
> but doesn't lose consciousness,
> an inner fire enflames by limbs
> but doesn't reduce them to ash.
> Fate strikes me to the quick
> but doesn't end my life.[74]

The word "but" (*tu*) signals a contradiction within each line, as Nārāyaṇa observes. But what prevents this verse from being, to paraphrase Pūrṇasarasvatī, a pointless proliferation of contradictions? It is that each "sets up" the following one. The first line has Nārāyaṇa ask: why shouldn't Rāma get rid of his feelings by retreating into unconsciousness, as people undoubtedly do? The second line ("my crippled body…") explains why that is impossible, but in turn raises another question: won't his misery lead, eventually, to some relief in the form of death? The third line ("an inner fire…") rules this out as well, while prompting the question: what prevents him from dying? This, finally, is answered by the last line.

Vāsantī then leads Rāma to a place that reminds him of a moment, specific yet mundane, when he and Sītā were together. He responds with the following outburst (3.38):

> Oh my queen, my heart is breaking,
> my body's bonds are coming undone,
> the world is empty for me, and I burn
> with an unrelenting fire within.
> My very soul, submerged in blinding
> darkness, is drowning helplessly,
> utter delirium envelopes me.
> What am I, cursed I, to do?[75]

Even though there is no explicit indication of a sequence here, Nārāyaṇa understands one here, primed, perhaps, by the waves of successive and increasingly devastating experiences described in the earlier verse (3.31). "From 'breaking'

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74 Pollock 2007: 207 (*dalati hṛdayaṁ gāḍhōdvēgaṁ dvidhā tu na bhidyatē vahati vikalaḥ kāyō mōhaṁ na muñcati cētanām ~ jvalayati tanūm antardāhaḥ karōti na bhasmasāt praharati vidhir marmacchēdī na kṛntati jīvitam ~~*); see Sankara Rama Sastri 1932: 126–127.

75 Pollock 2007: 213 (*hā hā dēvi sphuṭati hṛdayaṁ dhvaṁsatē dēhabandhaḥ śūnyaṁ manyē jagad aviratajvālam antarjvalāmi ~ sīdann andhe tamasi vidhurō majjatīvāntarātmā viśvaṁ mōhaḥ sthagayati kathaṁ mandabhāgyaḥ karōmi ~~*).

onward," he says, "we are given to understand that Rāma's suffering increases in intensity with each successive experience."[76]

We have seen how, in Nārāyaṇa's convincing analysis, the emotions of Bhavabhūti's characters, and their attempts to make sense of them, arise in quick and tumultuous succession. As Nārāyaṇa notes in one crucial passage, they are almost, but only almost, simultaneous. Toward the beginning of the third act, when Sītā first sees her husband after twelve long years, she too is overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. "Though he disowned me like that with no reason," she confesses, "when I see him in this state my heart reacts in ways I cannot understand."[77] Tamasā tries to articulate exactly what she is experiencing (3.13):

> Cold because of your despair,
> bitter because of his unkindness,
> in a state of near paralysis
> at meeting after long separation;
> forgiving because of your goodness,
> with deep sympathy for all your husband's pathos,
> melted by love—such is your heart
> and all, it seems, in a single moment.[78]

This verse starts off, as many of Bhavabhūti's do, by tumbling through feelings breathlessly, one after another after another. A careful reader like Nārāyaṇa would therefore be inclined to read it as a chain, where each image undermines the previous one—if it weren't for the arresting final phrase. What does it mean to say these qualities exist "all, it seems, in a single moment"? Nārāyaṇa answers:

> It is not the case that each of these states is predicated on the suppression of the previous. Instead, it is "all, it seems, in a single moment." "It seems" means "precisely." Here there is a fusion of the ornaments illumination (*dīpaka*) and overstatement (*atiśayōkti*), since actions such as **coldness** that arise sequentially end up describing a single thing simultaneously.[79]

Properly speaking, emotions do not, and cannot, arise simultaneously, since they each have specific conditions, intensities, durations, and so on. But this is nevertheless what Nārāyaṇa takes Tamasā to be saying here, for two subtle

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76 *atra prasphuṭatītyādinā svānubhavakramēṇa santāpavēgātiśayaḥ pratipādyate* (p. 132).

77 Pollock 2007: 184 (*tadhā nikkāraṇapariccāiṇō vi ēdassa evvaṁvidhēṇa daṁsaṇēna kīlisīō via mē hiaāvatth[a] tti ṇa āṇāmi*).

78 Pollock 2007: 185 (*taṭastham nairāśyād api ca kaluṣaṁ vipriyavaśād viyōgē dīrghē 'smiñ jhaṭiti ghaṭanāt stambhitam iva ~ prasannaṁ saujanyād dayitakaruṇair gāḍhakaruṇaṁ dravībhūtaṁ prēmṇā tava hṛdayam asmin kṣaṇa iva ~~*).

79 *na ca pūrvapūrvōpamardanōttarōttaram ētā avasthā ity āha—**asmin kṣaṇa ivēti**. ivaśabdo 'vadhāraṇē. atra kramabhāvinīnāṁ taṭasthādirūpāṇāṁ kriyāṇām ēkasmin kārakē yaugapadyēna samāvēśanād dīpakātiśayōktyōḥ saṁkaraḥ* (p. 109).

reasons. One is the structure of the verse, "illumination," where a single phrase ("such is your heart") is construed simultaneously with multiple other phrases. And the other is a counterintuitive reading of the tag "it seems" (*iva*). This tag usually serves as an acknowledgement that something is merely imagined, a mere approximation of experience. But here, Nārāyaṇa says, it is a marker of subjective certainty: "it seems" that way because these contradictory emotions are, from Sītā's first-person perspective, activated simultaneously. Nārāyaṇa makes clear that they are in fact contradictory. Sītā may be inclined to be cold to or angry with Rāma but the "state of paralysis" she undergoes is, in Nārāyaṇa's reading, defined by the wiping out of all such tendencies to act and feel in a certain way.[80]

On notable occasions (one of which we have seen above, p. 20), Nārāyaṇa will provide a "top-down" theory of a verse. In a particularly poignant verse in the first act (1.39), we see Nārāyaṇa the critic at his most expansive and open-hearted, allowing the moment of savoring to extend for as long as he can bear to relish it. The verse, which powerfully identifies the play's larger message, captures a quiet acknowledgment of Rāma's love for Sītā, who lies reposed on his chest, a peace soon to be shattered by an inevitable separation.

> Identity in joy and sorrow,
> consonance in every condition,
> where the heart can find respite,
> whose rasa old age cannot spoil,
> what alone abides as time
> removes all veils and pure love ripens—
> that singular blessing is only bestowed
> on a good man, and only then with luck.[81]

Bhavabhūti tells us that he is playing with the language of non-dualist metaphysics with the very first word of the verse, *advaitam*. He peppers the verse with references to the Advaitic concepts of "enduring" (*anugataṁ*), of "states of being" (*avasthā*), and of "veiling" (*āvaraṇa*). Curiously, Nārāyaṇa does not take the opportunity to decode these Vedantic references. Instead, he pauses to take a breath before diving back in, and reconstructs for us what Rāma is thinking in this moment:

> Rāma's heart has spontaneously plunged into the ocean of Sītā's good qualities. He recognizes her incomparable love for him, indicated by her long sojourn to the ends of the earth at his side without regard for her physical well-being. It's as if the events of the last fourteen years, triggered by the gallery viewing, were taking place right in front of him. He remembers the

80 ***stambhitaṁ*** *nirvikāraṁ vigalitanikhilasaṁskāram ity arthaḥ* (p. 108).

