The flight of the antelope

Outlining two different perspectives on the aesthetic reception of a verse from Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*

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This article will explore the aesthetic reception of a verse from the first act of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* as evidenced by the works of Kuntaka, Abhinavagupta and Rāghavabhaṭṭa. In doing so, this research critically examines the problem of how this one verse, which describes an antelope fleeing from Duṣyanta during his hunt, was employed as an example to illustrate two very different models of aesthetics: one which implicitly accepted that animal characters could evoke *rasa* and another which aimed to explicitly exclude animals from such a possibility.

Keywords: Indian aesthetics, theory of *rasa*, *kāvya*, *nāṭaka*, Sanskrit literature, Sanskrit theatre, South Asian studies, animal studies.

1. Introduction[1]

udghātinī bhūmir iti mayā raśmisaṃyamanād rathasya mandīkṛto vegaḥ.

'The terrain is uneven, by curbing in the reins I have reduced the chariot's speed'

(Somadeva 2006: 59)

In a similar spirit, the metaphorical path before us is difficult to tread and requires a bit of attention. The antelope's lucky escape from Duṣyanta's arrows has somehow left readers of Kālidāsa's (c. fourth to fifth century) masterful play, the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, in a dazzling cloud of dust. As chance would have it, by exploring the various positions taken by the participants in the debate on whether or not animal characters in literary works can evoke an aesthetic experience or are themselves receptacles of *rasa*, has led me to follow the tracks left by Duṣyanta 's chase and realise that this exemplary scene from the history of Sanskrit literature was subject to very different understandings. The scope of this paper

[1] This research was made possible thanks to the financial support of Next Generation EU – Line M4.C2.1.1 – PRIN 2022, project "For a Multivocal History of the Attitudes Towards Non-Human Animals in South Asia. Ethics, Practices, Symbolism. Investigating New and Unsolved Issues," CUP J53D23011210006.

is to invite the attentive reader to slow down and ponder the reasons behind their personal response to this scene, for we will attempt to unravel the different threads of interpretation spun by three illustrious authors: Kuntaka (c. tenth century), Abhinavagupta (c. late tenth to early eleventh century) and Rāghavabhaṭṭa (c. fifteenth to sixteenth century). The first two are famous for their works on aesthetics, building on the observations found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and occupy opposing sides of the debate on the aesthetic potential of animals. Rāghavabhaṭṭa, on the other hand, while not technically a theorist of aesthetics is a well-known commentator of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. What brings these three personages together on this occasion is that each of them has interesting things to say about the same verse from Kālidāsa's play:

> *grīvābhaṅgābhirāmaṃ muhur anupatati syandane baddhadṛṣṭiḥ*
> *paścārdhena praviṣṭaḥ śarapatanabhayād bhūyasā pūrvakāyam |*
> *darbhair ardhāvalīḍhaiḥ śramavivṛtamukhabhraṃśibhiḥ kīrṇavartmā*
> *paśyodagraplutatvād viyati bahutaraṃ stokam urvyāṃ prayāti* || 1.7 ||
>
> Gracefully twisting its neck, darting its eyes repeatedly towards the ensuing chariot,
> With its haunches forcefully drawn into its forebody out of fear of the falling arrows,
> The path scattered with half chewed *darbha* grass, falling from its mouth gaping from exhaustion,
> Look! With its lofty leaps [the antelope] moves more through the sky and hardly on the ground.

The verse describes the antelope in the midst of its flight as Duṣyanta follows in pursuit. The four *pada*s of the verse elegantly isolate four images of the antelope's flight. The first describes its vigilance, as it repeatedly glances back to the chariot following it. The second describes the urgency and forcefulness of its effort to escape, drawing its hind legs into the front of the body as it darts away. The third *pada* paints an image of its desperation as the path it has traversed is left littered by the half-eaten grass left to fall from its gaping mouth. Finally, the fourth *pada* widens the view and describes its great leaps which make it appear to be flying through the sky rather than running on the ground. Besides the physical description of the antelope, the verse also gives us two psychological cues of its emotional state: it is fatigued (*śrama*) and fearful (*bhaya*) of being struck by Duṣyanta 's arrows.

