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Analysis of Sūdraka's *The Toy Cart*

Dramatic literature has been a part of Indian culture for thousands of years (Brockett 614). Unlike other religions, such as Islam, India's dominant religion, Hinduism, "encouraged the representation of living beings in literature [and] drama" (Brockett 613). Because Indian performance was connected to the culture's religion in this way, it is not surprising that Sanskrit Dramas emerged and were defined by the *Natyaśāstra*, a religious text focusing on theatrical practices and theories recorded by a sage named Bharata (Brockett 615). The *Natyaśāstra* explains that the main goal of Sanskrit Dramas is to help the audience experience a *rasa*, or emotion (Brockett 615). Even if this *rasa* is a negative one, the plays always end happily, because "the final aim is to induce a sense of harmony" (Brockett 615). In this essay, I analyze a Sanskrit Drama, Sūdraka's *The Toy Cart*, to demonstrate its classification as a Prakarana Sanskrit Drama based on its characters and plot, identify its dominant *rasa* as Shringara, and to exemplify the broad similarities and specific differences between it and Plautus's *Asinaria: The One about the Asses*, an example of Roman New Comedy.

While there are several types of Sanskrit Dramas, two dominate (Brockett 615). The two main types are *Nataka*, which are heroic and epic, historical or mythical, and focus on divine or royal characters, and *Prakarana*, which are social plays focusing on the middle-class's struggles with love, money, legal justice, and honor (Brockett 615-616). The plot and characters of Sūdraka's *The Toy Cart* classify it as a *Prakarana* type of Sanskrit Drama. Chārudatta, a

prominent character in the play, is a Brahman, which is the highest of the four traditional castes or social classes in Indian society (Brockett 614). However, while high-class, a Brahman is neither divine nor royal, and Chārudatta specifically is a Brahman who has lost his wealth due to his generosity (Sūdraka 136). This character, thus, adheres to the specifications of Prakarana drama, not Nataka.

While *The Toy Cart* does include two characters of royal nature, Samsthānaka and Āryaka, the plot does not focus on them, as Āryaka does not become royalty until the end and Samsthānaka is used primarily as an obstacle to the love story between Chārudatta and Vasantasenā. In addition to the love story, plot points such as the money troubles of Chārudatta and other characters, Sharvilaka's conflict of honor verses love, and Āryaka's unjust imprisonment contribute to the play's classification of a Prakarana. Another factor in the play's classification is its length; the action transpires over four days (Sūdraka 137), which is not an epic amount of time as would be present in a Nataka drama.

This play's dominant rasa is Shringara, which means erotic or love. All of the plot points that classify the script as Prakarana work to further this rasa. An example of how the concern for money advances this rasa is in the first act when Samsthānaka, the king's brother-in-law, pursues Vasantasenā, Chārudatta's courtesan lover. Vasantasenā questions Samsthānaka's pursuit: "Do you seek my jewels?" and he replies, "what have we to do with your ornaments? [... I] obtain your affections" (Sūdraka 145). This exchange is vital because, after escaping into Chārudatta's presence, Vasantasenā lies to her lover about Samsthānaka's intentions: "[*Aside*] [I]t is not proper for me to remain longer [with Chārudatta]: let me think. It shall be so. [*Aloud.*] Sir, respected sir, if truly I have found favor in your sight, permit me to leave these ornaments in your house; *it was to rob me of them, that the villains I fled from pursued me*" [italics mine]

(Sūdraka 152). Because the beginning of Vasantasenā's line is shared with the audience, readers and viewers are blatantly aware of her motivation. It is not culturally acceptable, "not proper" (Sūdraka 152), for Vasantasenā to remain at Chārudatta's home, so she invents the lie about the attempted theft. Because she had earlier asked Samsthānaka if he wanted her jewels and he declared it was her affections he sought, it is clear that Vasantasenā uses an imagined concern for money as an excuse for her real motive: to return to her beloved.

Sharvilaka is another character who has money concerns, in addition to a question of honor; both of these Prakarana qualities advance the rasa of Shringara. This character resembles Chārudatta in that he is a Brahman who has also lost his wealth, but Sharvilaka responds to this poverty by becoming a thief. In the third act, Sharvilaka breaks into Chārudatta's home while Chārudatta and his friend Maitreya sleep (Sūdraka 166). Although Chārudatta is poor, he and Maitreya are guarding the expensive casket which Vasantasenā entrusts to their care. Sharvilaka steals this casket, but curses his motives: "Fie on this love! for whose dear sake I thus bring trouble on a Brahman's dwelling – nay, rather call down shame upon myself; and fie! and fie! upon this unmanly poverty, that urges me to acts which I must needs condemn. Now to Vasantasenā to redeem my beloved Madanikā" (Sūdraka 167). In this line, Sharvilaka's guilt resulting from his theft is clear; he condemns the very acts in which he engages and calls shame on himself, thus destroying his honor. He has stolen and dishonored himself for the sake of love.