81 Pollock 2007: 111 (*advaitaṁ sukhaduḥkhayōr anugataṁ sarvāsv avasthāsu yad viśrāmō hṛdayasya yatra jarasā yasminn ahāryō rasaḥ ~ kālēnāvaraṇātyayāt pariṇatē yat snēhasārē sthitaṁ bhadraṁ tasya sumānuṣasya katham apy ēkaṁ hi tat prāpyatē ~~*).

> particular calamity that befell her due to his own neglect, and his helpless attempts to call out for her. He wonders how he became so dear to this noble-born woman, the exemplary heroine. His thoughts are tossed around by fleeting emotions: disgust, piteousness, strength, torpor, delight, anxiety, memory, reticence, confusion, doubt, resolve, despondency, grief, wonder.[82]

From the outset, Nārāyaṇa identifies the main themes of the play: reliving, familiarity, and intensification. Having just witnessed his own story in the portrait gallery, Rāma recalls the tragic events that brought him and Sītā closer together. He can't quite believe that she could be so attached to him. His mind runs through a rapid series of mixed emotions, some positive but many rueful. Nārāyaṇa explains why Rāma experiences each of these fleeting emotions, a carefully curated list from the thirty-three available.[83] Rāma shifts from his reverie as Sītā stirs in her sleep. He zeroes in on the scene right before him:

> He, the supremely self-possessed, ideal hero, and she, the ideal heroine. Nestled up against him, she is enveloped by a mixture of shyness, happiness, stupor, trembling, perspiration, and exhaustion. Pregnant with his true heir, she is weary with the weight, and for that very reason, especially beautiful. She experiences the relief of sleep upon his chest. On the terrace of his lofty palace, in the city that he rules with full sovereignty, he witnesses her through degrees of an ambrosial *rasa* that he has anxiously sought for a thousand eons, and his sense of fulfillment is enhanced. Hearing her mumble in her dream, and afraid to lose her, he holds her gently with a soft caress of his hand, so as not to disturb her sleep. As if in a moment of madness, he hopes that what he is experiencing right now, which transcends the joy of unity between the human being and Brahman, will never fade for the two of them.[84]

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82 *ēvaṁ svata ēva sītāyā guṇagaṇārṇavanimagnahṛdayaś citradarśanōdbuddhacaturdaśasaṁvatsarasvavṛttatayā pratyakṣam iva tasyās tattatpradēśēṣu parityaktasvaśarīraṁ sthirānuvṛttisūcitaṁ svaviṣayam anurāgātiśayam upalabhya svapramādād ēva tasyās tādṛśaṁ vyasanam anucintya tasyām apy aśaktisamudghōṣaṇādisvavyāpāram anusmṛtya tasya ca śuddhavaṁśasamudbhūtāyāḥ samagranāyikāguṇagaṇamahitāyāḥ hṛdyalabdhapadatāṁ cākalayya nirvēdadainyadhṛtijaḍatāharṣacintāsmṛtivrīḍāmōhavitarkamativiṣādaśōkavismayādivyabhicārivargataraṅgitāśayaḥ* [...] (p. 47).

83 For example, "Memory is the collapsing of several previously experienced events in the mind on account of the intensity of the experience. Reticence is the absence of assertiveness that results from reflecting on his own cruelty, among other things. Doubt is wondering how he is going to experience joy when reuniting with someone he had abandoned" (*anubhavadārḍhyād anubhūtānām avasthāntarāṇāṁ sātatyēna manasi sannidhānāt smṛtiḥ. svanaiṣṭhuryādiparyālōcanayā dhārṣṭyābhāvō vrīḍā* [...] *kadā mayā tyaktaviyōgasaṅgamasukham anubhavitavyam iti vicāras tarkaḥ* [p. 50]).

84 *paramadhīrōdāttaḥ paramānukūlo mahānāyakaḥ tām ēvōttamanāyikāṁ svasannikarṣād vrīḍāharṣajaḍatāvēpathusvēdasādādibhir āliṅgitāṁ satsantatigarbhāṁ garbhapariśramālasām ata ēva viśēṣamanōharāṁ svavakṣasi svapnasukham anubhavantīṁ nirjitasvārājyē svapurē samuttuṅgasaudhōparivātāyanasannikarṣē sahasrayugaparitṛṣitapīyūṣarasakramēṇānubhavan paribṛṁhitanirvṛtis tasyāḥ svapnapralāpaśravaṇād viyōgaṁ prati adhikakātaraḥ san nidrābhaṅgabhayēna mṛdutarakaratalaparāmarśanēnāliṅganam ācarann unmatta ivānubhūyamānāyā nirjitajīvaparaikyasukhāyā daśāyāḥ svayōr aparicyutim āśaṁsatē—**advaitam** iti* (p. 47).

Nārāyaṇa captures both the tenderness and fragility of this moment, as Rāma watches Sītā who looks to him more beautiful than ever. He could not be happier. Sītā is his, the city is his, and his long search is over. Yet the threat of separation looms. Hoping against hope, Rāma verbalizes the experience, as if to crystallize it in time and forestall the inevitable. This is madness, Nārāyaṇa notes, but when your love transcends the greatest happiness you could possibly imagine, what wouldn't you do to hold onto it? From the lover's perspective, a tender moment like this is more precious than the highest spiritual fulfillment. Nārāyaṇa's deep dive into Rāma's thoughts allows him to explore the emotional ambivalence generated by the play on the whole in the setting of a single verse.

Nārāyaṇa will often turn to parallel passages in other works to explain certain ideas or conceits. His discussions do not, in our view, provide evidence for a clear sense of intertextual relations, although they do sometimes gesture in that direction. He shows, for instance, an exuberance of citation when commenting on verse 5.16, which is recited simultaneously by both Candrakētu and Lava when they meet each other for the first time, before they learn that they are cousins:

> Is it some chance meeting of minds?
> His many virtues? An ancient friendship
> fast formed in some previous birth?
> A relative of mine kept hidden
> by fate, that my heart should be rapt in attention
> at the very sight of him?[85]

The conceit at the background of this verse—that intuition, in certain cases, constitutes an authority unto itself—is central to the setup of Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā* as well, and Nārāyaṇa quotes Duṣyanta's statement to that effect ("in doubtful matters, what good people feel in their heart is the authority").[86] Once the connection is made, we can see this verse as an intertextual "node" linking *Rāma's Last Act* to Kālidāsa's play. The link is strengthened by the phrase "an ancient friendship fast formed in some previous birth," which alludes to a famous verse in *Śakuntalā* (5.2, "friendships from previous births, lodged deep in one's being"), as Nārāyaṇa notes.[87]

These connections could thus lead us to see the theme of recognition, developed in the latter half of the play, as a response to Kālidāsa's development of the same theme in *Śakuntalā*. Nārāyaṇa does not go there, however. For the phrase "his many virtues," he quotes a passage from Harṣa's *Priyadarśikā*, where

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85 Pollock 2007: 297 (*yadṛcchāsaṁvādaḥ kim u kim u guṇagaṇānām atiśayaḥ purāṇō vā janmāntaranibiḍabandhaḥ paricayaḥ ~ nijō vā sambandhaḥ kim u vidhivaśāt kō 'py aviditō mamaitasmin dṛṣṭē hṛdayam avadhānaṁ racayati ~~*).