Kālidāsa's retelling of Śakuntalā's story begins with the description of Duṣyanta in the middle of a hunting campaign. Previous versions of the story (Thapar (2011: 18) describe the hunt as a grand and bloody event: Duṣyanta sets out in the company of a large party of soldiers and generals, and the animals that perish by their hand are numerous. While this description is not present in the play, the audience would have probably been aware of this context. Kālidāsa picks up the story after the hunt has already begun and focuses the attention of the audience solely on Duṣyanta and his charioteer after they have left the rest of their hunting party behind in pursuit of a graceful antelope. The grandeur of

the scene is portrayed by Duṣyanta's might as he is likened to Pināki̇n,[2] the name given to Śiva when he takes on the role of a hunter and brandishes his bow, Pināka, while the dramatic tension and violence is encapsulated within Kālidāsa's masterful description of the antelope.

Subsequent commentators have focused their attention for the most part on the above verse. This holds true both for authors of aesthetic treatises and commentators. For all, it seems, the description of the antelope's flight held particular importance. Before drawing any distinctions in the interpretation and uses made of this verse by the three authors discussed here, it should be made clear that all three of them recognise the literary value of this verse and hold it in high regard. The distinctions that will emerge in the subsequent paragraphs will allow us to observe how different authors characterised the importance of the verse and understood the aesthetic relevance of the antelope described in it.

2. The common view: *Abhinavagupta āha*

One of the most important voices to have made use of this verse in their work is undoubtedly Abhinavagupta in the *Abhinavabhāratī.* Having expounded and criticised the theories of previous thinkers, Abhinavagupta presents his own account of what *rasa* is and how it comes about. In this portion of the text, Abhinavagupta provides three examples of verses that he considered to be particularly evocative. The first one is precisely this verse from Kālidāsa's play and it is subsequently used as the basis for his explanation of the transformation of a *sthāyibhāva* into its corresponding *rasa.* The scheme elaborated by Abhinavagupta highlights the supermundane nature of the emotion perceived in the representation, be it literary or dramatic. However, an aspect that is easily overlooked is the fact that in choosing to use this verse as a paradigmatic example, Abhinavagupta admits not only that the verse engenders *rasa* in the spectator/reader, but also that the character to which the specific *rasa* is associated is the antelope. Abhinavagupta makes no special mention of it, nor does he seem aware of the fact that other authors might not have agreed with his reading. For him, the verse is an obvious example of the frightening (*bhayānaka*) *rasa.*

Essentially, what Abhinavagupta points out is that the emotion encountered in the context of reading a *kāvya* or watching a *nāṭaka* differs from the ordinary emotions which present themselves to concrete subjects in their everyday lives. Ordinary or worldly emotions such as 'I am scared' (*bhīto 'haṃ*) or 'he is scared' (*bhīto 'yaṃ*) when experienced within a given context and associated with the

[2] *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.6: *kṛṣṇasāre dadac cakṣus tvayi cādhijyakārmuke | mṛgānusāriṇaṃ sākṣāt paśyāmīva pināki̇nam ||*

specifically characterised individuals give rise to a series of subsequent impulses to action driven either by desire, aversion or indifference. This, Abhinavagupta states, is precisely not the case when we experience the emotions evoked from a representation. To better highlight the point made by Abhinavagupta, it would be best to turn directly to the specific passage of the *Abhinavabhāratī* where he discusses this problem. The passage was famously edited and translated by Raniero Gnoli in his *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta* (1968) and more recently also by Sheldon Pollock in his *Rasa Reader* (2016). Gnoli's edition is still by far the most reliable and is the basis for this discussion. However, upon closer examination, both translations appear to have misunderstood a small detail in the text which emerged as problematic in the context of this present study.

