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Editorial

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Gracefully twisting the neck: literary commentaries as a (meta)genre of scholarly discourse

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Abstract: Commentaries on literary texts, be they Kāvyas or Nāṭyas, are a prolific though still much understudied genre in South Asia. The stress on the literary text as the achieved and circumscribed "work of art" has undermined studies on the reception history, transmission, and composing and staging of literary texts, where the poem or drama in its entirety is not always the main unit to be considered. Along these lines, literary commentaries are crucial for understanding the relation between theoretical prescriptions and compositional/performative practices, as they often put these two dimensions of literature (the theoretical and the practical) into dialogue. Moreover, a host of knowledge systems (*nāṭyaśāstra, alaṃkāraśāstra, vyākaraṇa, mīmāṃsā,* etc.), along with their philosophical insights, technical vocabulary, and hermeneutical techniques, are employed, combined, and creatively refunctionalized in literary commentaries, which therefore represent a liminal genre of *śāstra* that crosses the seemingly well-established boundaries among disciplines and offers to the modern scholar a unique window into the intellectual life of premodern South Asia.

> Commenter, c'est admettre par définition un excès du signifié sur le signifiant, un reste nécessaire non formulé de la pensée que le langage a laissé dans l'ombre, résidu qui en est l'essence elle-même, poussée hors de son secret.
>
> M. Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*

This paper is the fruit of a close and lasting collaboration between the two authors, Daniele Cuneo and Elisa Ganser, the former being responsible for the first half (pp. 471–488), the latter for the second (pp. 489–506).

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1 Introduction[1]

An estimated three-fourths of the texts composed in Sanskrit are commentaries.[2] Along these lines, a pithy remark by Sheldon Pollock has often been quoted in awe: "commentaries constitute as much as 75% of the Sanskrit written tradition, and they embody some of its most insightful thinking about texts".[3] Like many other premodern literary cultures, the Sanskritic intellectual tradition of premodern South Asia has been justly included among the aptly coined umbrella term of "commentary cultures".

In the last decades, several works have been dedicated to the definition and analysis of commentary cultures and commentarial traditions.[4] Without getting into the weeds of daringly transcultural and universalistic definitions, it is uncontroversial to state that the premodern intellectual traditions of South Asia are built on a hierarchical structure featuring a relatively small number of root texts atop a vast number of commentaries and subcommentaries, composed over centuries of often uninterrupted textual traditions. This vast exegetical corpus is dedicated to the explanation of the original works, but—most importantly—to its enrichment by way of an interpretive enhancement that conceals new knowledge and new understanding in the garb of a traditionally accepted and implicitly immutable original source (of course, with many important exceptions in this overgeneralized representation).[5] Examples could be multiplied *ad libitum*, from the paradigmatic case of Pāṇini's grammar and its commentarial tradition to the textual corpus of

1 The abstract in exergo is the one we prefaced to a special panel on "Literary Commentaries and the Intellectual Life of South Asia" that we jointly organized and convened at the 17th World Sanskrit Conference in Vancouver in 2018. The contributions by Csaba Dezső, Chiara Livio, and Deven Patel were originally part of the panel, along with others by Dharmaraj Adat, Sylvain Brocquet, Heike Oberlin, and Luther Obrock, who indirectly contributed something to the present discussion. Margi Madhu Chakyar and Indu G., together with the Ensemble Nepathya, gave a lecture demonstration in the framework of the panel, offering a visual performance of Sanskrit plays from the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire. We co-opted Andrew Ollett's paper from the Mīmāṃsā panel of the same conference, and along with it, got a bonus contribution by him and Anand Venkatkrishnan.

2 Von Hinüber 2007: 99.

3 Pollock 2015b: 115.

4 The term *Kommentarkulturen* was coined in Quisinsky/Walter 2007, especially building on Assmann/Gladigow 1995. For bird's-eye view surveys of the Sanskrit commentary culture and the commentarial practices of early Buddhism, see Slaje 2007 and von Hinüber 2007, respectively. For more focused studies on the Pāli and the Jain traditions, see Heim 2018 and Jyväsjärvi 2010. On the idea of "commentary", the volume edited by Most 1999 has become a *locus classicus* for recent scholarship.

5 In a series of articles from the eighties, Pollock (1985b, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c) tries to show how this metatheoretical model is more or less implicitly derived from the conception of an authorless and beginningless authority of the Vedic corpus as developed by the Mīmāṃsā tradition. A significant exception to this trend within the Sanskrit culture is the field of *alaṃkāraśāstra*, which will occupy us later on. On this eccentricity of *alaṃkāraśāstra*, see *inter alia* McCrea 2011, Cuneo 2017, and Bronner 2020.

nyāya (logic) and intellectual traditions belonging to Jainism or Buddhism, such as the canonical commentaries or the so-called Pramāṇa tradition, based on the seminal works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.[6]

However, even this quick sketch of the widely accepted delineation of the premodern commentary culture of South Asia shows how scholarship has mostly focused on religious and "scholarly" traditions, often by leaving out or at least marginalizing the immense intellectual wealth represented by what we might call "literary commentaries".[7] By this etic umbrella term, we mean to encompass commentaries composed on works of *kāvya* widely conceived, i.e., including works on dramas and on ornate literature in Sanskrit and the literary Prakrits.[8]

Interestingly enough, no emic term covers the subset of the South Asian commentary culture that consists of "literary commentaries" as opposed to other subsets, such as the more often studied "scholarly commentaries". In other words, while there are several emic taxonomies classifying and subclassifying genres such as *kāvya, śāstra, veda, purāṇa,* and many more (no matter how contested and historically mutable these divisions might be), we are not aware of any emic discussion that is explicitly dedicated to the conceptual or practical differentiation of commentaries on different genres, such as commentaries on Vedic texts,

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6 On the notion of a philosophical, religious, or scholarly commentary such as has just been sketched, see *inter alia* Brückner 1995, Stietencron 1995, Chenet 1998, Hulin 2000, Preisendanz 2008, and Ganeri 2010.

7 While sketching the broader intellectual history of "philology" in Sanskrit, Pollock (2015b: 116–118) outlines what we know about "literary commentaries" and considers them a crucial element within his widely conceived hermeneutical framework of philology as "the science of making sense of texts", which includes "the theory of textuality as well as the theory of textualized meaning" (Pollock 2015a: 22). Therefore, he focuses on how literary commentators were indeed philologists, as they provided "rational recensions, a more or less comprehensive inventory of variant readings, verse-by-verse exegeses, and, sometimes, coherent interpretations of entire poems (and, later, dramas) and epics". Without the same focus on "philology" and the same investment in conceptualizing "early modernity", we are indeed building on his proposal by adding some general thoughts, a typological framework for commentaries, and a battery of articles dedicated to specific case studies.

8 The term should also encompass commentarial texts in languages such as Tamil or Telugu, which belonged within the cultural koine of the *kāvya* movement for at least a period of their literary history. However, for the time being, our attention will not be focused on these other important literary and commentarial traditions. On "commentary idioms" within the Tamil tradition, see the recent work of Anandakichenin/D'Avella 2020. Given the virtual absence of a technical philosophical tradition in Tamil to complement its specialized commentarial practice, the case of Tamil literary culture is potentially quite illuminating, as "literary commentaries" represent the norm rather than the exception in the panorama of its commentary culture (of course, the fuzzy boundaries between religious and literary texts need to be investigated in a case-by-case fashion).

commentaries on philosophical or other *śāstra*s, or commentaries on *kāvya*s, nor is there any single term for the commentary as a genre, independently of the text commented upon. There are, however, a number of distinct terms to indicate different subgenres of commentaries and subcommentaries, starting from the most classical Bhāṣya, Vārttika, Vṛtti, Vivṛti or Ṭīkā, Ṭippanī, and so on.[9]

Even if authors from premodern South Asia were certainly aware of the more or less radical distinctions in form, purpose, and possibly audience between commentaries on *kāvya* and, for instance, commentaries on philosophical and scholarly works, they seemed to show no interest in developing a taxonomy that might fully account for such diversity.[10] Anyway, a hard and fast division between literary commentaries and philosophical commentaries cannot be posited without allowing generous space for exceptions, such as commentaries on epic texts, commentaries that interpret their root text as a religious text (even when it is not obviously so; see below), and similar fringe cases. However, this distinction does have a heuristic value when dealing with a huge amount of commentarial material

9 The differences among the various kinds of commentaries and the significance of their names are not always clear-cut, especially if one considers their diachronic development across different disciplines. See, for instance, the study of Bronkhorst 1990. For more details from Hemacandra and Rājaśekhara, see von Hinüber 2007: 100–101. The practice of composing several layers of subcommentaries is very rare (if not absent) among authors of literary commentaries. However, awareness of the work of previous commentators remains a crucial aspect of possibly any commentarial tradition (see, for instance, Kapoor 2005: 49, "the commentary tradition is a cumulative tradition, i.e., a long line of commentaries on a given text generally follow each other, each succeeding commentary taking into account and building on the preceding one").

10 A partial explanation might be found in the commentarial idiom and techniques shared across the board of South Asian commentary cultures, as shown by the invaluable *Scholastic Sanskrit* by Tubb and Boose (2007). Nevertheless, even if the majority of the specific commentarial methods and sometimes very technical procedures can be found in all sorts of commentaries, the work of Tubb and Boose is indeed divided in two macrosections, respectively dedicated to "Methods of Glossing" (by G. Tubb), focusing on commentarial practices exemplified by "literary commentaries", and "The Bhāṣya Style" (by E. R. Boose), focusing on commentarial practices exemplified by "philosophical commentaries". This subdivision is certainly coherent, given that some aspects are indeed specific to different genres of commentaries and that the two macrogenres are indeed different, as we have been suggesting so far. However, as the authors are fully cognizant, the subdivision remains partially problematic, since so many aspects of the commentarial idiom are indeed common to any kind of commentary, not to repeat the lack of a fully developed, emic taxonomy that deals with commentarial macrodivisions. A recent quasi-encyclopedic and somewhat derivative treatment of the Sanskritic commentarial tradition is Angot 2017, which again deals with Sanskrit commentary *tout court*. Its specific focus is the centrality of grammar (*vyākaraṇa*), without however disregarding the contributions from of disciplines, such as Vedic exegesis (*mīmāṃsā*) and poetics (*alaṃkāra*), but clearly manifesting an almost unargued bias against the value of "literary commentaries" (see, for instance, the section "Faiblesse générale des commentateurs dans les domaines des ornements et de la métrique", Angot 2017: 874–876).

that is clearly situated on one or the other side of the spectrum. At any rate, given the burgeoning nature of the study of the South Asian commentary cultures, we are in no position to give any definite account of the reason for such taxonomical absence,[11] but let us take this as one of the many starting points for delving into the original material in search of some answers, and certainly more open questions.