86 *satāṁ hi sandēhapadēṣu vastuṣu pramāṇam antaḥkaraṇapravṛttayaḥ* (p. 201).

87 *bhāvasthirāṇi jananāntarasauhṛdāni* (p. 201).

Rumaṇvān reminds Udayana that "those who appreciate virtue alone, like yourself my lord, take pleasure even in an enemy's virtues."[88] The citation is apposite, but does not, in our reading, indicate a particularly close intertextual relationship between *Rāma's Last Act* and *Priyadarśikā*.

Nārāyaṇa refers to Bhavabhūti's other plays very rarely, and only then it is to make a local interpretive point. That is not to say these interpretations are uninteresting. When Rāma faces the prospect of life without Sītā in the first act, he sees the world as "empty, a desolate wilderness," and then goes on to say "life is lifeless, this body mere matter."[89] This is, according to Nārāyaṇa, a little repetitive. But because it is caused by Rāma's overwhelming grief, the repetition actually adds to, rather than subtracts from, the play at this moment.[90] Nārāyaṇa cites, as a parallel, a verse from Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī and Mādhava* (5.30), where some of the exact same phrases are used (*asārē saṁsārē, jagaj jīrṇāraṇyam*).[91] Here Pūrṇasarasvatī had arrived at exactly the same conclusion, that the repetition is a virtue rather than a fault because it suggests Mādhava's grief.[92] This makes it quite clear that Nārāyaṇa had read Pūrṇasarasvatī's commentary.

Nārāyaṇa's primary purpose in quoting other authors, then, is providing an explanation for a specific aspect of the text on which he is commenting. A typical example, involving one of his favorite authors, is when he has to explain why it is that someone's face is compared to a lotus "covered in bees" (*udbhrāntabhṛṅga-*): the missing link is that bees have a strong preference for newly-opened lotuses, as shown by a verse from Murāri's *Rāma Beyond Price*.[93] In some cases, however, it could be argued that Nārāyaṇa, through his quotations, imposes certain aspects of his own intellectual and religious landscape onto Bhavabhūti's play. When Rāma blesses Śambūka in the second act, he mentions "heavenly routes" (*dēvayānāḥ*). Nārāyaṇa took this to mean the path by which Viṣṇu can be attained, and specifically the path to liberation that his teacher, Mēlputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, described in his poetic prayer to the Lord of Guruvāyūr.[94] Bhavabhūti, as his name suggests, was a devotee of Śiva.

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88 *dēva tvadvidhānām ēva guṇaikapakṣapātināṁ ripōr api guṇāḥ prītiṁ janayanti* (p. 201).

89 Pollock 2007: 117 (*śūnyam adhunā jīrṇāraṇyaṁ jagat. asāra ēva saṁsāraḥ. kāṣṭhaprāyaṁ śarīram*).

90 *atra karuṇākṣiptahṛdayatayā jagati śūnyakakṣyatārōpaṇē 'pi punar jīrṇāraṇyatvārōpaṇaṁ, saṁsāre 'sāratvārōpaṇē 'pi śarīrasya kāṣṭhaprāyatābhidhānaṁ ca punaruktaprāyam api na doṣāya api tu guṇāyaiva* (p. 57).

91 p. 57.

92 See Mainkar 1971: 29–30. For another example of faults becoming virtues in Pūrṇasarasvatī's commentarial work, see Venkatkrishnan 2015: 57 (n. 170).

93 p. 217.

94 *dēvō viṣṇuḥ prāpyatē yais tē, kramamuktimārgā ity arthaḥ. tatprakāraś ca—*[...] *ity asmadgurubhiḥ śrīmadguruvāyunāthastōtraratnē samyak prapañcita ēva* (p. 85).

4 Reading structure

We can be much briefer regarding Nārāyaṇa's attempts to read structural features of the play. He hardly makes any mention at all of the technical details of plot construction, in contrast to the later commentator Vīrarāghava, who carefully identifies the various "junctures" (*sandhi*s) and their constituent parts (*sandhyaṅgas*).[95] He does explain some technical aspects of stagecraft in the very beginning of his commentary, such as the mention of the play's author (*prarōcanā*), for which he cites Dhanañjaya's *Ten Forms* [*Daśarūpakam*], and he engages in a rather long discussion of whether the first verse (*idaṁgurubhyaḥ* etc.) should count as a "benediction" (*nāndī*).[96] The latter seems to have an obligatory topic in commentaries on plays in South India, occasioned by local differences in both the performance of and the terminology for the beginnings of a play. These technicalities, however, soon disappear from Nārāyaṇa's commentary.

One partial exception is the attention he plays to the junctures between acts. A certain amount of diegetic time passes between each act, and a playwright should, first of all, explain to the audience what has happened in the interval, and secondly provide for some kind of transition between the two acts. This is the main purpose of the "prologue" to each act (*viṣkambhakam*), which can in addition serve as a kind of "interlude" (not necessarily in the technical sense of a *prakarī* or *patākaḥ*). Nārāyaṇa attempts to locate, at the end of each act, some statement that "foreshadows" (*parisūcanam*) the beginning of the next act. For example, he sees the entrance of the ascetic, in the prologue of the second act, as foreshadowed by the phrase "prostrations to the ascetics" at the end of the previous act.[97] Similarly, he reads the final words of the second act, "the confluence of holy rivers," as a foreshadowing of the entrance of the rivers in the prologue of the third act.[98]

Nārāyaṇa has a bit more to add about the transition to the sixth act. It might not be obvious that the final words of the fifth act, "let's go and find somewhere more suitable for battle" (*vimardakṣamāṁ bhūmim avatarāva*), foreshadow the entrance of two Vidyādharas, divine beings capable of flight, in the next act.[99] But Nārāyaṇa explains that the word *avatarāva*, used as it is in the dual, straightforwardly intimates the "descent" of a pair of Vidyādharas. In this connection he also

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95 See Kane 1983.

96 On the *prarōcanā*, p. 8; on the *nāndī*, pp. 5–6.

97 *"ṇamo tavōdhaṇāṇam" ity atītāṅkakathāvasānaparisūcitaṁ tāpasīpravēśam āha* (p. 62). Note that the phrase is not found in all texts, and is missing in Pollock's edition (p. 122).

98 *"puṇyās saritsaṅgamā" iti samanantarātītāṅkāvasānaparisūcitaṁ nadīdevatāpravēśam āha* (p. 92), noted already by Pollock 2007: 417.