The problem has to do with the term *trāsaka* in the sentence: *tasyāṃ ca yo mṛgapotakādir bhāti tasya viśeṣarūpatvābhāvād bhīta iti trāsakasyāpāramārthikatvād bhayam eva paraṃ*. A *nomen agentis* of the word *trāsa,* another word for fear, the word *trāsaka* indicates the one who is responsible for causing fear. The error that appears to have been made is to overcomplicate the meaning of this word in this context, a tendency that is easy to fall into given the initial ambiguity of its role in this sentence. Without a clear referent in sight, there arise at least three different possible ways of understanding this term. Gnoli's (1968: 55) translation renders *trāsaka* as follows: "the actor, who [playing the role of the deer], frightens [the spectators]."[3] This translation attempts to make sense of the ambiguous construction of the sentence and the unclear referent of the word trāsaka by supplying information which seems at first sight to respect the general idea of Abhinavagupta's theory of aesthetic reception. As the fear is being perceived by an audience, it seems plausible that the one causing the emotion of fear to arise must be the actor playing the character that is experiencing it, *i.e.* the antelope. This solution, however, raises important problems both with regards to the history and practice of theatre in South Asia,[4] and with regards to the structure of Abhinavagupta's sentence. The more pertinent point here is that this translation does not follow the point being made by Abhinavagupta. It is a little hard to see, but the main sentence should be *tasyāṃ yo bhāti tasya bhīta iti bhayam eva param* 'in this [perception], the-being-afraid of the one that appears is nothing more than fear itself.' In other words, this sentence concerns the production of the *sthāyibhāva*, of a generalised notion, of fear (*bhaya*), from the concrete representation of a character that is afraid. Everything else present in the sentence is either circumstantial or explains the conditions for this process of generalisation: the one that is afraid must

[3] Pollock's translation skips over this ambiguity and simplifies the sentence. See Pollock (2016: 194).

[4] This point will be discussed in greater detail in the section dealing with Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary on *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7.

be devoid of particularity and the one causing the fear must be unreal. Such a generalisation can only ever happen in the context of a literary and dramatic representation of such a scene. This process will later be juxtaposed and contrasted with real-world instances when we perceive someone who is afraid being terrorised by a real cause. Consequently, the most appropriate way to understand *trāsaka* in this context is simply as the 'the one causing fear,' but not to the audience and instead to the character that is represented as being afraid. In the specific case of A*bhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7, this would apply to the character of Duṣyanta who is the cause of the antelope's fright.[5]

Having discussed these problems, I present here the relevant portion of the Abhinavabhāratī drawn from Gnoli's edition and a modified version of his translation with my changes indicated in italics.

> *tasya ca "grīvābhaṅgābhirāmam" iti "umāpi nīlālaka" iti "haras tu kiṃcit" ityādivākyebhyo vākyārthapratipatter anantaraṃ mānasī sākṣātkārātmikāpahastitatattadvākyopāttakālādivibhāgā tāvat pratītir upajāyate | tasyāṃ ca yo mṛgapotakādir bhāti tasya viśeṣarūpatvābhāvād bhīta iti trāsakasyāpāramārthikatvād bhayam eva paraṃ deśakālādyanāliṅgitam, tata eva bhīto 'haṃ bhīto 'yaṃ śatrur vayasyo madhyastho vetyādipratyayebhyo duḥkhasukhādikṛtahānādibuddhyantarodayaniyamavattayā vighnabahulebhyo vilakṣaṇaṃ nirvighnapratītigrāhyaṃ sākṣād iva hṛdaye niviśamānaṃ cakṣuṣor iva viparivartamānaṃ bhayānako rasaḥ* (Gnoli 1968: 13).

> In such a person hearing phrases such as, "Gracefully bending his neck...," "Even Umā, dropping the golden *karṇikāra*...," "The firmness of Hara...," there appears, immediately after the perception of their literal sense, a perception of a different order, a mental perception consisting in a direct experience which completely eliminates the temporal distinction, etc. assumed by these sentences. *Besides, due to the absence of particularity* (viśeṣarūpatva) *of the young antelope, etc. which appears in this [perception], [and] since the one causing fear* (trāsaka) *is ultimately unreal* (apāramārthika)*, [its] "being afraid"* (bhīta iti) *is simply and solely fear—fear in itself* (bhayam eva param)*, uncircumscribed by time, space, etc.* This perception of fear is of a different order from the [ordinary] perceptions "I am afraid, he—my enemy, my friend, anybody—is afraid"; for these are necessarily affected by the appearance of fresh mental movements (of shunning, etc.), consisting of pleasure, pain, etc. and just for this reason are full of obstacles (*vighna*). The sensation of the fear above mentioned, on the contrary, is the matter of cognition by a perception devoid of obstacles (*nirvighna*), and may be said to enter directly (*niviś*) into our hearts, to dance (*viparivṛt*) before our eyes: this is the terrible *Rasa*.[6]

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[5] This solution was arrived at after much reasoning and help from my mentors and colleagues. I must especially thank Saverio Marchignoli with whom I had the pleasure of reading through the *Abhinavabhāratī's* section on *rasa* and who pointed me towards a solution to this problem. I must also thank Daniele Cuneo, who was generous enough to take the time to give his feedback on this solution and who later informed me that he had arrived at a similar translation when working on his doctoral dissertation. If there is any merit to this proposed reading, it is all due to their generosity in sharing their knowledge, any defects are the fruit of my own misunderstandings.