2 Literary commentaries within and without history

Given the regrettable absence of any intellectual history of the genre of "literary commentaries" and the virtual absence of any monograph on the topic,[12] this special issue of *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* cannot hope to completely fill this scholarly lacuna, but it can be seen as one more small step toward a wider understanding of this incredibly rich literary and intellectual phenomenon.

As powerfully put by McCrea, "the vast commentarial literature that grew up around the major works of Sanskrit poetry provides an invaluable resource for investigating the culture's own understanding of its literature, one that has never received anything like the attention it deserves from modern scholars".[13] In other words, the study of literary commentaries can offer an intellectual history of the reading practices of the audience of *kāvya* and show the pluralities of meanings that were attributed to the foundational works of the tradition by ever new generations of readers, listeners, and spectators in a multiplicity of historical contexts.[14]

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11 A similar general "absence of nomenclature" and undertheorization for other widely common and absolutely central enterprises—such as "reading practices" at large, understood as "philology", and "translation"—is thoughtfully investigated in Pollock 2015a: 15–16.

12 Some exceptions should be mentioned, the most important being the excellent work of Patel 2014, mostly dedicated to the commentarial history of Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhīyacarita* (12th century). Certainly, the classic work of Roodbergen 1984 on Mallinātha's *Ghaṇṭāpatha* deserves mention as well. The edited volume (1982) and monograph (2002) by Layle are also dedicated to the towering figure of Mallinātha. Goodall and Isaacson 2003 contains, beside a critical edition of Vallabhadeva's commentary on the *Raghuvaṃśa*, a very thoughtful introduction on the style of this early literary commentator. Another exception is Unithiri's work (2004) on Pūrṇasarasvatī, again more a multi-faceted polymath than a simple commentator. Specifically dedicated to some commentaries on dramas, Mainkar 1971 is a valuable source of analysis, insight, and information. Of course, specific articles and longer studies on single commentaries are relatively numerous. Among those we have found useful, see De 1955, Banerji 1972, Skraep 1978, Selby 1996, Bronner 1998, Grimal 2000 and 2001, McCrea 2010, Cattoni 2012, Klebanov 2020, Minkowski 2020, and Gomez 2022.

13 McCrea 2010: 236.

14 See also Patel (2014: 17), who plainly states that in the second millennium, *kāvya* commentaries become "the mechanism through which to preserve, control and teach elegant language and to carry

If a full-fledged history of literary commentaries in premodern South Asia is a scholarly desideratum that must await further research, one can at least start with what is probably the earliest extant commentary on *kāvya*, the *Laghuṭīkā* on Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya*, by the Kashmiri author Prakāśavarṣa (late ninth–early tenth century CE).[15] He was probably the teacher of the celebrated Vallabhadeva (early tenth century CE), the commentator on the three great poems of Kālidāsa, the *Raghuvaṃśa*, the *Kumārasambhava*, and the *Meghadūta*, on Māgha's *Śiśupālavadha*, and on Ratnākara's *Vakroktipañcaśikā*.[16] However, "the first evidence we have of written commentaries being composed on purely belletristic works belongs to as early as the seventh century AD. *The New Catalogus Catalogorum* [Vol. 4, p. 162] lists the no longer extant commentary of the seventh-century Gāṅga King Durvinīta on the fifteenth *sarga* of the *Kirātārjunīya*, which we know of from an inscription".[17] As to the emergence of the subgenre of the *nāṭaka* commentary, while providing plays with commentaries became a relatively common practice by the thirteenth or fourteenth century, there is no certainty as to when the practice started or who the first commentator on drama might have been.[18]

Considering that the history of *kāvya* (and *nāṭya*) likely starts in the first centuries CE, literary commentaries are undoubtedly latecomers, especially when compared to the flourishing commentarial traditions of other disciplines, like that of grammar, which was already thriving in the centuries before the Common Era; the early commentarial traditions on the Buddhist and Jain canons (probably the

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forward the values of Sanskrit culture". On the importance of literary commentators as veritable editors of Sanskrit texts and their principles for adjudicating variants, see Pollock 2003: 111–112 and *passim*. On the interactions between scribal transmission, literary commentaries, and theoretical works in the establishment of the poetic text, see Goodall 2001 and 2009.

15 For some caution on the figure of Prakāśavarṣa as the first "extant" commentator on *kāvya*, see the detailed comments of Goodall and Isaacson (2003: xvi, n. 8), who prudently prefer to consider Vallabhadeva as the earliest commentator on *kāvya* whose works still survive. For a study of the *Laghuṭīkā*, its manuscript tradition, and some text-historical data that can be gleaned from it, see Klebanov 2016: 135ff. In his commentary on the *Śiśupālavadha*, Vallabhadeva mentions the existence of many predecessors whose works are now lost (see again Goodall/Isaacson 2003: xix).

16 On Vallabhadeva, his date, his works (including the lost ones we have not mentioned), and his distinctive style, see the introduction of Goodall and Isaacson 2003. It is interesting to remark that all early "literary commentaries" seem to be devoted to *kāvya stricto sensu*, i.e. not drama.

17 Goodall/Isaacson 2003: xix. For more references to early commentaries that are no longer extant, see Pollock 2015b: 117 and notes.

18 A possible candidate seems to be Dakṣiṇāvartanātha (13th c. ?), with his very sparse commentary on Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (see below). Dakṣiṇāvartanātha is probably also the earliest and one of the rare early authors who composed commentaries on both *kāvya* and *nāṭaka* works, as he also commented on three classical poems by Kālidāsa: the *Kumārasaṃbhava*, the *Raghuvaṃśa*, and the *Meghadūta*. An even more likely candidate might be Harihara, possibly belonging to the end of the twelfth century (see Grimal 1999: vii).

early centuries CE); or the so-called Brahmanical *darśana*s, whose first layer of commentaries might have been composed around the beginning of the Gupta period.[19] What remains unanswered is the crucial and historically delicate question as to why Sanskrit authors felt the desire or, perhaps, the need to compose commentaries on *kāvya* around the end of the first millennium, and, a few centuries later, on *nāṭaka*s as well.[20] Nevertheless, from around the beginning of the second millennium, literary commentaries have been composed in ever increasing numbers up to the twentieth century and beyond. No student of Sanskrit literature today is unaware of the names and works of commentators such as Pūrṇasarasvatī, Mallinātha,[21] Rāghavabhaṭṭa, and Ghanaśyāma. Again, given the state of scholarship on the subject, it is impossible to find feasible answers to complex historical questions regarding the "historical conditions of possibilities"[22] of this comparatively new

19 From a more radical perspective, the very earliest prose texts from South Asia, i.e. the prose portions of the Veda and the Brāhmaṇas, might be considered as the very first form of commentary and were certainly meant as an aid to the comprehension of the earlier Vedic texts. On this line of reasoning, see Lubin 2019.

20 One might speculate that it took a certain time for Sanskrit authors to embark on the enterprise of producing exegeses of nonsacred or *laukika* texts. This process presupposes an uptick in the authority and prestige of literary texts that allowed them to be considered as *mūla*s worthy of an author's exegetical efforts. It moreover requires a certain institutionalization of the practice, with wealthy patrons taking an interest in poetry and drama, patronizing commentaries on them, and possibly also providing authors with the use of library facilities or at least with textual resources. More importantly, this practice involves a new readership in need of exegetical aid, intertwined with new pedagogical contexts of instruction and acculturation. An educated guess, or at least a plausible scenario, as to how literary commentaries came about at all involves, on the one hand, the poets' practice of providing their own poetic compositions with oral exegeses (delivered at the time of recitation) and their commitment to writing, and, on the other, the growing normalization of marginal glosses in manuscripts of *kāvya* works. These glosses would start being copied again and again along with the commented text, and would finally start taking on an intellectual life of their own as literary commentaries. On the early oral commentarial practice of poets, see Pollock 2006: 87 and n. 33. For his idea of the literary commentary as "a literary-cultural innovation" dated to "the early centuries of the second millennium", see again Pollock (2015b), who however admits that it is not yet possible to give a "true social-historical or intellectual-historical explanation". Less hesitantly, Tubb and Boose (2007: 2) see the emergence of *mahākāvya* commentaires as pedagogically motivated, which would also explain, according to them, the time gap separating those earlier exegetical enterprises from their *nāṭaka* counterparts: "Indeed, the fact that we have old commentaries on these *mahākāvya*s, and only much more recent ones on great plays of equivalent age and difficulty, may be presumed to indicate that the *mahākāvya*s made up the standard curriculum for Indian students of Sanskrit *kāvya*" (ibid.). Whatever the reason for such asynchronous beginnings, composing a full-fledged commentary on drama requires competence in the complex field of *nāṭyaśāstra*, which was possibly a rarer intellectual commodity in premodern South Asia.

21 As tersely put by Patel (2014: 79), "Mallinātha's commentaries have had the single greatest influence on *kāvya* studies throughout the past five centuries".

22 Pollock 2015a: 19.

genre of composition, the reasons for its success, or even answers to simpler questions regarding the main turning points[23] of the intellectual history of literary commentaries. Nonetheless, the recognition of the need to raise these lines of questioning is already a step away from the general devaluation of "literary commentaries" per se and their use only as crutches for the comprehension of the root texts, not as objects of study and interest in themselves.[24]

To be sure, literary texts of the *kāvya* genre are in no way easy or straightforward to read, and despite the conventional dictum praising them as an easier, more pleasurable means to attain instruction in the ends of human life, potentially accessible to everybody, they were actually produced and destined for a cultivated and refined public of connoisseurs.[25] As a matter of fact, a whole twin discipline, running along the two independent but largely parallel tracks of *nāṭyaśāstra* (dramaturgy) and *alaṃkāraśāstra* (poetics), was developed around the study and analysis of their richness and complexity. Authors of literary commentaries, however, by no means confined themselves to the instruments of literary analysis developed in these two fields, but relied on a much broader palette of hermeneutical tools. Primarily, they drew on the various "linguistic" disciplines inherited from the Vedic and Brahmanical tradition, i.e., grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) and prosody (*chandas*), but also phonetics (*śikṣā*), semantic analysis (*nirukta*), and lexicography (*nighaṇṭu*s and *kośa*s). Moreover, the literary commentaries often employed sophisticated theoretical categories and hermeneutical instruments developed in scholarly disciplines such as Vedic exegesis (*mīmāṃsā*), logic (*nyāya*), or the Buddhist Pramāṇa tradition, without disregarding knowledge systems that dealt with social reality and its cultural domestication, such as the trivium of law (*dharmaśāstra*), polity (*arthaśāstra*), and erotics

23 Very tentatively, Pollock (2015b: 117) sketches some moments of this history: "This [i.e., the boom in literary commentaries] seems to have started in the twelfth century among the Jains of western India, but they were quickly followed by Kerala scholars in the thirteenth century, who had clearly learned from the Kashmiris; the practice then moved eastward, to Andhra by the early fifteenth century, and then Bengal (though there were earlier commentators in Mithila)".