99 The translation is Pollock's, 2007: 313.

notes the dramaturgical purpose served by drawing the fifth act to a close just as Lava and Candrakētu are about to fight: battles cannot be represented on stage, so Bhavabhūti will have the Vidyādharas describe the battle, from their aerial vantage point, in the following act.[100]

The transition to the fourth act is rather rough, in Nārāyaṇa's reading. It is not that the entrance of Vālmīki's students was not foreshadowed by the final words of the previous act—in fact Vālmīki is clearly mentioned in the last verse of the third act, which in Nārāyaṇa's reading signals to us that the following act will take place in his ashram, where viewers have now been expecting Vasiṣṭha and his family to arrive.[101] It is rather the stark difference in tone between the third act and the prologue of the fourth that concerns Nārāyaṇa. In the prologue, Vālmīki's students attempt, incompetently, to have a scholastic debate about the events unfolding around them. The debate would have been funny, if it weren't for the fact that it is immediately preceded and followed by two of the most heart-rending scenes in Sanskrit literature: Rāma's encounter with the spectral Sītā, and Kausalyā's meeting with Janaka, both happening after twelve long years. This is the closest that Nārāyaṇa comes to criticizing Bhavabhūti:

> The conversation between Vālmīki's students serves as a transition between those parts of the story that have already happened and those that are about to happen, and the introduction of the "points of defeat" (*vigrahasthāna-*), which apply when someone is trying to win a formal debate, has a comic effect in this context (*hāsyarasaṁ puṣṇāti*), even if their definitions are lacking. Now it is the tragic *rasa* (*karuṇa-*) which is amplified when Rāma and Sītā's families meet [in the part immediately following this interlude], which will be developed as the *rasa* of love-in-separation, and which pervades the work as a whole (*prabandhavyāpin-*). The comic now ends up being a subordinate part of the tragic. This is likely to be taken to pieces by really sharp critics, so sympathetic readers need to find a good way of explaining it. But I'll let that be for now. Let's get back to the commentary.[102]

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100 *athādhikṣēpavacanakupitayōḥ kumārayōr vṛttasya rasavattvēnāṅkanivēśanaucityē 'pi. "dūrādhvānaṁ vadhaṁ yuddham" ityādinā raṅgē sākṣādyuddhavidhānasya niṣiddhatvān madhyapātramukhēna tat pratipādayituṁ viṣkambhakam upanibadhnann atītāṅkāvasānē "tad itō vimardakṣamaṁ bhūmim avatarāva" ity atra yuddhōcitapradēśagamasyōparitanabhāgād divyajanōcitabhūlōkaparāpatanavācinā 'vataraṇaśabdēna pratipādanād ēva sūcitaṁ vidyādharamithunapravēśam kathayati* (p. 217). We note that some special pleading is needed for the foreshadowing of the seventh act: Nārāyaṇa sees the word *śiśu* "child" as foreshadowing the entrance of Lakṣmaṇa (p. 251), just because Lakṣmaṇa is Rāma's younger brother.

101 *ātrēyyā vacanēna pratipāditaṁ vasiṣṭhādīnāṁ vālmīkitapōvanapravēśaṁ saṅghaṭayitum atītāṅkāvasānē "sa ca kulapatir" ity atra kulapatiśabdēna sūcitaṁ vālmīkiśiṣyapravēśam āha* (p. 146).

102 *atō 'tra vṛttavartiṣyamāṇakathāṁśasaṅghaṭanātmakē vālmīkiśiṣyasaṁlāpē vijigīṣukathāprasiddhanigrahasthānōdbhāvanaṁ parihīṇatallakṣaṇam api hāsyarasaṁ puṣṇāti. sa ca kausalyādīnām itarētarasandarśanōpabṛṁhitasya vipralambhaśṛṅgāratayā pariṇaṁsyataḥ prabandhavyāpinaḥ karuṇasyaivāṅgabhāvam āpadyata iti kuśalāgrīyadhiṣaṇakṣōdanīyam iti vimalamatibhiḥ sahṛdayaiḥ samyag anusandhēyam ity āstāṁ tāvat. prakṛtam anusarāmaḥ* (p. 150).

The problem here is a potential conflict between the "local" emotional tenor of the prologue and the "global" tenor of the work (*prabandhavyāpin-*). The idea of multiple *rasa*s in a single work is not in itself problematic, but rather the copresence of these particular *rasa*s, viz. pity for Sītā's bereaved family and laughter at the self-important stupidity of Vālmīki's students. Nārāyaṇa pretends not to adjudicate the issue, although he arguably does so just by raising it.

Nārāyaṇa does not see foreshadowing only in the seams between acts. In a critical passage, he notes that the successful resolution of the play is foreshadowed, albeit ambivalently, by a line in the first act. As Rāma pries himself away from Sītā, still asleep, he says: "[t]his is the very last time that Rāma will touch his head to your lotus feet."[103] The word for "very last" here, *apaścima-*, typically has just that meaning, although it can in principle be read with the opposite meaning.[104] Nārāyaṇa said nothing about this when it came up in the first act, but cites it as an instance of foreshadowing at the beginning of the seventh.[105]

Nārāyaṇa thus sees the reunion of Rāma and Sītā as foreshadowed from the first act. This reunion, in turn, informs his comments at the very beginning of the play. The question that arises there is whether it is rash, on Bhavabhūti's part, to choose as the key element of the plot Rāma's abandonment of Sītā, which is tragic and hence inauspicious, given that there are so many other episodes in the Rāma story to choose from, and given the general recommendation that the predominant *rasa* in a play be either the erotic or the heroic.[106] This is arguably *the* question of the play. Nārāyaṇa first quotes a number of verses that suggest that it can never be inauspicious to have Rāma, who is after all an embodiment of Viṣṇu, be the lead character in a play.[107] But he goes on to say that Bhavabhūti was aware that readers

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103 Pollock 2007: 119 (*ayam apaścimas tē rāmasya śirasā pādapaṅkajasparśaḥ*).

104 "Very last" = "that of which there is no subsequent [instance]," *avidyamānaṁ paścimaṁ yasya tad apaścimam*; "not the last" (*na paścimam ity apaścimam*).

105 *atha nikhilavastūnām upasaṁhṛtirūpaṁ nirvahaṇasandhim upasaṁhṛtirūpaṁ mahākavir ayam "apaścimas tē rāmaśirasā pādapaṅkajasparśa" ity ādimāṅkāvasānōpakṣiptasya jānakīlābhasyōpapattayē taddhētubhūtaduryaśaḥpariharaṇaṁ nāṭyaprayōgadarśanadvārā vidhātuṁ* [...] (p. 251). In the first act he merely glosses *apaścimaḥ* as *acaramaḥ* (an exact synonym in both senses), p. 51.

106 *nanu raghunāthasyaiva nikhilajanamanassamāvarjakē 'bhimatarasabhāji nibandhanasamucitē caritāntarē saty api kimartham ayaṁ mahākavir nidrōṣataradharmadāraparityajanād ubhayalōkaviruddham atisāhasabhūtam ēvaitat karuṇarasātmakatvēnāmaṅgalaprāyaṁ tādṛśam itivṛttaṁ, 'ēkō rasō 'ṅgīkartavyaḥ śṛṅgārō vīra ēva vā' iti nāṭyajñaśāsanam apy anādṛtya svaprabandhē nibabandha iti cēd* (p. 4). The quotation is from Dhanañjaya's *Ten Forms* (*Daśarūpakam*), 3.33.