[6] Translation adapted from the one present in Gnoli (1968: 55-56).

One problem that Abhinavagupta does tackle is whether it is possible for the process of identification to take place even with dissimilar classes of beings. The objection presented in the text is framed around the question of a human audience being able to identify with the emotions of divine characters.[7] This problem was discussed elsewhere in the *Abhinavabhāratī* and more extensively in the *Locana*, his commentary to Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* II.4. The problem is an interesting one and it probably played an important role in determining whether non-human animals can be considered to produce *rasa*. Abhinavagupta resolves the problem by appealing to the theory of *vāsanā*s or latent impressions that each being carries from an infinite number of preceding rebirths. He argues that since in our infinite past lives we have lived as all possible types of being, even though we are currently human we carry in us the latent impressions necessary for us to identify with any type of character represented in a literary work.[8] The recourse to the theory of *vāsanā*s presented in *Yogasūtra* IV 9 and 10 raises the question of why the possibility of identifying with dissimilar classes of beings was not more widely accepted by theorists.

Having said this, it is all the more relevant that this debate does not emerge when referring to the verse from the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. This can probably be seen as indicating the lack of contention surrounding the interpretation of verse 1.7 of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, at least in Abhinavagupta's immediate cultural and intellectual surroundings. Furthermore, the use of this verse as the principal example in delineating his own position could be an indication that it would not have been the subject of any significant interpretative disagreements. From this lack of contention, we can tentatively conclude that Abhinavagupta was not aware of other differing interpretations of this verse, specifically, or objections to idea that *rasa* can also be evoked from non-human animal characters.

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[7] *bhaṭṭanāyakas tv āha | raso na pratīyate, notpadyate, nābhivyajyate | svagatena hi pratītau karuṇe duḥkhitatvaṃ syāt | na ca sā pratītir yuktā sītāder avubhāvātvāt, svakāntāsmṛtyasaṃvedanāt, devatādau sādhāraṇīkaraṇayogyatvāt, samudrollaṅghanāder asādhāraṇyāt |* (ed. Gnoli 1968, 10). "Again, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka says :—Rasa is neither perceived (*pratī*), nor produced (*utpad*), nor manifested (*abhivyaj*). For if it were perceived by the spectator as really present in himself, in the pathetic Rasa he would necessarily experience pain. Again, such a perception does not stand to reason, because Sītā, etc., does not play the role of a determinant [as regards the spectator]; because no memory of his own beloved one does arise in the spectator's consciousness (while he looks at Sītā); because [the representation of] deities, etc., cannot logically arouse (in the spectator) the state of generality (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*) [required for the aesthetic experience]; because ocean-crossings, etc., [are extraordinary undertakings, and thus] fall short of generality (*sādhāraṇya*)" (trans. Gnoli 1968: 43-44).

[8] "Everybody's mind is indeed characterized by the most various latent impressions; for as it has been said, 'As the desire is permanent, these are beginningless (*Yogasūtra* IV 10),' and, 'On the ground that the remembrances and the impressions are homogenous there is an uninterrupted succession of latent impressions, even if they are separated by birth, space, and time (*Yogasūtra* IV 9).' Therefore, it is established that Rasa is perceived. This perception, in its turn, presents himself in the form of relishing." (Gnoli 1968, 112). The same passage has also been translated in Ingalls, Masson and Patwardhan (1990: 225).

3. Uncovering an uncommon view: following the antelope through Kuntaka's eyes

Kuntaka's views on aesthetics are decidedly different from the ones held by Abhinavagupta. While Abhinavagupta can be understood as reformulating the *rasa* theory into a theory of aesthetic reception, *rasa* being considered as synonymous with *rasanā*, the act of savouring a spectator engages in, Kuntaka holds a diametrically opposite externalist and maybe even substantialist[9] view of *rasa* as something that inheres in the literary/theatrical character.[10] Consequently, Kuntaka's examination of the origination of *rasa* is centred on the appropriateness of the receptacle in which *rasa* is situated in a given work. The receptacle in Kuntaka's case is the character in a work, or rather, more generally the object of a capable poet's creation and description. Ultimately, the aesthetic value of a work is determined by the poet's capacity to render the material of their work in good taste.