The final classification for a Prakarana drama, legal justice, also emphasizes the rasa of Shringara. Āryaka is a character that escapes incarceration to eventually ascend to the throne, and his first act as ruler is focused on Chārudatta, the lover: "Now to obey his first commands, and raise / The worthy Chārudatta far above / Calamity and fear" (Sūdraka 237) (these lines are set in verse, as mixing dialogue styles was a common practice of Sanskrit Drama [Brockett

615]). The result of this command is that Chārudatta's release, after being framed by Samsthānaka for the attempted murder of Vasantasenā, is ensured. Thus, Chārudatta is free to rush and save his loving wife from committing suicide in response to loss of her husband (Sūdraka 240). In this way, each of the qualities of Prakarana dramas present in *The Toy Cart* work to enhance the dominant rasa of Shringara.

While the plot and characters of *The Toy Cart* are similar to that of Plautus's *Asinaria: The One about the Asses*, there are salient differences between each playwright's approach. *Asinaria: The One about the Asses* is in the Roman genre of New Comedy, which is similar to Prakarana drama in that its plots are concerned with issues of money and love (Brockett 37). In both *The Toy Cart* and *Asinaria: The One about the Asses*, there are financially troubled men who pursue a courtesan. Both courtesans have undesirable men pursuing them in addition to their lovers; Vasantasenā is pursued by Chārudatta and Samsthānaka, and Philaenium, the courtesan in Plautus's play, is pursued by Argyrippus, her true lover, and Lover-Boy One. However, Vasantasenā is wealthy and can choose to reject Samsthānaka's advances (Sūdraka 143), whereas Philaenium is bound by an agreement her mother makes with Lover-Boy One: if he can pay twenty minae before another potential lover can, Philaenium will belong to him for an entire year (Plautus 23). The year-long contract is another distinction between the two plays, as Argyrippus is also only seeking to spend a year with Philaenium, whereas a wedding veil is thrown over Vasantasenā's head (Sūdraka 241), implying the long-term commitment of a marriage to come.

Another important distinction is that while both Philaenium and Vasantasenā are pursued by married men (Argyrippus's father Damaenetus and Chārudatta, respectively), the treatment and each man's wife and her reception to her husband's lover is vastly different. Damaenetus

hates his wife, and even wishes for her death: “I long for her...–dead” (Plautus 95). When his wife discovers his attempted infidelity, she orders him home and denies his requests for time with Philaenium: “DEM: Give us space, just a bit, over there. MRS: UP, LOVERMAN, HOME YOU GO” (Plautus 99). Conversely, Chārudatta declares his love for his wife: “[*embraces his WIFE*] My dearest love” (Sūdraka 240). Also, there is no animosity between Chārudatta’s wife and Vasantasenā: “WIFE: Welcome, happy sister! VASANTASENĀ: I now indeed am happy. [*They embrace*]” (Sūdraka 241). Thus, while the plays include similar subjects and characters, the authors are distinctive in their handling of them.

These differences in the authors’ approaches may be due at least in part to their culture, as each has a distinctive value system that defines the work of the period. As previously stated, the goal of Indian drama is to achieve harmony. This aligns with the Indian value system of striving for “union with the Supreme World-Soul,” who is perfect; it is impossible to achieve this union in one lifetime, but harmony could help bring performers and viewers closer in the next reincarnation (Brockett 613). The relationship between Chārudatta’s wife and Vasantasenā is evidence of this harmony. In contrast, the Romans placed their values in “discipline, economy, endurance, military precision, and loyalty to family and state” (Brockett 45). They were not concerned about something as peaceful as harmony; they simply wanted to be entertained. Thus, it is the mockery of what happens when their core values are abandoned (Damaenetus is not loyal to his wife and is undisciplined in his relationship with his son) that makes *Asinaria: The One about the Asses* an entertaining comedy, for both Roman and other audiences.

Another broad similarity between Roman New Comedy and Indian Sanskrit Drama is the way in which each genres portrayed location. Both utilized painted backgrounds which were referred to as “scaenae frons” in Rome (Brockett 57), and in India were simply painted or carved

backgrounds that were decorative or symbolic (Brockett 617). In Roman theatre, the audience relies on the text to determine location of action (Brockett 58). While the greatest emphasis in Indian theatre is placed on the actor and his four resources, “movement and gesture; speech and song; costume and makeup; and psychological insight” (Brockett 617), it is clear from *The Toy Cart* that the text provided many descriptions of location for the audience, just as Roman texts did. For example, when Maitreya goes to Vasantasenā’s home to tell her the casket has been lost in gambling (a lie to hide Sharvilaka’s theft), he spends almost three pages of text describing his journey through her courts (Sūdraka 178-180). Because there is no scenery other than the painted and carved decorations (Brockett 617), these vibrant descriptions serve as a way for an audience to “see” the scene, just as Roman texts did.

Despite being hundreds of years old and having been translated from its original language, Sūdraka’s *The Toy Cart* is still an enjoyable play for today’s audiences and readers. The play’s style of humor, which is made up mostly of mistakes and confusion, is one that has persisted throughout theatrical history in various cultures, namely in Roman New Comedy hundreds of years earlier. Additionally, while traditional Hindu values of achieving harmony are not generally considered prominent in modern American culture, the pursuit of love regardless of money is an admirable goal for any culture to value. Like any successful play, then, Sūdraka’s *The Toy Cart* was important and enjoyed in its time, and this importance and enjoyment has continued to the present.

Works Cited

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