107 p. 4. He cites *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 5.17.17 (*smṛtē sakalakalyāṇabhājanaṁ yatra jāyatē ~ puruṣastamajaṁ nityaṁ vrajāmi śaraṇaṁ harim ~~*), the refrain of the *Maṅgalyastavaḥ* (*mamāstu maṅgalyavṛddhayē hariḥ*), and a common phrase (*maṅgalānāṁ ca maṅgalam*) that is found, *inter alia*, in the *Viṣṇusahasranāma*.

might be uncomfortable with the story he's chosen to tell, and headed off this criticism with the *bharatavākyam* (the final benediction of the play), which describes the story as both auspicious (*maṅgalyā*) and enthralling (*manōharā*).[108]

Sheldon Pollock has observed that *Rāma's Last Act*, very much like Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*, exhibits principles of recapitulation and responsion in its structure. He noted, for example, "resonances" between the two metaliterary devices, the painting gallery and the play within a play, in the first and seventh acts, respectively, and similar points of contact between the second and sixth acts (2007: 34–37). Besides the examples adduced by Pollock—including the repetition, *verbatim*, of verse 2.19 as 6.5[109]—we can detect a different kind of responsion, wherein a verse is reimagined later on in the play. There is a type of "foreshadowing" involved when Rāma uses the word "revive" (*jīvayan*) in verse 1.39 [Pollock 1.40], since the same word is used when Sītā does in fact revive him in the third act, in verse 3.39. Another example is 3.40 [Pollock 3.41], when Rāma affirms that the touch he is experiencing is indeed Sītā's. This verse contains several references to 1.18 (the marriage bracelet) and 1.20 (the grace of Sītā's body).

Nārāyaṇa makes no reference to the "concentric, antiphonal design of the play."[110] When he gets to verse 6.5, which repeats 2.19, he merely says that he's commented on this verse already.[111] He very nearly misses an opportunity when commenting on verse 3.12. There Rāma, having just been touched by Sītā, whom he cannot see, recovers consciousness and wonders what it was that he just experienced. "Surely I am familiar with this touch from long ago," he says, and proceeds to describe its contradictory effects on him: it "both restores my consciousness and induces a deep delirium: no sooner does it dispel the faintness arising from my anguish than it produces the stupefaction of an absolute bliss."[112] The description clearly echoes verse 1.35, where Rāma, before casting Sītā away, comments on the "indescribable" effect that Sītā's touch has on him, in very similar terms. When commenting on the demonstrative *saḥ* ("*that* very same touch") in 3.12, he says that its use is licensed by the fact that it was previously experienced by Rāma.[113] He

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108 *ata ēva hi śrōt̤r̤ṇām ētacchaṅkām apanayatā mahākavinā—pāpmabhyaś ca punāti vardhayati ca śrēyāṁsi yēyaṁ kathā maṅgalyā ca manōharā ca jagatō mātēva gaṅgēva ca ~ tām ētāṁ paribhāvayantv abhinayair vinyastarūpāṁ budhāḥ śabdabrahmavidaḥ kavēḥ pariṇatāṁ prājñasya vāṇīm imām ~~ ity upasaṁhārē maṅgalyatvaṁ manōharatvaṁ ca pratipāditam iti sakalam anākulam* (pp. 4–5).

109 We can add the *verbatim* repetition of verse 1.15 as 6.15 (*brahmādayō brahmahitāya taptvā* etc.).

110 Pollock 2007: 37.

111 *vyākhyātam ētat purastāt* (p. 221).

112 Pollock 2007: 183 (*sparśaḥ purā paricitō niyataṁ sa ēṣa sañjīvanaś ca manasaḥ parimōhanaś ca ~ santāpajāṁ sapadi yaḥ pratihatya mūrchām ānandanēna jaḍatāṁ punar ātanōti ~~*).

113 *sa iti pūrvānubhūtānubhavaparāmarśaḥ* (p. 106).

does not refer to the verse in the first act as an example of this "previous experience." Similarly, when Rāma refers to "that unanimity of hearts" in 6.33, Nārāyaṇa notes that the use of the word "that" (*tat*) is licensed by the fact that Rāma had previously experienced it; he does not note that this experience is described in verse 1.39, discussed above (p. 25).[114] And indeed several words and phrases from 1.39 are repeated in 6.33 (*prēman-*, *rasa-*, *sukha-* and *duḥkha-*, *hṛdaya-*, *viśrāma-*/*visrambha-*, etc.), where the love that Rāma once considered himself lucky to experience is now a distant and painful memory.

This is not to say that Nārāyaṇa is completely unaware of intertextuality within the play. When commenting on Rāma's reference to his "bodily elements" (*śarīradhātu-*) in 3.39 [Pollock 3.40], he addresses the contrast between "external" and "internal" elements by referring ahead to verse 6.22, where Rāma refers to "elemental consciousness" (*cētanādhātu-*).[115] Nārāyaṇa's concern is here just with the meaning of individual expressions. We may note, however, that the similarity between these two verses suggests that Lava's embrace, in the sixth act, has an effect upon Rāma that is similar to Sītā's touch in the third act. One further example comes in Nārāyaṇa's commentary on verse 5.16, discussed above (p. 27), where Candrakētu and Lava comment on their inexplicable affection for each other. Here Nārāyaṇa refers to 6.12, where Rāma states the problem in general terms: "[t]here is some inner cause that accounts for mutual attraction."[116]

Just as Nārāyaṇa barely comments on the reuse and responsion of verses within *Rāma's Last Act*, he makes no reference at all to the fact that several verses in the play appear in Bhavabhūti's other plays. He does, however, comment on certain similarities of expression between *Rāma's Last Act* and *Mālatī and Mādhava* (see p. 28). References to Bhavabhūti's other plays at all are in fact very rare, and when they do crop up, brief.[117] Literary commentaries normally do not identify allusions and intertextual references. Perhaps that is because they were obvious to many readers, or perhaps it is because the literary theory with which most commentators were familiar lacked an account of intertextuality that would contribute anything to the understanding of the literary work. (Arguably we are still in search of such an account.) Nārāyaṇa's reticence on this point, then, might not call for much comment. But it is just possible that he specifically avoids referring to *Mālatī and Mādhava*, at least, in order not to draw attention to his debt to Pūrṇasarasvatī, who is never mentioned by name.

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114 Pollock 2007: 351 (*tad aikyam*). Nārāyaṇa: *tad ity anubhūtaparāmarśaḥ* (p. 245).

115 p. 134.

116 Pollock (2007: 329): *vyatiṣajati padārthān āntaraḥ kō 'pi hētuḥ*; Nārāyaṇa,. p. 201.

117 See, e.g., his citation of *Mālatī and Mādhava* 3.15 and 5.7 on p. 48.

5 Reading subtext

So far we've seen that Nārāyaṇa, while occasionally turning to other texts for corroboration, remains very much "within" the play. He does not generally interpret passages of *Rāma's Last Act* with reference to something that we know, or could possibly know, from our position "outside" the play. This all changes, if only momentarily, when the greatness of Rāma is called into question.