24 An early voice in the right direction is Dundas (1985: 6), who laments: "Probably owing to the comparatively minor position which *belles lettres* occupy in Indian studies, commentators on *kāvya* texts are generally read more for the glosses on difficult words and constructions they provide than for any intrinsic interpretive merit they might possess".

25 The celebrated dictum that the Veda instructs like a master, history like a friend, and poetry like a lover, first formulated by Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka (9th–10th c.), has become a topos to justify the ethical function of *kāvya*. Moreover, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* already praises the distinctiveness of drama as a means of instruction available even to women, children, and the lowest social groups. Although the classical plays might have been staged in popular or religious contexts such as festivals, their versified portions were certainly not immediately grasped by most, let alone by people without a full mastery of the Sanskrit language and its poetical conventions.

(*kāmaśāstra*).[26] Moreover, the very literary tradition that the authors of literary commentaries helped create, establish, and constantly refashion offered them one more source of textual authority to justify their own interpretive choices. In other words, in order to buttress their readings of belletristic works, commentators would also quote the poems of Kālidāsa, Māgha, and other staple figures of Sanskrit literature as authoritative sources side by side with theoretical works on poetics or other knowledge systems.

Of course, single commentaries vary enormously in size, originality, hermeneutical acuity, and the number of transdisciplinary sources they draw upon. Historically, as the best-known case—that is, Vallabhadeva—seems to show,[27] it appears plausible that the earliest commentaries had a more terse style and adhered closer to the letter of the commented text; meanwhile, later authors composed longer commentaries with more detailed explanations, discussions, references to disparate scholarly texts, and daring hermeneutical takes on their target poetical works on the whole. However, this degree of historical overgeneralization is far from offering any workable analytical tool and stands to be disproved by further research.

Conversely, from a descriptive, ahistorical perspective, in order to flesh out what a commentary is and what its functions are considered to be, it is customary to quote a well-known floating verse on commentary's alleged *pañcalakṣaṇa*, its fivefold definition. The verse runs as follows:

> *padacchedo 'nvayoktiś ca samāsādivivecanam* |
> *padārthabodhas tātparyaṃ vyākhyāvayavapañcakam* ||

Roodbergen translates: "The five parts of a commentary are (1) marking off the words, (2) the statement of the words in their order of construction, (3) the examination of compounds, etc., (4) the explanation of word meanings, (5) (the statement of) the author's intention".[28] A variant of this verse, attributed by the *Nyāyakośa* to the *Parāśapurāṇa*,[29] is quoted by Tubb and Boose, who even take its cue for the general organization of their invaluable handbook:

> *padacchedaḥ padārthoktir vigraho vākyayojanā* |
> *ākṣepeṣu samādhānaṃ vyākhyānaṃ pañcalakṣaṇam* ||[30]

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26 Thus, literary commentaries also offer precious glimpses of the textual and cultural histories of numerous different disciplines and the varied forms of their textual reuse. On textual reuse, see the work of Elisa Freschi, especially Freschi/Maas 2017. For a similar take on "what commentaries do", see Patel 2014: 52–53.

27 Goodall/Isaacson 2003.

28 Roodbergen 1984: 2.

29 More variants of this verse can be found in Goodall/Isaacson 2003: li, n. 100.

30 Tubb/Boose 2007: 3.

According to Tubb and Boose's useful analysis, the translation would run as follows: "The five services of a commentary are 1) word-division, 2) paraphrasing, 3) analysis of grammatical complexities, 4) the construction of sentences, and 5) the answering of objections".[31] Ostensibly, with its mention of the practice of *ākṣepa* and *samādhāna*, objections and counterobjections, this second version seems to offer a definition that would also account for the commentarial practice focused on religious and philosophical commentaries, while the first version might be seen as focusing more narrowly on what we call "literary commentaries". Again, the distinction we have drawn between "literary commentaries" and other kinds of exegetical works appears to be both hinted at and concealed by the emic discourse.

Whatever version one might choose to consider, it is clear that this verse enjoins an ex post, global comprehension of commentarial practice without taking into account any differences based on personal ingenuity, diachronic variety, or specific heterogeneity due to the genre or specificities of the commented text.[32] In other words, this verse could well be interpreted as the extreme waiver of any attempt to offer a structured typology for the unwieldy variety of commentarial practices in general and the utmost diversity in quality and scope of single commentaries in particular. In the next section, we will attempt a typological taxonomy suited for "literary commentaries" as we have encountered them in our reading practices, and in the analyses of this volume's contributors and others, which might at least represent a first guide in navigating this vast and multifarious ocean.

3 Attempting a typological taxonomy

As we have hinted, literary commentaries often offer much more than a simple explanation and clarification of their target text, as the *pañcalakṣaṇa* verse seems to imply. Especially for those commentators who draw fully from the wealth of intellectual resources offered by the other disciplinary fields of the Sanskrit

31 Ibid. 2007: 4–5.

32 Based on this earlier fivefold emic functional account of the Sanskrit commentary, Klebanov (2020) has attempted to extrapolate and isolate sixteen "functional elements" from the commentarial tradition on Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya*, examples of which are "paraphrases or direct glosses of the words from the root text, simple questions or other types of introductory remarks employed to disambiguate syntactic relation between words, general explanatory passages, technical analysis of grammatical complexes, quotes from Sanskrit dictionaries and many more" (ibid.: 529). Looking at their distribution in commentaries belonging to different time periods and typologies can, according to Klebanov, offer a methodology for the structural analysis of commentaries on *mahākāvyas*—a genre he distinguishes from commentaries on shorter *kāvyas*—that might prove useful for text-critical purposes.

intellectual tradition, literary commentaries were sometimes the locus for complex arguments about the nature of literary art, social reality, ethical practice, and even soteriological issues.

Therefore, a different way to grapple with the issue of what a literary commentary is and what it does within the intellectual life of premodern South Asia is to ask whether it represents 1) a new genre per se; 2) a practice-oriented extension of the theoretical discourse developed in the dual *śāstra* of poetics-cum-dramaturgy; or even 3) a sort of metagenre of cultural exegesis, drawing on an incredibly vast, and potentially open, number of disparate disciplines, whose limits are coextensive with the breadth of culturally encoded life itself, here reproduced and remodelled in the universe of fiction.

1) The newness of literary commentaries, as mentioned above, lies principally in the application of interpretive techniques that had developed out of Vedic exegesis—and, as such, had long been restricted to the world of philosophical and religious texts, including the disciplines ancillary to the study of the Vedas—to a new secular domain, that of literature. The genre emerged sometime before the ninth century as a practice of glossing words and finding synonyms, with a focus on *kāvya stricto sensu*, and later expanded to *nāṭya* as well. One might say, however, that the practice of explaining passages from a *kāvya* or *nāṭaka* was not completely new either, since the authors of *alaṃkāraśāstra* were already in the habit of quoting existing literary samples, or of making up new verses, in order to exemplify the rules they were codifying in treatises. These might be regarded as early examples of commentaries as literary criticism, though applied to stray verses and prose passages drawing on a wide pool of poems and dramas, rather than to a single literary work.
2) The continuity between the practice of *ālaṃkārika*s and literary commentators leads us to the next hypothesis, namely that "literary commentaries" represent an extension of the practice inaugurated by literary critics. Starting from around 800 CE, at the court of Jayāpīḍa of Kashmir, Udbhaṭa and Vāmana began the practice of quoting and analysing examples from existing literary compositions to illustrate the principles laid down in their *alaṃkāraśāstra* works, a practice that continued and bloomed with subsequent authors, such as Ānandavardhana, Mukula, and, of course, Abhinavagupta.[33] It is

33 Udbhaṭa and Vāmana are also the first known authors of *alaṅkāraśāstra* who quoted examples from Sanskrit plays. For instance, in his mostly lost commentary on Bhāmaha's *Kāvyālaṃkāra*, Udbhaṭa quotes a verse from the *Ratnāvalī*, while Vāmana quotes famous verses from the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Uttararāmacarita*, just to mention two celebrated plays.

noteworthy that in the field of *nāṭyaśāstra*, this practice flourished especially in the form of commentators on scholarly treatises. The *Abhinavabhāratī* and the *Avaloka*, which are both commentaries on dramaturgical texts, use examples from *nāṭaka*s as well as *kāvya*s to illustrate certain theoretical principles laid down in their *mūla*.[34]

Thus, one might argue that "literary commentaries" are just a systematic application of the same principles of analysis first seen in the works of *alaṃkāra-* and *nāṭyaśāstra* to a literary work investigated and understood as a whole.[35] However, as suggested by McCrea, in consideration of the "notable disjunction between the practice and the theory of Sanskrit poetry",[36] one might assume that at least some "literary commentaries" were not simply applying śāstric principles to works of literature, but were meant to fill "the gap between poetic theory and poetic practice" by possibly "providing a kind of interface between them".[37] As such, they might be considered primary sources for the study of the developments in *alaṃkāraśāstra* and its textual history. In the field of *nāṭyaśāstra*, illustration through cases of *prayoga* can also be noted, as for instance in the *Abhinavabhāratī*, in which examples are taken from the practice of actors and not from that of the dramatist alone, a practice that is continued in at least one *nāṭaka* commentary, the *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā* (see below). However, considering commentaries on *nāṭaka*s as a mere practice-oriented extension of the specialized normative discourse of *nāṭyaśāstra* is even more problematic, as these commentaries generally engage a much more diversified array of disciplines, including, to a large extent, the analysis of figures of speech, which usually plays a minor role in *nāṭyaśāstra* literature compared to *rasa* analysis.

3) Undoubtedly, the most radical position is to argue that "literary commentaries" represent a metagenre of cultural exegesis, an open-ended discursive and hermeneutic enterprise that starts from a literary text, but necessarily transcends it. By fully utilizing the wealth of knowledge offered by the centuries-long tradition of multidisciplinary exegesis, the authors of such kinds of literary commentaries offer their interpretations and their ultimately prescriptive takes on reality itself by using the fictional universe of poetry as a springboard to weigh in even on matters of ultimate concern. A paradigmatic example might

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34 Analogously to the mixing of categories already noted in *alaṃkāraśāstra*, one might remark that Dhanika's *Avaloka* ad *Daśarūpaka* (10th c.), though belonging to the *nāṭyaśāstra* tradition, quotes examples from the *Sattasaī*, in particular to exemplify heroine typology.

35 Such is the view expressed by, for instance, Mainkar, who regards the activity of *nāṭya* commentators as the application of the canons of dramaturgy to the plays (Mainkar 1971: 1).