The focus placed on the object of description leads Kuntaka to enumerate all that can be described by the poet; an enumeration that categorises the various objects in two basic types: sentient beings and insentient objects. Sentient beings are further divided into two classes: the primarily sentient, which include human beings, *deva*s and *asura*s; and beings with a second-grade sentience, which include animals and presumably other beings of a lower rebirth.

> *tatra pūrvaṃ prakārābhyāṃ dvābhyām eva vibhidyate |*
> *surādisiṃhaprabhṛtiprādhānyetarayogataḥ || Vakroktijīvita* 3.6 ||
>
> In this regard, the first [kind of entities] is divided into two classes:
> that of gods etc. and that of lions and so forth [i.e. animals], which
> are [respectively] the main class and the other [i.e. the subordinate]
> class, in accordance with the order of enunciation (Franceschini 2025).
>
> *mukhyam akliṣṭaratyādiparipoṣamanoharam |*
> *svajātyucitahevākasamullekhojjvalaṃ param || Vakroktijīvita* 3.7 ||

[9] I borrow these terms from the field of contemporary Buddhist logico-epistemological studies as they seem to accurately highlight the distinction at play in this context. The disagreement over the status of *rasa*s has precisely to do with its status as an object of perception. Abhinavagupta holds that the perception at play is of a unique type as its object is not situated in a determinate time and space. Nevertheless, he stresses that aesthetic experience is first and foremost something that occurs in the perceiver and does not exist a priori. *Rasa* seems to be conceived very differently by Kuntaka and many other theorists who speak of it as a substantial object of perception which needs to inhere in a defined *āśraya*. Understood as a debate on the nature of perception, it can be seen as following similar lines to the general internalist-externalist divide in most debates in Indian epistemology.

[10] A more detailed account of Kuntaka's views can be found in Marco Franceschini's article in this same publication.

> The "primary" category is made beautiful by the enhancement of their unaffected desire and the like; the other becomes adorned when reference is made to the impulses appropriate to their particular species (Pollock 2016: 99).

This division of sentient beings into two qualitatively different classes based on the presumed psychological faculties of either class is the criterion adduced by Kuntaka to determine which characters produce *rasa* and which cannot.

Kuntaka understands *rasa* to be the transformation of a basic *bhāva* and requires that the characters themselves have the capacity to experience both the *bhāva* and the consequent *rasa*. This criterion restricts the possible possessors of *rasa* to those beings belonging to the primary class as they are considered as possessing a greater and better defined psychological depth, in other words they are considered capable of experiencing emotions and *rasa*s. The secondary class, on the other hand, appears to be considered incapable of truly experiencing emotions, reducing their capacity as aesthetically efficacious objects of poetic description. That being said, Kuntaka does discuss the function of these secondary beings within poetic and dramatic works.

In *Vakroktijīvita* 3.7, Kuntaka describes the manner in which a poet is to treat these beings within their work. Having implicitly denied any psychological depth to animals beyond a very basic sentience, their representation in *kāvya* can occur solely on the basis of instincts which are considered appropriate to their species (*svajātyucitahevāka*), and it is these that the poet endeavours to depict. Commenting on this verse, Kuntaka provides two examples to illustrate his point with regard to animals: in the first he quotes a verse describing a lion sitting majestically, emblematic of the calm authority exuded by the animal in question;[11] however, to our surprise, the second example he presents is the very verse from Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānśākuntala* discussed previously. Unfortunately, Kuntaka does not comment on the verses he quotes as examples in much detail and does not provide us with an explanation of his interpretation of the verse from the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. For his purposes, it seems, there was no need to provide a detailed exegesis of these verses.

[11] *kadācid etena ca pāriyātraguhāgṛhe mīlitalocanena | vyatyastahastadvitayopaviṣṭadaṃṣṭrāṅkurāñcaccibukam prasuptam* || 30 || "Once this lion on mount Pāriyātra was asleep in home-den with eyes closed; His jaws resting on the two crossed legs and his chin spread out by the pressure" (Krishnamoorthy 1977: 427).