In the fifth act, Candrakētu and Lava meet in Vālmīki's grove. The two young men are cousins p. 34, l. 24—Candrakētu is Lakṣmaṇa's son, and Lava is Rāma's—although they don't know it yet. Lava doesn't even know who his father is. All Lava knows about Candrakētu is that he is conducting a horse sacrifice on behalf of Rāma, and all Candrakētu knows about Lava is that he is interfering with the sacrifice out of arrogance. Candrakētu insists that he should stand down, in recognition of Rāma's greatness, and Lava refuses. "Who doesn't acknowledge Rāma's acts and greatness? On the other hand," he says, "there is room for criticism."[118] In following verse (5.34 = Pollock 5.35), Lava derisively alludes to several of Rāma's least heroic deeds: his murder of a woman, Tāṭakā, his retreat from Khara, and his deceitful murder of Vālin. "Why," he says in that verse, "people are fully aware of all these things."[119]

We can account for Lava's statement entirely from within the play. Those are, in fact, things that Rāma has done, and people are, in fact, fully aware of them. Lava's disparagement of Rāma might be theologically awkward, but it is an exquisite bit of dramatic irony, since Lava may well not exist at all if Rāma had not taken these extreme measures. And as Nārāyaṇa says, Lava is not being totally sincere, but rather provoking Candrakētu to fight by the time-honored technique of disparaging his relatives.[120]

Nārāyaṇa takes a further step, however. When Lava says, "people are fully aware of all these things," the "hidden meaning" (*nigūḍhō 'rthaḥ*) is just that "people really do recognize even these deeds of Rāma as great, in accordance with the principle that 'whatever gods say and do in any situation is right.'"[121] We think

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118 Pollock 2007: 311 (*kō hy raghupatēś caritaṁ mahimānaṁ ca na jānāti? yadi nāma kiṁcid vaktavyam asti…*).

119 Pollock 2007: 313 (*tatrāpy abhijñō janaḥ*).

120 *ētatkathanaṁ ca yuddhautsukyēna candrakētukōpajananārtham iti draṣṭavyam* (p. 215).

121 *atrāpi 'īśvarāṇāṁ vacaḥ satyaṁ tathaivācaritaṁ kvacit' ityādyuktanyāyēna niravadyaṁ tasya caritaṁ mahimānaṁ ca kō na bahumanuta ity ēva nigūḍhō 'rthaḥ. kēvalaṁ candrakētukōpajananāyaiva nindāsūcanaṁ kṛtam ity avasēyam* (p. 215). The quotation is *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.33.32*ab*. One other example of praise disguised as blame occurs in the speech of Śiśupāla in the fifteenth chapter of Māgha's *Killing of Śiśupāla* (*Śiśupālavadhaḥ*): in Vallabhadēva's version, he ostensibly criticizes Krishna, but all of his criticisms can be read equally as praise. See Bronner and McCrea 2012 and Salomon 2014.

such an interpretation is only really open to a perspective outside of the play, and we doubt whether Bhavabhūti was as concerned about theodicy as Nārāyaṇa. (It might be worth noting that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which Nārāyaṇa quotes here, was likely composed two centuries or so after Bhavabhūti lived.) Technically, however, Nārāyaṇa locates even this "hidden meaning" within the play: the character of Lava is aware that Rāma is a god, and hence makes his disparaging comment solely in order to provoke Candrakētu to fight.

We are not sure what to make of this sudden irruption of theodicy into the play. On the one hand, there is an argument, which Nārāyaṇa does in fact make (see p. 32), that the divinity of Rāma runs throughout the play, and is in fact not very "hidden." The fact that the protagonist of the play is god himself, at least according to a popular understanding represented by Nārāyaṇa, might account for certain features of the play's construction, including its sensational *deus ex machina*.[122] On the other hand, it seems to us that Bhavabhūti uses Rāma's divinity, or at least his notional perfection, as a cover for exploring the darker and more complex aspects of the Rāma story, by casting him (at least in his own self-recriminating imagination) as "cruel" (after 1.45, after 3.26) "sinful" (1.28, 6.33) and an "outcaste" (after 1.46), and indeed to explore darker and more complex issues than could otherwise have been represented on stage.

Whatever we make of Nārāyaṇa's reading here, it is the closest that he comes, in his commentary on *Rāma's Last Act*, to reading in light of a "subtext" rather than a "context" internal to the play. In another work, however, Nārāyaṇa makes a definitive turn toward subtext in order to understand the deeper meanings of a play. That work is his *Diṅmātradarśinī*, a commentary on the *Bhagavadajjukam*, or *The Hermit and the Harlot*, a satire from the 7th-century Pallava court. Nārāyaṇa states at the outset that he intends to "elucidate the hidden meanings" (*gūḊhārthān viśadān karōmi*) in this profound stage play.[123] To all intents and purposes a bawdy critique of religious hypocrites, the *Bhagavadajjukam* was an unlikely, audacious site for Nārāyaṇa's subtextual reading. In this section, we explore the *Diṅmātradarśinī* in order to understand how this form of reading dovetailed with dramatic performance in seventeenth-century Kerala.

We enter the *Bhagavadajjukam* to find the cynical student Śāṇḍilya describing his lifelong search for a few square meals. Having grown up in a poor uneducated brahmin family, he joins a Buddhist monastery, but upon realizing that they only eat once a day, he tears off his robes and follows a wandering ascetic (*parivrājaka*). The hapless *parivrājaka* tries in vain to give Śāṇḍilya scriptural instruction in yoga, only to be met by a barrage of insults and satirical comments. As they arrive at a

122 Pollock (2007: 51) notes that "modern readers are likely to find" it "altogether unsatisfying."
123 Anujan Achan 1925: 1.

garden to take rest, they come upon a courtesan and her two maids, waiting for her tryst with an appointed lover. Unknown to everyone, a messenger from the god of Death takes the form of a snake and bites the courtesan, Vasantasenā, as she plucks flowers. She falls faint and dies. Śāṇḍilya raises a hue and cry, imploring his teacher to do something. Sighing, the *parivrājaka* decides to use this as a teaching opportunity, and using the power of yoga, enters the courtesan's lifeless body. Meanwhile, the messenger of Death returns, having had an earful from his boss for killing the wrong Vasantasenā. Seeing the courtesan up and well, he hastily deposits her soul in the yoga master's body. Mistaken identity leads to predictable hilarity.

In the *Bhagavadajjukam*, Nārāyaṇa goes deeper, doubling down on Yoga and Vedanta as the subtext of the entire play.[124] The yoga master and his student are representatives of God and the individual soul, the courtesan is the Suṣumnā vein, her attendants are Iḍā and Piṅgalā, and her madam is Avidyā. The drama is a farce only in name, for its "true meaning is hidden within the comedy."[125] In fact it is the definition of a farce that its comedic plot should be construed as superficial, and from that false exterior, the true meaning is shaken out.[126] This operative distinction between the "outer" and "inner" meanings of the text was noted by previous readers of this commentary.[127] We would like to look at some of these passages in detail for what they show about how Nārāyaṇa carried out his mode of exegesis.

The first point of interest is Nārāyaṇa's new theory of secondary meaning. He locates his account of outer and inner meaning in the context of earlier discussions in literary theory. First, he stresses that the farce is, to a certain extent, superficial. Four previous theories are briefly mentioned and rejected: *prakaraṇa*, contextual meaning; *ślēṣa*, double meaning; *lakṣaṇā*, secondary meaning; and *dhvani*, suggested meaning. First, the play's meaning is not contextually derived, but rather derived from the language itself. Second, to be subject to *ślēṣa* rests on the possibility that both word-meanings presented in a text are equally plausible, which does not apply in the present instance. Third, *lakṣaṇā* requires that the first-order meaning be blocked, and supplanted by the secondary meaning. In this play, however, one does not resort to figurative interpretation, one simply reads the text as is. Finally, and most subtle, the meaning does not fall under the type of *dhvani*

124 One is reminded of Pūrṇasarasvatī's remark that Bhavabhūti was a "master of the sciences of Yoga and Vedanta" (*yōgavēdāntaśāstrasarvapathīna*, Mahadeva Śāstrī 1953: 265).