36 McCrea 2010: 231.

37 Ibid.: 232.

well be represented by Lakṣmaṇa Paṇḍita's commentary on the first canto of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa*, which interprets the famous poem as an esoteric exposition of Vedāntic monism (as discussed further below), a hermeneutical enterprise that clearly follows a larger religio-philosophical agenda than the mere act of commenting on a literary work.

Ultimately, this three-pronged characterization of literary commentaries as a genre is bound to remain extremely theoretical if it is not connected with the study of original materials and confrontation with the actual variety of literary commentaries and their form and function. In other words, some literary commentaries are indeed closer to the famous *pañcalakṣaṇa* and offer little more than (extremely useful) glosses on the commented texts. Other literary commentaries are steeped in the śāstric tradition and offer a full-fledged analysis of the work, backed up by a host of quotations from a plurality of scholarly sources.[38] Finally, some commentators might well go beyond the literary text and develop a hermeneutical approach aimed at larger issues of philosophical or even soteriological importance.

These three dimensions of literary commentaries are not mutually exclusive, as they are to be found in different proportions in a single exegetical effort; however, they can be tentatively extrapolated and isolated from the existing corpus for analytical purposes. This allows us to trace, if not a history of the genre, at least some general tendencies in the reception history of literary works at large. As shown by Patel, such shifts and turning points in the history of commentarial literature are best noticed when one has access to a whole series of commentaries on a single poem, spanning several centuries and composed by authors we can assign to specific geographical areas and defined sociocultural contexts.[39] Working on the reception history of the *Naiṣadhīyacarita*, a celebrated *mahākāvya* composed by Śrīharṣa in twelfth-century Kanauj, Patel argues that the poem "presents a semiotic density that invites multiple forms of commentarial analysis".[40] The *Naiṣadhīyacarita* has the unique characteristic of offering an almost uninterrupted tradition of commentaries, starting from about a century after the composition of the poem up to the twentieth century. From this vantage point, it is possible to look at the exegetical functions that different commentaries in different times and places carried out on one and the same text. The historical taxonomy that Patel traces for the *Naiṣadhīya* commentaries, however, cannot be taken as indicative of the whole tradition of

38 See McCrea 2010: 232, "Commentators, at least the more intellectually ambitious among them, seek not simply to provide a minimal interpretive aid to the less capable reader, but to explain fully and, where necessary, to justify both the form and the content of the poet's words, often with extensive reference to relevant works of grammatical, poetic, political and moral theory".

39 Patel 2014.

40 Ibid.: 86.

literary commentaries, as it starts already some three to four centuries earlier than the first commentary on the *Naiṣadhīyacarita*, and the relative distance between say, the work of Vallabhadeva (10th c.) and that of Kālidāsa (4th–5th c.) might also have had a different impact on the exegetical goals of the commentator. When one thinks about Sanskrit drama, the chronological distance between root text and commentary becomes even greater, and we might therefore suppose a different set of relations between the commentator's intent, the availability of exegetical instruments such as *śāstra*s or other commentaries, and the intended audience.

Along the lines just traced, and against the general tendency to dismiss literary commentaries as a genre inferior to philosophical commentaries, it is necessary to recognize the great variety in quality, complexity, or simply purpose in the various instances of literary commentaries. Given the huge vastness of the body of literary commentaries, we propose here a more concrete version of the typological taxonomy described above. It cannot but be based on inevitably biased and personal choices, led by our interests and our hunches, and sometimes simply guided by the availability of previous analytical attempts in secondary literature. We still hope that this taxonomy may have some practical utility, especially in showing the value of exploring the ocean of the commentarial tradition of *kāvya* and *nāṭya*.

In the search for sufficiently broad and evocative labels for the three items in our taxonomy, we have ultimately opted for the three simple terms: "comprehension", "interpretation", and "overinterpretation". Obviously enough, we are fully aware of and do share the Gadamerian and post-Gadamerian stance that every act of comprehension is an interpretation, and that every interpretation is to some extent an overinterpretation, as it cannot but be oriented toward the concerns and interests of the interpreters and infused with their pre-understanding of any specific issue as well as of the larger framework. However, we still think that a heuristic usage of the three terms we have chosen will allow readers and researchers to blaze a trail through the jungle of literary commentaries by positing some differences in content and style that are not fully thematized by the Sanskrit tradition nor by contemporary scholarship.

1) Commentaries as comprehension

The first typology includes commentaries that are concerned primarily with explaining the sense of the work they comment upon, which corresponds to what they understand to be the author's intention (the *tātpārya*, loosely speaking). A commentary falling under this category works as a companion for those who want to appreciate a poem or a play, providing simple glosses of its words, explanation of difficult passages, disambiguation of the meaning, analyses of compounded words, alternative readings, translations of the Prakrit passages into Sanskrit,

rearrangements of the syntax, etc.[41] Such commentaries are often presented as having a pedagogical intent, and as such, they are extremely helpful to even an average reader—provided such a figure ever existed in the refined world of Sanskrit court poetry. However, as Pollock has commented on Vallabhadeva, the earliest *kāvya* commentator whose works are extant and easily accessible, "there is little attempt at any comprehensive appreciation of the transcendent beauty of the work"; these commentaries are "*ad usum scholarum*".[42]

Vallabhadeva's commentarial style, as described in detail by Goodall and Isaacson in their introduction to the *Raghupañcikā*,[43] is quite unique in its brevity and terseness. What seems to be its main aim is to provide the purport of Kālidāsa's verses using glosses—without the corresponding *pratīka*s—and explaining unusual expressions or compounds—without analysing their basic elements. As such, it does not fulfil all the canonical functions later attributed to commentaries (read, the *pañcalakṣaṇa*), nor does it follow the practices most frequently attested, such as providing direct quotations from lexicons and grammars: "He [Vallabhadeva] rarely reproduces a word from the root text, quotes lexicographers very infrequently, and when he enters into grammatical discussions (which he does only rarely), he usually alludes to or paraphrases grammatical rules rather than quote them".[44] Instead, he appears to presuppose the reader's in-depth knowledge of the *Amarakośa* and the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, as well as the epics and the *Manusmṛti*, which are alluded to solely through incomplete quotations to be filled in by the erudite audience. No mention of works of *alaṃkāraśāstra* is made by Vallabhadeva, and rhetorical figures are identified very sparsely, by name alone. The fact that his commentary on the *Śiśupālavadha* engages a wider range of śāstric disciplines through quotation, commensurate with the difficulty of this poem, cannot but confirm Vallabhadeva's main concern as being one of textual comprehension.

Even though he is separated by around half a millennium from the time of his fellow countryman Vallabhadeva, Jonarāja (15th century) employs a similarly simple style of glossing in his commentaries. As investigated by Livio in the present volume, his commentary on Maṅkha's *Śrīkaṇṭhacarita* (as well as his commentary on Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya*) is thus an example of a concise and straightforward analysis of the root text, which aims at providing "only the synonymous syntactically simple meaning (*paryāyamātra*)" and dealing "only with the literal meaning

41 These correspond largely to the five functions given in the canonical *pañcalakṣaṇa*, on which see the previous section. For examples of each of these functions, extrapolated from Harihara's 12th-century commentary on the *Mālatīmādhava*, see Grimal 2000. This commentary might well be said to fall under our first category of commentaries as comprehension.

42 Pollock 1985a: 382.

43 Goodall/Isaacson 2003.

44 Ibid.: xlvii.

(*vācyārthamātravivṛttiṃ*)".[45] However, there are several exceptions to this general attitude of the commentator, as he occasionally has to venture deeper explanations when the text prompts him to do so.[46] By contrast, the norm of his commentarial style is simple and concise, quoting almost exclusively from Pāṇini's *Aṣṭadhyāyī* and Amarasiṃha's *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*, but without refraining from the "philological" discussion of some variant readings. Without speculating on the reason for his terseness, it is clear that it was indeed a commentarial choice, as we know and will briefly see from the many other commentators of the same period who took rather different exegetical approaches.

Dakṣiṇāvartanātha or Dakṣiṇāvartapati, a South Indian commentator of the thirteenth,[47] or fourteenth to fifteenth century,[48] is the author of the *Ṭippaṇa*, a short commentary on the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*.[49] It is the oldest available commentary on Kālidāsa's most celebrated play—though not so old compared to the commentarial tradition of Kālidāsa's poems, starting around the tenth century. As the Sanskrit title suggests, the *Ṭippaṇa* is another example of a commentary type that can be labelled as a "gloss". Its treatment of the root text is extremely brief and sporadic. However, it does offer synonyms and paraphrases for some difficult Sanskrit words, with references to Pāṇini or the *Amarakośa*. At times, it provides possible alternative understandings (*vā*) and discusses a handful of variant readings. More often, his commentary is limited to Sanskrit renderings of the Prakrit, be it single words or longer passages, such as the famous scene of the fisherman at the beginning of act 6, for which Dakṣiṇāvartanātha gives a full Sanskrit *chāyā*. All things considered, the *Ṭippaṇa* is indeed a useful work, but it does seem little more than a polished collation of notes that a pedagogically attentive teacher would offer to his young students.

Certainly, we might find many more examples of commentaries that straddle the line between pedagogically oriented compilations of short glosses and well-thought-out works of didactic exegesis, both to be loosely subsumed under our category of commentaries as comprehension.

2) Commentaries as interpretation

This second category is the hardest to define and delimit, as it possibly includes the great majority of literary commentaries, potentially nullifying the very validity of this taxonomical effort. It includes commentaries that aim at what one might call a

45 Obrock 2015: 78–79, quoted by Livio, this volume, p. 532.

46 See the case—studied in Livio 2020 and taken up again in this volume—of the philosophical hymn found in the seventeenth canto of the *Śrīkaṇṭhacarita*.

47 De 1955.

48 Shukla Shastri 1992.

49 Edited by Shukla Shastri 1992. On other commentaries by Dakṣiṇāvarthanātha on the works of Kālidāsa, see above, n. 18.

"close reading" of the target text, a line-by-line or verse-by-verse analysis that deconstructs and reconstructs form and meaning. This is also realized by the mobilization of an extensive pool of references from all sorts of theoretical texts, well beyond the "zero degree" of commentarial intertextuality, i.e. the simple use of grammar and lexicons. As noted in our general characterization of literary commentaries, these authors peruse works of *alaṃkāraśāstra*, *dharmaśāstra*, *mīmāṃsā*, and *nyāya* without neglecting texts such as the epics or other literary oeuvres. Thus, beyond the numerous works that are focused on the identification of figures of speech (*alaṃkāra*), instances of poetic suggestion (*vyañjanā*), and aesthetic emotions (*rasa*), many commentaries do bear a different focus. For instance, as shown by Patel's historical analysis of the commentarial tradition of the *Naiṣadhīyacarita*, Vidyādhara focused on the literary aspects of the *alaṃkāra* tradition,[50] while Cāṇḍupaṇḍita acknowledged the results of his predecessors but decided to focus on something else, i.e., the larger philosophical culture that imbues the *Naiṣadhīya*. Therefore, one aim for future research would be to fine-tune this all-too-large second category, possibly along the lines of the close reading preferred by different commentators, for instance by comparing their library of citations and their sometimes very explicit statements with what their scholarly agenda is supposed to accomplish.