3.1. The fearful antelope

The problem, in Kuntaka's eyes, is not the sentience of animals per se, but whether they are considered to be capable of experiencing stable emotions (*sthāyibhāva*). Kuntaka determines that the sentience of animals is fundamentally of a different kind, and while animals may feel emotions they are incapable of actually identifying them. The emotions felt by animals do not go beyond the spontaneous, instinctual response to a situation. When Kuntaka asserts that the description of the antelope fleeing in fright is nothing more than an instinctive action, the fear felt by the antelope is understood to be an expression of its instincts. In other words, animals are not capable of being aware of the emotion they are experiencing. In order to better understand this idea, one must look beyond the confines of this discussion and into the way in which certain animals were perceived in the literature of the time.

Just as we today have stock literary associations between certain animals and states of mind or qualities, some animals served a similar purpose in the literary culture of South Asia. One such association is the idea that the antelope's instinct is to be fearful and timid, an association that can be clearly found at a very early date in passages of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[12] This goes hand in hand with the characterisation of antelopes as the ideal prey: an elusive animal, that is constantly alert and flees at the slightest disturbance. This same characteristic is also employed when the shyness of a lover is compared to the timidity of an antelope.[13]

In Kuntaka's view, Kālidāsa's representation of the antelope in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is nothing more than a continuation of this very trope. The explicit mention of the fear (*bhaya*) felt by the animal does not pose a problem in his theory, as fear is commonly attested as being the instinctive behaviour of the antelope. What the animal lacks is the ability to be aware of the emotion it feels and to conceptualise it, thereby elevating it to the status of a *sthāyibhāva*. This step is one that the primary sentient beings are able to accomplish, allowing them to become receptacles of a *rasa*.

3.2. An alternative path for the antelope?

Kuntaka does not say much about *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7, but it is not all he says about the literary and aesthetic function of animals. The discussion is continued in the next verse of his work, *Vakroktijīvita* 3.8, in which he adds a further detail that momentarily complicates our understanding of Kuntaka's interpretation of the scene from Kālidāsa's play. In this verse, he adds that while animals and insentient

[12] *mṛgāṇāṃ tu bhayaṃ*. *Rāmāyaṇa* IV.58.9.

[13] See the work by Pieruccini in this same publication for a more detailed discussion of these associations.

objects like plants, cannot themselves be receptacles of *rasa*, they do serve the function of *rasoddīpana*. The term *rasoddīpana* is often used in aesthetic literature, but at present it is difficult to say whether there is any uniformity in the use of this term. Even in this case, Kuntaka's self-commentary does not come to our aid, but it is possible to gain an overall understanding of what he is trying to say from the examples he lists. Kuntaka has in mind all those instances where natural features, plants and animals are used by a poet to highlight or intensify the expression of a *rasa*. In other words, this verse discusses the allegorical use of naturalistic imagery to express and highlight an emotion being felt by one or more human characters.

The text can initially seem a little ambiguous and may lead one to believe that even animals in the previous examples can serve a similar function. However, upon further examination it becomes clear that the examples adduced for the verses, *Vakroktijīvita* 3.7 and 3.8, are quite different and do not point to any overlap in function[14]. Furthermore, trying to read the antelope from *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7 as an example of *rasoddīpaṇa* leads one to the very basic question regarding which other *rasa* is being highlighted by the antelope's fear and, more crucially, to whom does it pertain. The only other prominent character in the scene is the antelope's pursuer, King Duṣyanta , and a possible alternative to the *rasa* of fear (*bhayānaka*) could be the *rasa* of heroism (*vīrya*)[15], expressed by his prowess in the hunt. Unfortunately, such a hypothesis stumbles into more problems the longer it is stretched; not least due to the fact that it would force us to supply too many elements not directly present in the verse itself. Reasoning through this hypothesis did, however, lead to a couple of insights into the narrative structure and references of Kālidāsa's text, which will be touched upon in a later section.

[14] The examples Kuntaka presents when discussing verse 3.8 do not portray the emotions of autonomous animals. Instead, they focus on the emotion of a human or divine character that is intensified by the actions of an animal or other non-sentient natural phenomena. The examples include *Kumārasambhava* 3.2

'With a throat clear by tasting the mango-shoots,
When the he-cuckoo started his sweet song,
It turned out to be the order of Cupid
To break the rising pride of beloveds" (Krishnamoorthy 1977: 428),

which focuses on the love felt by humans and intensified by Kāma's influence on the natural world surrounding them.