125 Anujan Achan 1925: 98 (*hāsyagūhitatattvārtha*).

126 Anujan Achan 1925: 9–10 (*atra nāṭyasya prahasanarūpatvāt prathamaṁ bāhyatayā hāsyaṁ vastu yōjanīyam. idam ēva hy asya lakṣaṇaṁ yad alīkēnaiva puratah prahasanēna pāramārthikam artham avadhūya kathyata iti*).

127 Mainkar 1971: 88–96.

that rests on the power of words. This is a sub-type of a sub-type of the *dhvani*, in which the literal meaning is intended but subordinated to a second meaning. In this type of *dhvani*, not unlike the reverberation of a bell, sequence is perceptible. First you hear one meaning, then the next, as you put the pieces together. In the examples provided by Ānandavardhana in his *Dhvanyālōka*, the power of words suggests a second, non-contextual meaning. One is able to imagine the relation between the two as a result of their compatibility. In this play, however, the language appears to the reader at first blush. For all these reasons, the farce is just a farce. But at the same time, says Nārāyaṇa, just like in these other theories, a secondary meaning appears after an interval, and is concealed deep within the text. Therefore, direct expression is prevented, and the meaning is simultaneously interior.[128]

Nārāyaṇa's discussion is very terse here, and not necessarily convincing. He invents a language for indirectness (*vyākōpa*), a common indication that a scholar is searching for a way to say something new. What that newness consists of is not entirely spelled out. The play is, somehow, simultaneously straightforward and complex, in ways that do not quite fit into previously existing theories of secondary meaning. The best we can do is determine the means by which Nārāyaṇa performs this new mode of exegesis. We may be familiar with Vedāntic reading strategies from the Upaniṣads onwards that employ farfetched etymologies or dubious methods of parsing (e.g., *atat tvam asi*). In Nārāyaṇa's commentary, however, hiddenness or interiority is discovered not through clever compound analysis but by taking account of the shared properties between the possible referents of a word. For example, when Śāṇḍilya and his teacher arrive at the garden, the cowardly student says: "I heard my old mama say that tigers live hidden in the branches of trees. So why don't you go first. I'm right behind you."[129] According to the commentator, the inner meaning is: "I understand from the eternal scripture that worldly attachment lurks deep within sense objects. If I enter this pleasure-garden that incites love, it's sure to engender that attachment in me. But if I go after you, because of the power of your liberation, that attachment will dissipate the moment it arises." Nārāyaṇa identifies the subtext of each word by repeatedly using the term *sādharmya*, or "having the same property." The word "mother" can mean "injunctive scripture" because both are objects of trust. The "*aśoka*

128 Anujan Achan 1925: 10 (*prahasanasya cēhāprākaraṇikakatvād ubhayaprādhānyābhāvēna ślēṣaviṣayatāsambhavād mukhyārthabādhādyabhāvēna lakṣaṇāyā anupapatteḥ puraḥsphūrtyā ca śabdaśaktimūladhvanēr api viṣayīkarttum aśakyatvāt bāhyatvam iti. tadvad ēvētarasyārthasya paścāt pratītēr nigūḍhatayāvasthānāc ca vācyatāvyākōpād ābhyantaratvam ity api vaktum ēva yuktam ity avasēyam).*

129 Anujan Achan 1925: 34 (*pōḷāaṇīe mama mādāe sudaṁ asōapaḷḷavantaḷaṇiḷuddhō vagghō paḍivasadi tti. tā bhaavaṁ evva puradō pavisadu. ahaṁ piṭṭhadō pavisāmi*).

branches" can be "sense objects" because both enchant the senses. And the "tiger" can be "attachment" because both ultimately do violence.[130]

For T.G. Mainkar, who wrote one of the few early studies of commentarial writing on Sanskrit plays, this account of outer and inner meaning was "evidence enough to indicate the ingenuity of the commentator."[131] This ingenuity has come into question by K.G. Paulose, author of many books on the Kerala tradition of stage plays. Paulose points out that the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of the *Bhagavadajjukam* made identical use of an inner and outer meaning, *akapporuḷ* and *purapporuḷ*, in interpreting the play. He cites the evidence of a *Kramadīpikā*, or stage manual, in both Sanskrit and Malayalam, that embeds a philosophical discussion in the conversation between student and master, drawing it out over thirty-five days.[132] On the basis of the *Kramadīpikā* and the broader system of dramatic criticism contained in works such as the *Naṭāṅkuśa* and *Vyaṅgyavyākhyā*, Paulose argues that Nārāyaṇa was merely following a long-established trend in the performative tradition.[133] Nārāyaṇa certainly could have been a connoisseur of and participant in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition. He says himself that whatever the extent of delight his "foolhardy" commentary might bring to learned people, it will have been a success as long as it helped "unthinking and unruly" actors.[134] This suggests that Nārāyaṇa, like the author of the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, might have been critical of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Instead of following a trend, then, perhaps he was intervening in dramatic practice. Whatever the direction of influence, both Mainkar and Paulose are right in their own way: Nārāyaṇa was doing something creative by engaging with the history of secondary meaning, and he was participating in a broader interpretive tradition.

Immediately after Nārāyaṇa's allegorical reading of the characters, which he inserts in the middle of the play before the entrance of the courtesan, he says: "In this way, the actor-ascetic, employing the yoga of the stage-play, can instantly manifest the inner Lord right in front of him, and become content."[135] Scholars have studied drama as a mode of religious realization, or acting as a way of

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130 Anujan Achan 1925: 34–35 (*ābhyantaras tu...**mātur** iti viśvasanīyatādisādharmyāt cōdanāyām adhyavasāyaḥ* [...] *indriyahāritāsādharmyād **aśōkapallava**śabdēna viṣayāḥ kathyantē* [...] *hiṁsratvasādharmyāc ca viṣayābhiṣaṅge **vyāghra** ity adhyavasāyaḥ).*

131 Mainkar 1971: 94.

132 Kunjunni Raja 1961.

133 Paulose 2000: 135–158.

134 Anujan Achan 1925: 98 (*budhajanamānasēna kiyatīm api mē vivr̥tiḥ mudam atiriktamōharabhasōpacitā kurutē ~ tad api kr̥śāśayāvaśakuśīlavamātrahitā yadi tu bhaviṣyatīyam iyatā saphalaiva kr̥tiḥ ~~).*

135 Anujan Achan 1925: 55 (*ēvaṁ prēkṣāmayaṁ yōgaṁ yuñjan nartakatāpasaḥ ~ pratyañcam acyutaṁ sadyaḥ sākṣātkr̥tya sukhī bhavēt ~~).*

salvation in premodern India.[136] Here, however, is a mode of absorption in which the actor imagines himself not as a lover of God, but as a yogi manifesting God within himself. One is reminded of Pūrṇasarasvatī, who claimed that Bhavabhūti was communicating the secrets of yogic practice that one would otherwise receive from one's guru.[137] The revolving door between scholarly and performative traditions turns actors and poets into the true yogis, and commentators into their privileged interpreters, revealing their hidden depths.