The most well-known example of this middle ground of interpretive exegesis is the celebrated Mallinātha, famous for his numerous commentaries on the most renowned *kāvya* works (including the *pañcamahākāvya* of Kālidāsa, Bhāravi, Māgha, and Śrīharṣa) and on a few *nyāya* philosophical works. Mallinātha hailed from fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Andhra, and the broadness of his scholarship is commensurate with his scholarly title—the highest and most honorific—of Mahāmahopādhyāya.[51] In an explicitly disdainful attitude toward his predecessors, Mallinātha assumes a more professional and critical tone in his exegetical language,

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50 Similarly, in his commentary on Harṣa's *Nāgānanda*, called *Vimarśinī*, the post-thirteenth-century Kerala commentator Śivarāma deals with many topics treated within the discipline of *alaṃkāraśāstra* (poetics) coupled with its natural theatrical "other", that is, the field of *nāṭyaśāstra* (dramaturgy). For instance, possibly inaugurating a practice common to later Kerala commentators, he offers a detailed discussion of the *nāndī*, the benedictory verse enjoined by Bharata, as well as what is a creative mini-essay on *śāntarasa*, the aesthetic emotion of tranquillity, by skilfully etching his own position in the form of an intertextual discussion of the works of celebrated śāstric authors such as Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, Dhanika, Bhoja, and Śāradātanaya.

51 On Mallinātha's life and works, see Lalye 2002: 11–19. About his erudition, Layle says: "Mallinātha was a commentator par excellence. This position, he attained, was surely due to his vast and all encompassing knowledge. His erudition knew no bounds. Almost all the lexicons, Sūtras of Pāṇini and Dharmaśāstra works were mastered by him" (ibid.: 20). On the breadth of Mallinātha's erudition and the disciplines he mastered, as testified by his huge wealth of citations from all kinds of texts, see Lalye op. cit. and Banerji 1972. McCrea (2010: 238) voices an interesting take on Mallinātha's use of his immense knowledge, namely that he goes on relentlessly identifying poetic figures of sound and

which is directed, according to Patel, at both the *kāvya* scholarly community (which included his rival commentators) and his students of belles lettres. In fact, Mallinātha's commentaries "convey the practice of a dedicated teacher explaining the technical points of grammar, meter, and lexicography"[52] without adding any nonessential, extraneous material to the matter treated by the poet. It is easy to imagine how, in a pedagogical setting, this noninterventionist yet exhaustive attitude toward the text[53] must have earned him a tremendous aura of scholarly and prescriptive authority, so much so that "even today, most students of canonical *mahākāvya* read the poem with his commentary underneath the source text".[54]

Another household name from the commentarial tradition of literary texts is Rāghavabhaṭṭa (16th or 17th century),[55] a "poet-commentator" in the words of Mainkar.[56] "His style, simple and facile, has a certain poetic glow and easy eloquence".[57] What is of particular interest here is Rāghavabhaṭṭa's incredible scholarship,[58] precisely insofar as it is joined with his sensitive analysis of aesthetic emotions and all the other trappings of literary investigation. In his commentary on the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, he stands out also for his philological acumen and his well-pondered opinions on which readings are to be preferred or which verses are to be accepted, discarded, or improved—to the point that, contrary to Vallabhadeva, he does not shy away from correcting mistakes in the composition of some of Kālidāsa's verses according to the principles laid out in the theoretical texts of *alaṃkāraśāstra*.[59] Most interestingly, however, is Rāghavabhaṭṭa's capacity to deepen the

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sense by sourcing different works of *alaṃkāraśāstra*, while being "generally uninterested in resolving the tensions between the various conflicting taxonomies they offer".

52 Patel 2014: 62.

53 In a sort of self-manifesto at the beginning of all of his commentaries, Mallinātha boastfully reiterates his allegiance to the poet's text by declaring his intention to deal exclusively with matters that are relevant and internal to the text. Even the titles of some of his commentaries (*Sañjīvinī*, *Jīvātu*) make reference to the process of "bringing back to life" what was killed by others (Patel 2014: 62, 92).

54 Ibid.: 79.

55 For instance, the *Arthadyotanikā*, Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary on the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, has been perused by Gerow (1979 and 1980) in his analysis of the different parts of the plot of Kālidāsa's celebrated play.

56 Mainkar 1971: 38.

57 Ibid.: 39.

58 See Pusalker 1960 for the impressive list of works quoted by Rāghavabhaṭṭa (on the likely assumption that he is the same author who wrote a commentary on the *Śāradātilaka*).

59 For a discussion of how Mallinātha deals with what some theoreticians would regard as potential flaws in poetry, see McCrea 2010: 236ff. Ostensibly, the choice oscillates between the more common practice of defending the transmitted text and the more interesting choice of emending it, as Rāghavabhaṭṭa is also sometimes ready to do (see, for instance, the famous *sarasijam anuviddham* verse discussed in Mainkar 1971: 41–42).

meanings of the commented text by showing all the suggested senses that are concealed in its semantic and phonetic textures—the best example of which, again displayed by Mainkar, may be his linguistically sophisticated and emotionally insightful analysis of Śakuntalā's love letter to Duṣyanta.[60]

As to the incorporation of debates and discourses specific to other disciplines, Dezső looks at the incorporation of the debate, typical of *dharmaśāstra*, on the availability of the fourth stage of life, i.e. renunciation, to kings in the *Raghuvaṃśa*: namely, the options featured, on the one hand, in *dharmaśāstra* texts and, on the other, in Kālidāsa's treatment of Raghu's last years, or rather, in the different variant readings of selected verses as transmitted by literary commentators. On the basis of a finely chiselled textual-critical and philological analysis of published and unpublished commentaries on the *Raghuvaṃśa*, Dezső shows how some of the commentators' choices of particular readings of the *mūla* constituted different interpretations of the text with regard to Raghu's resorting to the stage of *saṃnyāsa* rather than that of *vānaprastha* after passing on the kingdom to his son. The availability of the fourth *āśrama* to kings was a much debated issue among *dharmaśāstra* authors, as testified by the quotation of their diverging opinions by Kālidāsa's commentators, and as reflected in the discrepancies among the variant readings transmitted in the *Raghuvaṃśa* commentaries, which ultimately reflect such divergences. As Dezső puts it, "in many cases the commentators discuss these variants and argue pro and contra the availability of *saṃnyāsa* for people of royal status, thus participating in a larger mediaeval debate observable in texts on *dharmaśāstra*".[61]

Another discipline one might expect to find more prominently mobilized in literary commentarial literature—given its bold entrance into poetic analysis in early ninth-century Kashmir, and its subsequent pervasiveness in the aesthetic discourse on *rasa*—is Mīmāṃsā, the science of textual hermeneutics par excellence. Although some aspects of its general theory of language and communication were indirectly drawn into commentaries on *kāvya* and *nāṭya*, through *ālaṃkāra-* and *nāṭya-śāstra*,[62] Mīmāṃsā hermeneutic principles generally play a minor role in literary commentaries, and its texts are hardly ever quoted. Against this background, the early modern commentary on Śaktibhadra's *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* by Kaścit ("Someone"), a self-declared follower of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa—who moreover quotes

60 Mainkar 1971: 50–52. For more examples of scholarly dense literary commentaries, see again Mainkar (ibid.: 55–72) on Ghanaśyāma's *Sañjīvana*, a commentary on Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*, as well as Kamalā's and Sundarī's *Camatkārataraṅgiṇī* on Rājaśekhara's *Viddhaśālabhañjikā*. On this veritable family of commentators and their sociology, see the recent and excellent Gomez 2022.

61 Dezső, this volume, p. 507.

62 For the most famous examples of Mīmāṃsā influence on *alaṃkāraśāstra*, see McCrea 2008 and Bronner 2016.

directly from Mīmāṃsā sources to substantiate his literary analysis—makes for an exceptional case study by Ollett in this special issue. As Ollett notes, the Mīmāṃsā model of discourse, which pays particular attention to contextual elements of speech and its "information structure" composed of foci (*vidheya*) and topics (*anuvādya*), primary and secondary segments, and intended and unintended meanings, "is particularly important to conversation and to literary genres like the stage-play in which conversation plays a major role".[63] If one thinks about the place and importance that terms like "objective", "intention", and "action" have in modern Western discourse on theatre and acting, one cannot but wonder whether this commentary might have been of any use to the Cākyār community, for whom this play and its individual acts are paramount works of Kūṭiyāṭṭam actorial virtuosity. Indeed, it was a pleasant coincidence to discover, while attending a staging of the first act of Śaktibhadra's *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* (the Parṇaśālāṅkam) by the Nepathya Ensemble in Moozhikkulam, that Kaścit's commentary was in all likelihood consulted by Kūṭiyāṭṭam master Ammanur Madhava Chakyar as he composed a new Malayāḷam acting manual (*āṭṭaprakāram*) for this act in the 1950s, given that the original had not been preserved.[64]

Moving from pragmatics to metatheoretical abstraction, Patel's contribution to the present volume focuses transversally on the metalinguistic features that characterize literary commentaries in Sanskrit, especially in the light of their continuity with the practices of everyday communication—insofar as commentaries are also an "artefactual remainder of oral teaching practices". By implementing this approach, the author manages to reflect on the varying reading practices of *kāvya*, mostly in line with our middle category of interpretation. However, along lines of reasoning somewhat dissimilar to our own, he regards the purpose of commentaries (in most cases) as an attempt to open up the semantics of a text, rather than merely narrow it down to one single interpretation.[65] Poetic texts are metasemantically and

63 Ollett, this volume, p. 564.

64 Margi Madhu Chakyar, director of Nepathya, confirmed that his teacher Ammanur Madhava Chakyar had a copy of Kuppuswami's Sastri edition of the play and commentary in his personal library (personal communication, July 2016). Although it is not certain to what extent Kaścit's commentary influenced modern Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance, a certain commonality of vocabulary in the explanation and elaboration of the *Āścāryacūḍāmaṇi*'s first act in its Sanskrit commentary and in the Malāyāḷam *āṭṭaprakāram* of the same cannot be the result of mere coincidence. Moreover, the idea of the *āṭṭaprakāram* as a "visual commentary" of the play was fruitfully explored by Margi Madhu Chakyar and Nepathya in a lecture demonstration connected with the special panel on Literary Commentaries at the 17th World Sanskrit Conference in Vancouver. A similar idea is arguably entertained in the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, a fifteenth-century (?) Kerala text on theatrical practice, however a larger treatment of this topic must be postponed for the time being.

65 An interesting counterexample is offered by Pollock (2015b: 124–127), who analyses the commentary of Aruṇagirinātha, a fourteenth-century author from Kerala, on the first chapter of

metapragmatically repurposed by their commentarial tradition in a potentially endless dialogue between reading the past into the present and the present into the past. For instance, the expansion of ever more specific meanings is highlighted as a common way of deepening the senses expressed by the root text. Thus, argues Patel, the meaning-making objectives of literary commentaries (again, in most cases) are far from a restriction of the text to one critical explanation or interpretation, but rather consist in powerfully enriching, complicating, and augmenting the cognitive, emotional, and imaginative purport of the root text.[66]

To conclude this section, one commentator whom we could situate at the threshold, so to say, of interpreting and overinterpreting is Nārāyaṇa, a seventeenth-century century Kerala author and student of Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa. This "unusually sensitive reader",[67] whom we can moreover suspect of likewise being an unusually sensitive spectator (an all-around *rasika*), tested his exegetical skills on both heroic comedy (*nāṭaka*)—with his *Bhāvārthadīpikā* on Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*—and satirical comedy (*prahasana*)—with his *Diṅmātradarśinī* on the *Bhagavadajjukam* (see below). In his commentary on Bhavabhūti, as Ollett and Venkatkrishnan contend, Nārāyaṇa was especially looking for the "deeper meanings" of the play, i.e. the "themes" that pervade the work as a whole, identified by the authors of this fine analysis as "reliving the past, heart-rending affects, familiarity and thickening"—the complex internal states that Bhavabhūti imbued his characters with. Moving away from the classical analysis of emotional experience as a *rasa* provoked in the spectators by the skilful presentation of the aesthetic factors onstage, and starting from the fact that—for Bhavabhūti, as thematized in the *Uttararāmacarita*—the inner states can hardly reach full expression in words and action, Nārāyaṇa interprets words such as particles, figures of speech, and the specific transitions in parts of the verses as the expression of complex or intense emotions affecting the characters, combining "sensitivity to and appreciation

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Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhava*. Pollock shows how the commentator interprets almost every single verse as a description of the psychologically most suitable place for the famous culmination of the poem, the blossoming of love between Śiva and Pārvatī. This insightful and straightforward interpretation of the seemingly descriptive beginning of the famous *mahākāvya* is teased out by a heavy reliance on the treatises of poetics and erotics that offer the theoretical background for the very understanding of love in the Sanskrit thought world. In Pollock's words, "making sense of Kālidāsa's text for Aruṇagirinātha, thus, meant above all embedding it in a set of intertexts, a body of ancillary knowledges, that preexist the poem" (ibid.: 127), which offer a solid basis for unequivocal interpretive efforts on the commentator's part.

66 Another purpose of literary commentaries that is insightfully highlighted by Patel is their implicit, but deliberate capacity to develop the skill to read Sanskrit *kāvya*s in all their incredibly complex phonetic and semantic structure.

67 Ollet/Venkatkrishnan, this volume, p. 581, n. 1.

for dramatic art with deep scholarly knowledge".[68] While the deeper meanings Nārāyaṇa discerns in the *Uttararāmacarita* are almost always contextual, the hidden meanings he elucidates in the *Bhagavadajjukam* are based on a subtext on Yoga and Vedānta that underlies the whole play (see below). This latter feature betrays, according to Ollett and Venkatkrishnan, Nārāyaṇa's indebtedness to Pūrṇasarasvatī's commentary on the *Mālatīmādhava*, a commentary we would qualify as "over-interpretive", as explained next.

3) Commentaries as overinterpretation

A recent article by Minkowski offers a clever definition of overinterpretation as the act of "subjugating the text to a tendentious agenda", be it religious, philosophical, ideological, or aesthetic.[69] We might not wish to stress the tendentiousness of the overinterpretive approach, as we do wish to include improbable readings of literary texts that are meant sincerely, or at least those whose sincerity cannot be ruled out. By contrast, the term "tendentious" does lean in the direction of some voluntary misrepresentation. Nevertheless, the possibly small set of literary commentaries that we are tentatively including under this label encompasses works that are undoubtedly veritable hermeneutical *tours de force*, but might indeed remain within the pale of plausibility (see, for instance, Jagaddhara's tentative reading of the *Mālatīmādhava*). What is of the greatest intellectual interest is how—by opening up an unprecedented semantic layer through the philological-cum-hermeneutical scholarly toolkit—such overinterpretive commentaries ineluctably cross the boundary lines of the literary and enter the domain of culture at large, with a whole set of, for instance, socioreligious ideas and perspectives that are explicitly meant to have a direct impact on the real world outside of fiction. To use a term from Biblical studies to indicate an interpretation that reads one's own ideas and biases into the text, this sort of "eisegesis" assumes the important role of cultural criticism *tout court*. Of course, these distinctions can never be clear-cut. For instance, we have seen how commentators on the *Raghuvaṃśa* intervene in the delicate social issues of *dharma*; however, this is not comparable with a fully devotional reinterpretation of a play or an advaitic rereading and even rewriting of the *Raghuvaṃśa* itself (for cases of which, see below), even if only its first canto. The hermeneutical and scholarly richness of this commentarial mode cannot be overestimated.

A well-known example of this kind of overinterpretive undertaking is the *Rasa-mañjari*, a commentary on Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* by the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Kerala commentator Pūrṇasarasvatī.[70] This courtly love story follows

68 Ibid.: p.

69 Minkowski 2020: 192.

70 Mainkar 1971: 19–37.

the complex romantic adventures of two couples, the eponymous Mālatī and Mādhava and their friends Makaranda and Madayantikā, assisted by a host of companions and allies and opposed by as many adversaries and antagonistic forces. Pūrnasarasvatī, most probably a Śaiva ascetic with advaitic leanings, offers a very ingenious allegorical reading of the plot that completely transcends the human nature of the characters' feelings and adversities. The whole drama becomes a celebration of the cosmic unions of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī in the guise of Mādhava and Mālatī and, secondarily, of Śiva and Pārvatī in the guise of Makaranda and Madayantikā. Even the whole array of secondary characters is interpreted as other deities, such as Sarasvatī, or as personifications of positive or negative universal principles, such as *bhakti* (devotion) or *hiṃsā* (violence).[71] This religio-philosophical allegory transmogrifies the very essence of the play by adding a deeper layer of meaning without negating the focus on the amorous sentiment that pervades the play, but subordinating it to a Vaiṣṇava philosophical agenda—which we might indeed call out as tendentious (see above).[72]

In a digression within Ollett and Venkatkrishnan's insightful paper in the present volume, the authors focus their attention on another commentary of Nārāyaṇa, the *Diṅmātradarśinī*, on the *Bhagavadajjukam*, a satire from the seventh-century Pallava court. In this work, Nārāyaṇa goes much further in his interpretive enterprise of elucidating hidden meanings (*gūḍhārtha*) than he did for Bhavabhūti's play (see above). He reads this satirical play on the hypocrisy of religious adepts as an allegory of the philosophical vision of Yoga and Vedānta, with the various characters representing cosmic entities such as God himself, the individual soul, and Nescience. Nārāyaṇa's positioning of his theory of meaning within the larger framework of aesthetic and linguistic theories of *alaṃkāraśāstra* is one of the most innovative aspects of his contribution. Allegorical overinterpretation is thus epistemically justified within the larger śāstric background of the Sanskrit literary tradition, even if the way Nārāyaṇa discusses it is "very terse, and not necessarily convincing".[73] However, his creativity deserves a special place as a valuable specimen in our category of commentary as overinterpretation.

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71 Again, see Mainkar (1971: 19–37) for more details on the allegorical correspondences proposed by Pūrṇasarasvatī.

72 Mainkar (1971: 19–37, specifically 22–24) offers an analysis of one more allegorical reading of Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*, that of Jagaddhara. Even if he does not go as far as Pūrṇasarasvatī in the conviction he shows toward his original interpretation, Jagaddhara presents a "natural" allegory, in Mainkar's words, by identifying several of the play's hints at the season of spring (*vasanta*) and its beauty—as if the human characters were better read as personifications of different aspects of the blossoming of nature in the season of love, the real, hidden topic of the play.

73 Ollett/Venkatkrishnan, this volume, p. 616. On the possible relation with the tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and its highly sophisticated interpretive traditions, see the article in this volume where the present authors discuss the views of K. G. Paulose.

Among the commentators on the celebrated *Amaruśataka*, Ravicandra (dating uncertain) certainly represents the figure of an overinterpreter. As Bronner describes, "against an entire tradition of understanding Amaru's explicitly erotic verses at face value, [Ravicandra] argued that they simultaneously describe both passion and its antithesis—dispassion".[74] The commentator's ascetic and philosophical reinterpretation is an impressive hermeneutical achievement, for which Ravicandra deploys the full array of commentarial techniques developed over centuries of both Sanskrit composition and exegesis.[75] Influenced as it was by some form of nondual Vaiṣṇavism, this interpretive feat was clearly accomplished with a specific agenda in mind. Even if Ravicandra's motivation remains somewhat uncertain,[76] the result of his commentary was a thorough reinvention of one of the most important literary texts of the erotic tradition for the sake of aesthetic, cultural, and religious purposes that the *Amaruśataka* was neither meant to represent nor to advance.

An even more extreme example of overinterpretation can be offered by the little-known *Advaitasudhā* of Lakṣmaṇa Paṇḍita (17th century, Benares), recently showcased by Minkowski.[77] Again, by stretching the practice of commentarial enterprise almost beyond the pale of scholarly credibility, Lakṣmaṇa Paṇḍita gives a nondual, Vedāntic interpretation of every single verse of the first canto of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa*. The result is so staggering that Minkowksi even proposes the creation of a new exegetical category—"outlandishness"—that would describe readings of traditional texts that the simple category of "overinterpretation" would fail to fully capture. The necessity of this new category is maintained on account of the "literary effect intended by the commentator", which would purposefully evoke the experience of "surprise, discovery and transgression" in the reader.[78]

If it is reasonable to remain agnostic as to the necessity of creating a category that is completely separate from "overinterpretation", our examples clearly show two different kinds of "eisegetical" readings. In the former case, that of Pūrṇasarasvatī and Jagaddhara, the literary text is understood and read as a whole in the light of a certain allegorical understanding, with only some specific but central

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74 Bronner 1998: 233.

75 Especially within the tradition of bitextuality; see Bronner 2010. On the specifics of Ravicandra's commentarial techniques, such as "resegmenting phoneme strings into words, exploiting the polysemic nature of various words, stretching the semantic field of others, and utilizing the ambiguities of Sanskrit syntax, grammar and word order", see Bronner 1998: 239–240 and *passim*.