In *The Hermit and the Harlot*, Nārāyaṇa looked outside the text for its inner meaning. In *Rāma's Last Act*, he mostly refused to do so, even when presented with the opportunity for Vedantic reading. However, given his predilection for elaborating upon a character's thoughts in a moment of heightened emotion, it is possible that what he witnessed on stage made it into his commentary on that play as well. The slow, deliberate, entrancing build-up towards a scene in Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances echoes in Nārāyaṇa's deep dive into a character's inner monologue. His audience was comprised of both connoisseurs of the stage play and its performers. In this he most resembled his teacher, Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri, who produced works of scholarly renown and wrote screenplays for his theater friends.

6 Readers in endless time

Bhavabhūti himself, in a well-known rebuke to contemporary critics, predicted that it would be a long time before someone would come by who was truly capable of understanding and appreciating his work:

> Now as for those who disparage me—
> they know what they know. This effort is not for them.
> There will arise, however, someone like me,
> for time is endless, and the earth is vast.[138]

In light of Nārāyaṇa's commentary, this seems more like a prophecy than the "unreasoning hope of a romantic."[139] For "someone like" Bhavabhūti did arise, in the village of Veḷḷāṅṅallūr, more than eight centuries after Bhavabhūti lived.

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136 Wulff 1984, Haberman 1988.

137 Mahādēva Śāstrī 1953: 9–10 (*atra cāyam akhilōpaniṣadaṅganāsaṅgītaraṅgamaṇḍapēna sāṅkhyayōgasāgarapārāvārīṇēna kavikulēndunā gurumukhaikagamyō 'tirahasyō 'rthaḥ sūtritō 'nusandhēyaḥ*).

138 *Mālatī and Mādhava* 1.8 (Mahādēvaśāstrī 1953: 23): *yē nāma kēcid iha naḥ prathayanty avajñāṁ jānanti tē kim api tān prati naiṣa yatnaḥ ~ utpatsyatē tu mama kō 'pi samānadharmā kālō hy ayaṁ niravadhir vipulā ca pṛthvī ~~*

139 Ingalls 1965: 440.

Nārāyaṇa tells us at the beginning of his commentary that his task was all the more difficult since the commentarial tradition on the play was lost, and hence the play had lain "totally vacant" (*khilībhūta-*).[140] Indeed Nārāyaṇa's commentary is among the earliest that survive, and certainly the earliest to offer more than grammatical and lexical notes for students.[141] His concern with the "deeper meanings" of Bhavabhūti's play sets him apart entirely, for example, from Ghanaśyāma, who wrote a pedantic and carping commentary on the play about a century later.

Nārāyaṇa tells us that he began his commentary at the suggestion of Nētra-nārāyaṇa, the leader of the Nambudiri community at the time.[142] Perhaps Nētra-nārāyaṇa sensed that Nārāyaṇa could finally give Bhavabhūti's play the attention it deserved. In any case, as we noted in the introduction, there were models available to Nārāyaṇa for writing a commentary that engaged with the "deeper" meanings of a play. The most proximate model was of course Pūrṇasarasvatī's commentary (*Rasamañjarī*) on Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī and Mādhava*, with which Nārāyaṇa was familiar. Nārāyaṇa's avowed desire "to take a deep dive" into *Rāma's Last Act* (*vijigāhiṣā* noted on p. 2 above) recalls, and probably refers to, Pūrṇasarasvatī's wish "to take a deep dive" into *Mālatī and Mādhava* (*kartum īhē vigāham*).[143]

As we have shown, the meanings which Nārāyaṇa tried to elicit in his commentary were "deep" in two senses. First, they pertained to the internal states of Bhavabhūti's characters. This interest in interiority is of course a recurrent theme in Sanskrit plays, and in Bhavabhūti's plays in particular. But it is also characteristic of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, a performance tradition of which Nārāyaṇa may well have had direct experience, especially given that the other play on which he commented, *The Hermit and the Harlot*, is a staple of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire. In Bhavabhūti's poetics, words can never do justice to the complexity and intensity of feelings, as shown by his proclivity to the figure we called a "chain of approximations." The impossibility of externalizing the internal is all the more pronounced in the case of characters, like Rāma, whose deliberate composure belies, if only temporarily, their inner turmoil. Insofar as theater is premised on the externalization of internal states, especially within the framework of the "manifestation" of *rasa*, this contradiction strikes at the very heart of theatrical representation, as Bhavabhūti must have known. Nārāyaṇa, as a commentator, works primarily in the gap between these internal states and their externalization in

140 *sampradāyasamucchēdāt khilībhūtē 'tra nāṭakē ~ vyākriyāyatnatas tv ētan nirvahēma samīhitam* ~~ (v. 8, p. 1).

141 Of the commentaries listed in the *New Catalogus Catalogorum*, only the very brief gloss by Vēma Bhūpa (15th c.) is earlier.

142 [...] *nētranārāyaṇasya vivṛtir akhilahṛdyā prastutā yā niyōgāt* [...] (p. 273).

143 Mahādēva Śāstrī 1953: 2.

speech and action. He introduces statements with long explanations that go some of the way toward accounting for those statements' affective charge.

Second, these meanings are "deep" in that they pertain to the text as a whole, as its central concerns, motifs, and themes. Nārāyaṇa attempts to see reflections of these deeper meanings in the individual parts of the text that he, as a commentator, attends to in the first instance. The "big picture" of the play thus regularly enters into the determination of the "overall meaning" (*tātparyam*) of its constituent parts. Thus, even for something as small as a single word, Nārāyaṇa does not simply say *what* it means, but explains *why* the context leads us to understand its meaning in precisely this way. And hence these smaller parts really do become "parts" of a larger whole, insofar as they reinscribe the play's themes. We noted that Nārāyaṇa is best when he is attempting to reconstruct an "overall meaning" for a given passage, availing himself of contextual clues, citing parallel texts, and attending closely to Bhavabhūti's choice of words. He is understandably less astute when it comes to noticing and interpreting larger units of structure; even for us, it is one thing to talk about the "meaning" of a verse, and quite another to talk about the "meaning" of the recurrence of a verse in two parts of the play, or indeed in two separate plays.

Finally, Nārāyaṇa occasionally refers to "hidden meanings" in his commentary on *Rāma's Last Act*, where a statement is interpreted to have a theological meaning that seems, in its immediate context, rather unlikely. These "hidden meanings" are the focus of Nārāyaṇa's other commentary, on Mahēndravarman's *The Hermit and the Harlot,* where Nārāyaṇa systematically relates the play's meanings to deeper spiritual lessons drawn from the traditions of Yoga and Vedanta. To do so he even develops a theory of hidden meaning, which is the sign, however inchoate, of a creative thinker.

Nārāyaṇa was certainly influenced, in his approach to these plays, by scholarly and performative traditions. But if these traditions directed his attention to "deeper meanings," and gave him some of the tools for excavating them, it is Nārāyaṇa himself who worked them out. His precision in doing so, his concern with the emotional complexity and depth of Bhavabhūti's characters, and his attention to the themes and motifs that recur throughout the play—these all set him apart from many other commentators. We readily agree with Sheldon Pollock's assessment that Nārāyaṇa's commentary "must be counted among the more careful and perceptive ever produced for a Sanskrit play."[144]

144 Pollock 2007: 53.

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