76 Bronner (1998: 249–253) suggests a plausible motivation for Ravicandra's agenda: a defence of the "ascription" of the *Amaruśataka* to Śaṅkara, which by his time had become common knowledge and had probably been cause of criticism toward the perfectly ascetic founder of Advaitavedānta.

77 Minkowski 2020.

78 Ibid.: 189.

elements of the work cursorily interpreted in this direction. By contrast, in the latter case of Lakṣmaṇa Paṇḍita, the literary text is fully reinterpreted on the level of the signifiers[79] by the creation of a whole new text. This textual reduplication, which was crafted by way of a painstaking reinterpretation of its every word, is ultimately made possible by the all too powerful tools offered by both the commentarial tradition and the literary movement of bitextuality.[80]

To wrap up this tentative, three-pronged typological account of literary commentaries in the Sanskrit tradition, let us simply reiterate the heuristic nature of this enterprise and the necessity to substantially refine its taxonomical precision, especially with regard to the central category, which runs the risk of becoming an unwieldy, catch-all label, unless further subcategorized and fine-tuned in ever more comprehensive studies of the tradition of literary commentaries.

4 Conclusions: the two antlers of Sanskrit literary commentaries

To conclude our observations, we will examine a celebrated verse that played an important role in the history of Sanskrit literary culture. The famous depiction of a deer chased by Duṣyanta's chariot at the beginning of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* will serve as both a paradigmatic example of a centuries-long interaction between poetical theory, literary commentaries, and their objects—the literary text, which sometimes extends to its staged dimension—as well as a very imperfect metaphor for one of the crucial issues of this very interplay: the ever-changing and ever-fragile balance between poetic (and performative) novelty and theoretical normalization.

grīvābhaṅgābhirāmaṃ muhur anupatati syandane dattadṛṣṭiḥ
paścārdhena praviṣṭaḥ śarapatanabhayād bhūyasā pūrvakāyam |
śaṣpair ardhāvalīḍhaiḥ śramavitatamukhabhraṃśibhiḥ kīrṇavartmā
paśyodagraplutitvād viyati bahutaraṃ stokam urvyāṃ prayāti || 1.7 ||

Repeatedly darts a glance at the pursuing chariot,
gracefully twisting his neck,

79 As already suggested by Bronner 1998.

80 For an analysis of how some other classics of Sanskrit literature were read as bitextual works (*śleṣa*), see Bronner 2010: 155–194; for a specific discussion of the differences and similarities of allegorical readings and *śleṣa* readings, see specifically Bronner 2010: 181–183, in which the allegorical examples come from commentators' readings of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which we have decided to leave outside of our current focus. For some examples along these lines, see Goldman 1992, Minkowski 2005, and most recently Rao 2014.

with his haunches drawn acutely forward
into his forebody
out of fear of the arrow strike,
scattering the path with grass half-chewed,
dropping from his mouth gaping
with exhaustion.
Look! With his lofty leaps he moves
more through the sky
and hardly touches the ground.[81]

This elegant verse opening the first act of the iconic Indian play *Abhijñānaśā-kuntala* makes for a perfect stock example of how to build up an emotion in theatre, according to the well-known *rasasūtra*, *vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaṃyogād rasaniṣpattiḥ* (*rasa* arises out of the union of the determinants, the consequents, and the transitory states): the element determining fear in the deer (*vibhāva*) is King Duṣyanta himself, while the consequents of this fear (*anubhāva*) are the physical signs the stanza attributes to the deer, such as the turning of the neck, the open mouth dropping half-chewed grass, the contraction of the body, and the lofty leaps. The transitory states (*vyabhicāribhāva*) accompanying the main mood are terror, exhaustion and agitation, evident from the deer's pace. All these elements converge in the stable state (*sthāyibhāva*) of fear (*bhaya*), and result in the rasa *bhayānaka*, the fearsome. Although this verse appears, at first sight, to have been composed almost as a "textbook" example, and indeed so happened to fulfil this role in many an instance, the interpretations ascribed to it, both by authors of *nāṭya-* and *alaṃkāra-śāstra* and later by authors of literary commentaries, differ significantly.

Without taking a deep dive into the depths of *rasa* theory, it is worth commencing with Abhinavagupta, who first took up this touching verse in his famous commentary on Bharata's *rasasūtra* at the beginning of his final statement (*siddhānta*) on the ontology of the *rasa* experience. As is well known, the represented scene of an emotional experience is the trigger for the spectators' savouring of the aesthetic emotion, insofar as it becomes both generalized, i.e., free from any connection to a specific time, place, and knowing subject, and deeply engrossing, thanks to its quasi-perceptual character. Thus, on hearing the *grīvābhaṅgā-bhirāmaṃ* verse, once the representation triggers the process of generalization, fear is no longer experienced as belonging to the deer (nor to King Duṣyanta, who is ultimately unreal, or to anyone else), and is savoured as an absolute feeling:

81 Text and translation Vasudeva 2006: 58–59.

the fearsome *rasa*.[82] The *grīvābhaṅgābhirāmaṃ* verse will be taken up again and read from a variety of standpoints by other writers of *alaṃkāraśāstra*, such as Kuntaka and Vidyādhara, especially in dealing more explicitly with the issue of whether an animal is an appropriate trigger for a full-fledged *rasa* experience.[83] By contrast, a maverick *alaṃkāraśāstra* author such as Mahima Bhaṭṭa (eleventh century, Kashmir) might use the *grīvābhaṅgābhirāmaṃ* verse for quite a different purpose, e.g., in the latter's case, as an illustration of the ever-problematic figure of speech that is *svabhāvokti*, the "natural description".[84]

Unsurprisingly, this verse was also dealt with by the many commentators on Kālidāsa's play. As in the case of *ālaṃkārika*s, as well as in the case of literary commentators, we reserve a complete treatment of the plurality of interpretations for some future enterprise. However, it is worth mentioning a couple of commentaries that we have scanned in search of inspiration. The terse and laconic Dakṣiṇāvartanātha (13th c.? See above) says nothing at all about our deer in his *Ṭippaṇa*.[85] Kāṭayavema (14th c.), on the contrary, gives a semantic analysis of the verse in his *Kumāragirirājīya*, but does not mention any broader interpretation in terms of *rasa* or figures of speech.[86] Later commentators seem to take sides more explicitly on these issues: Rāghavabhaṭṭa (15th c.) clearly sees the *grīvābhaṅgābhirāmaṃ* through the lens of the aesthetic factors mentioned at the outset of our analysis, of poetic suggestion, and of proper *rasa* experience along recognizably Abhinavaguptian lines;[87] while Abhirāma Bhaṭṭa (17th.) opts for an analysis in terms of poetical figuration, with the description of the deer's flight clearly labelled as a *svabhāvokti*.[88]

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82 Among the vast secondary literature on the topic of *rasa*, see Gnoli 1968: 13 (for the edition), ibid.: 54–56 (for the translation of this passage), and Pollock 2016: 194.

83 Kuntaka uses this verse in his third *unmeṣa* as an example of a *rasābhāsa*, a mere semblance of *rasa*, which here is triggered by the representation of the emotions of animals (see Pollock 2016: 98–99). Vidyādhara's opposite position is sketched by Pollock (ibid.: 247ff.), who also explains how the issue is closely connected with "the question of the analytical locus of rasa. If this was squarely the literary character, as held by Kuntaka and Bhoja, it would seem to make no sense to attribute rasa to an animal; for Abhinava, by contrast, for whom the analytic had shifted entirely to reception, the original character did not really experience rasa anyway, and hence it was entirely reasonable for the viewer to have a rasa experience in the presence of such a representation" (ibid.: 249).

84 See verse 120 of the second *vimarśa* of Mahima Bhaṭṭa's *Vyaktiviveka* (p. 108 in the edition of Ganapati Sastri).

85 *Ṭippaṇa* (edition by Shukla 1992).

86 *Kumāragirirājīya* (edition by Sastri 1947), pp. 6–7.

87 *Arthadyotanikā* (edition by Godabole/Parab 1891), pp. 16–17.

88 *Diṅmātrādarśana* (see under Abhirāma), p. 17–18: *svabhāvoktir alaṃkāraḥ, bibhyataḥ sāraṅgasya kriyārūpavarṇanāt. 'svabhāvoktis tu ḍimbhādeḥ svakriyārūpavarṇanam' iti.* Quoting Mammaṭa's definition of *svabhāvokti* from *Kāvyaprakāśa* 111, Ullāsa 10, p. 302.

Again, exhaustiveness is not our current aim; rather, we wish to focus on an underresearched commentary on Kālidāsa's most famous play, the anonymous *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā*. Most probably, it is a work composed in Kerala in the fifteenth century or later.[89] Its Kerala origin is suggested by various factors: the very mention of Pūrṇasarasvatī, the *Sāhityasāra* of Sarveśvarācāya, and many of the Trivandrum plays attributed to Bhāsa, as well as the *Āścaryacūḍamaṇi* of Śaktibhadra. Even the sheer fact that the totality of the available manuscripts of this work are in Malayalam script points to Kerala.[90] The reason we have chosen it as a short case study in the interplay between text and commentary is the extent to which the *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā* comments on practical details of staging and performance, starting from Mainkar's acknowledgment that "the most remarkable feature of this commentary that distinguished it from all the rest of the commentaries whether on this play or any other, is the awareness it reveals of the fact that this is a play to be performed on the stage, an awareness which is reflected in many of its discussions".[91] Let us give the crucial example of our deer as a study of what we have elsewhere dubbed "stage philology".[92]

First of all, following in the steps of previous *ālaṃkārika*s, and followed by the Kerala Śakuntalā-commentator Abhirāma, the author of the *Carcā* describes the terrified flight of the deer in the *grīvābhaṅgābhirāmaṃ* verse as a case of *svabhāvokti*. He then continues with a discussion that recalls Kuntaka's and Abhinavagupta's debate about the possibility that the fearsome *rasa* be expressed by the same

89 The *terminus post quem* is Pūrṇasarasvatī, who is quoted and sometimes criticized in the work.

90 Of course, the same is true of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, a Kashmirian text that has been the object of our wildest dreams and nightmares in the last two decades or so. The *Carcā*'s attention to the stage, and the commonality of some technical terminology with the *Naṭāṅkuśa* ("Goading the Actor")—particularly the distinction between *anukārya* and *parāmṛśya* role types in a play—might be considered a further hint that points toward a Kerala origin for the *Abhijñānaśākuntalacārcā*, if not even to the common authorship of the *Naṭāṅkuśa* and the *Carcā*. The latter was already hinted at by Kunjunni Raja in his "Foreword" to Paulose's 1993 edition of the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, on the basis of a nonspecified "same attitude" (p. x) between the two works.

91 Mainkar 1971: 109. Apart from Mainkar (ibid.: 97–111), on the *Carcā* see the edition of Pillai 1961, a short article (Unni 1975), an unpublished thesis (Bai 1998), and the recent Vimala 2018.

92 In our joint paper at the special panel on literary commentaries at the 17th WSC in Vancouver, we presented a project on "stage philology" as a conscious attempt to retrieve the historical transformation of theatrical theories and practices through the study of dramaturgical texts alongside *nāṭaka* commentaries; such texts offer a precious window, if not directly on the practices, on the theoretical reflections on these practices, which cannot but be triggered, at least in part, by the living performances witnessed by the authors of such texts. Stage philology is therefore the "slow reading" of texts on theatrical performance while bearing in mind the question of how these texts are informed by the subtle interplay between theory and practice.

stanza, and finally gives it an unexpected and original twist, which makes the passage worth rendering in full:

> In this verse, the activity of the frightened deer running corresponds to the poetical figure called "natural description" (*svabhāvokti*). However, one should not think that the fearsome (*bhayānaka*) *rasa* is conveyed through the visible movement [of the deer], since it belongs to a character that is merely referred to (*parāmṛśya*, i.e. a character only indicated by the text, as opposed to one that is being enacted on stage in the appropriate costume). And it is impossible to see the emotional state (*bhāva* or *rasa*) of a character that is merely referred to. But in case one wants to see it, it will become visible by making [that character] enter the stage. Only what actually enters the stage is visible to the audience, not what does not enter. Here, [in theatre,] emotional states such as fear and the like are not represented with reference to [characters] that are invisible to the spectator, since theatre is meant to be seen by the audience. If someone were to ask the reason for bringing up such [a description] at all, we would answer that it is because it is used to bring out the body of the story, and that it aims at communicating the emotional states (*bhāva* and *rasa*) of the enacted characters (the king and his charioteer), who are made visible through their entrance on stage. Thus, here, the emotional state of fear (*bhaya-bhāva*), which belongs to the character merely referred to (i.e., the deer)—invisible to the audience, since its entry has not been announced—is not perceived through its visible effects, but only by way of listening. How can these two aspects coexist in a single same entity? This has been taught in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*: "The goddess Sarasvatī has given audibility to what is visible". (NŚ 1.61)[93]

This short but dense passage seems to at least entertain the possibility that an animal might have feelings and ultimately even evoke *rasa*, thus possibly contributing to an older śāstric debate; however, this is not the main point made by the *Carcā* author here. More than the aesthetic questions regarding the ontology and epistemology of *rasa*, or spotting the full configuration of aesthetic factors that reference a certain *rasa*, our author is concerned with what we could call the "poetics of stage performance". That is to say, his attention to performance is not actually directed toward a particular historical instance of the stage performance of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, but to the very theatricality of the play in the transition from its textual to its stage form, resorting to the authority of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to justify the presence of poetic descriptions, alongside dialogical

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93 Our translation of *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā*, p. 31: *atra mṛgasya bhayadhāvanakriyā svabhāvoktir alaṅkāraḥ | bhayānakarasas tu prekṣyagatyā na cintanīyaḥ, parāmṛśyagatatvāt | parāmṛśyaraso bhāvo vā na prekṣitum iṣyate | prekṣituṃ vā yadi tv iṣyate praveśavidhinā sa pratyakṣīkriyate | praviṣṭaḥ khalu prekṣakāṇāṃ pratyakṣo bhavati, nāpraviṣṭaḥ | prekṣakāpratyakṣāṇāṃ bhayādyavasthānirūpaṇaṃ nātropayujyate, nāṭyasya prekṣakadarśanārthatvāt | kim arthaṃ tarhi tatprasaṅga iti cet kathāśarīranirvāhāt | praveśapratyakṣānukāryabhāvarasasampādanārthaṃ ca | evaṃ cātra praveśākathanād apratyakṣasya parāmṛśyabhūtasya bhayabhāvo na kāryā(d ā)locyate, śrāvyagatyā tv ālocyate | katham ekasyaiva dvaividhyam iti cet, asti | tad uktam—"śrāvyatvaṃ prekṣaṇīyasya dadau devī sarasvatī" iti |*. We take the opportunity to thank Naresh Keerthi, with whom we had the pleasure to read the whole *Carcā*.

exchanges and visible action. There are hints, however, that our commentator might also have had in mind some practices of performance contemporaneous to him. In medieval Kerala, around the middle of the second millennium, new practices of staging Sanskrit plays took a prominent role in the performance landscape, and began to be recorded and discussed in the śāstric corpus. This is evidenced in a text that is kindred to the *Carcā* in many respects, i.e. the already mentioned *Naṭāṅkuśa*, which stages a debate between an actor—probably a Cākyār, an exponent of the practical tradition of Kerala Sanskrit theatre Kūṭiyāṭṭam—and a scholar familiar with the tradition of the *Bhāratīyanāṭyaśāstra*. The scholar criticizes the actor for introducing new features that are not warranted by Bharata (or by his own interpretation of Bharata), such as the Vidūṣaka speaking Malayalam, the convention of taking up another's role without changing costume (*pakarnnāṭṭam*),[94] and, even more crucially here, the practice of giving expression to the feelings of characters that are only referred to in the text, but have not properly entered the scene through stage directions to that effect (our *parāmṛśya*, including even animals and non-sentient entities).

Possibly echoing a similar criticism, the author of the *Carcā* adopts the seemingly obvious but important distinction between characters that are enacted and those that are referred to in a play, while gainsaying the possibility, for the audience, of fully perceiving the latter's feelings, given the impossibility of their visible representation without a corresponding character having entered on stage in the appropriate costume. At the same time, he attempts to find a rationale for the use of such emotionally loaded (after all) descriptions in theatre: they do in fact bring out the body of the story (*kathāśarīranirvāha*), in the case at stake, the royal hunting expedition that will culminate in the encounter of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā, while they also highlight and heighten, if only by reflection, the feelings of the characters enacted on stage—not the fear of the gazelle referred to, but, at the very least, the ardour of the king and the marvel of his charioteer at the sight of this dramatic one-on-one chase. One cannot but notice, once again, a possible reference to the practice of the *nirvahaṇam* or "flashback", the long elaboration that, in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, accompanies the entry of a new character on stage, and sets up the scene to come by providing the part of the story preceding it.[95]

These features of the *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā* can be interpreted not only in light of the author's very fine interpretation of the meanings of the literary text, including the whole array of poetic figures, emotional configurations, and dramatic

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94 For a detailed study of the critique of the *pakarnnāṭṭam* in the *Naṭāṅkuśa*, see Shevchenko 2022.

95 A hint to the Kūṭiyāttam *nirvahaṇam* was also read in conjunction with the long *avataraṇikā*s that set up some of the character's speeches in Nārāyaṇa's commentary on the *Uttararāmacarita* by Ollett/Venkatkrishnan, this volume, p. 585.

structure, but also as betraying close attention to performance aspects. This might stem, on the one hand, from the special interaction between scholarly and performative traditions in this period, and, on the other, from a period of profound transformation in the theatrical practices, in particular those of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, of which the author of the *Carcā* could have been a direct witness. Although removed both chronologically and geographically from fifteenth-century Kerala, we can find a similar attitude in Abhinavagupta, who—apart from discussing the highest matter of *rasa*, in his voluminous commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—gives us flashes of the staging practices of famous Sanskrit plays of his time, as well as of developing new performance genres.[96] He declares this attention to performance from the very outset of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, while elaborating the purposes of his commentary, which harmonizes "adherence to practice" (*lakṣyānusaraṇa*) with the semantic-cum-syntactic-interpretive aims of the celebrated *pañcalakṣaṇa*.[97]

To conclude, in an exegetical rush of overinterpretation, we would like to look at the deer and its gracefully twisting neck not only as an example, but also as a metaphor of the tension-saturated relation between a literary commentary, the plural universe of *śāstra*s, and the poetic text being commented upon (including in its performance aspects, in the case of plays). These latter two, poetic-cum-dramaturgical theory (without neglecting the other knowledge systems often mentioned above) and poetic-cum-dramaturgical practice, might be considered as the two horns (or antlers) of the very issue tackled by each and every literary commentary, the re-creative revisitation and update of a "classic". In its exegetical sprint, the literary commentary represents our deer, its eyes fixed on the chariot that is its object, the literary text. It constantly outpaces its commented text, though never losing sight of it, even in its most exuberant theoretical dashes; always keeping it at a distance, leading the way, creating the path that the text is made to follow in the new way of reading that the literary commentary offers. But our commentary-as-deer is also being chased by the chariot that is *śāstra*, or better, a

96 For reference to the spectacular dimension of specific plays as described by Abhinavagupta, see Bansat-Boudon 1992; for his description and incorporation of new performance genres within the framework of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, see Ganser 2022.

97 See *Abhinavabhāratī* (edition Krishnamoorthy 1992), p. 2: *upādeyasya saṃpāṭhas tadanyasya pratīkanam | sphuṭavyākhyā virodhānāṃ parihāraḥ supūrṇatā || 5 ||* ***lakṣyānusaraṇaṃ*** *śliṣṭa-vaktavyāṃśavivecanam | saṅgatiḥ paunaruktyānāṃ samādhānam anākulam* [conj.; *samādhāna-samākulam* Ed.] *|| saṅgrahaś cety ayaṃ vyākhyāprakāro 'tra samāśritaḥ || 6 ||* "(5.) An accurate study of what has to be accepted, a glimpse of what is different from that (the *heya*), a clear explanation, the resolution of inconsistencies, the completion [of implied matters], (6.) adherence to practice, the analysis of the parts that have to be intended as polysemic, the consequential reconstruction of repetitions, consistent replies to objections, and summary: on all these is based here this type of commentary". On the *pañcalakṣaṇa* of commentaries see above, Section 1.

whole śāstric tradition that is always a plurality of disciplinary perspectives, actual prescriptive texts, and an impressive array of diverging theories proposed in such works. Thus, our deer must outpace *śāstra* as well, as it is constantly creating its own localized version of a larger theoretical model, often by cherry-picking from multiple works and knowledge systems. It keeps its eyes fixed on the theoretical textual tradition that precedes it, but also escapes the threatening scaffolding of *śāstra* as a whole. It cannot simply look away and dash freely and unbridled, as the parameters of *śāstra* as well as its legitimating authority are necessary for the success of any commentarial enterprise. Thus, our literary commentary-as-deer must keep gracefully twisting its neck toward this dual chariot, which is at once the literary text that must remain the centre of exegetical attention, and the whole body of theory that cannot but inform any exegetical activity worthy of the term.

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