[15] As stated by Boccali (Boccali, Sacha and Torella 2023: 260-261) and corroborated by the description of *vīrya* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *rasa* of heroism can also be expressed through the bravery, ferocity or cruelty of a character. This could, in principle, make it possible to consider the description of a hunting scene the locus for the *rasa* of heroism.

4. Rāghavabhaṭṭa, saviour of antelopes

Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is fairly late, being written sometime between the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Its uniqueness stems from the detailed explanations it provides of various aspects of Kālidāsa's work, delving into both linguistic features of the work itself, but also providing explanations of the stylistic conventions of *nāṭaka*s and *kāvya* more generally. Of all the commentators on the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Rāghavabhaṭṭa delves very systematically into an aesthetic analysis of verse 1.7 and I have attempted here to provide a first translation of this passage.

> *atra bhayānako raso vyaṅgyaḥ | tasya mṛgagataṃ bhayaṃ sthāyibhāvaḥ | duṣyantādhiṣṭhitasyandanālokanam ālambanavibhāvaḥ | tadanupatanaśarapatanautsukyādīny uddīpanavibhāvaḥ |*
>
> *grīvābhaṅgārdhabhakṣitatṛṇaskhalanaśuṣkoṣṭhakaṇṭhatvamukhavaivarṇyaśarīrasaṃkocāś cañcalādayo 'nubhāvāḥ | trāsaśramaśaṅkāvegādayo vyabhicāriṇaḥ | kampādayaḥ sātvikāḥ | etai raso vyajyate |*
>
> Here, the fearful *rasa* is made manifest. Its stable emotion is the fear belonging to the antelope. The sight of the chariot on which Duṣyanta is seated is the *ālambanavibhāva*. The anxiety, etc. caused by their pursuit and the falling arrows is the *uddīpanavibhāva*. Movements, etc. [such as] the bending of the neck, the falling half-eaten grass, the dryness of the lips and throat, the pallor of the face and the trembling body are the *anubhāva*s. Fear, fatigue, doubt, hurry, etc. are the *vyabhicārin*s. Trembling and the rest are the *sātvika*s. By means of these [factors] is *rasa* manifested.

This passage is very clearly aligned with Abhinavagupta's general view of the aesthetic quality of the verse, but is written in such a way that it can be seen to emphasise the production of *rasa* more clearly. Rāghavabhaṭṭa does not take the fact that verse 1.7 of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* produces a specific *rasa* for granted. This is evidenced by the way in which he structures this passage, emphasising the production of *rasa* through the repeated affirmation, both at the beginning and the end: *atra bhayānako rasaḥ vyaṅgayaḥ... etai raso vyajyate*. Furthermore, unlike the *Abhinavabhāratī*, this passage tries to provide the reader with evidence for the aesthetic quality of the verse by attempting to compile an exhaustive list of the aesthetic factors present within it. These two rhetorical elements can be seen to point to an understanding on the part of the author that this interpretation of the verse is not unanimously accepted by other scholars of *kāvya* and *alaṃkāraśāstra*. Rāghavabhaṭṭa is out to make a point, although the reason is not clear since he then moves to subsequent portions of the text, but unlike Abhinavagupta's use of the verse which takes the production of *rasa* for granted by utilising it as an example to illustrate his aesthetic theory more generally, Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary is almost an attempt to justify Abhinavagupta's reading of the verse by providing evidence in its support.

While Rāghavabhaṭṭa does not mention Abhinavagupta by name in the context of this passage, he does mention him positively in other parts of the text.[16] We can thus be fairly certain that his reading of this verse is influenced in large part by a commentarial tradition that was in line with Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa*. That being said, Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary to this verse presents one clear oddity which is not easily explained if not read in light of the *Abhinavabhāratī*.

4.1. The case of an overzealous commentator

As was stated in the section dedicated to Abhinavagupta, the *Abhinavabhāratī* is not a commentary on the verse of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. It uses the verse as an example to elaborate a particular theory of what *rasa* is. In order to do so, it clearly formulates the discussion following the specificities found in the verse, and so begins by citing the antelope, and referencing its fear and the circumstances that caused it, leading up to the manner in which the emotion portrayed can then give rise to its corresponding *rasa*: *bhayānaka*. However, the way in which all these elements are discussed in this passage point to a general analysis that should, in theory, be applicable to all cases in which a *rasa* is evoked. Reading any of this passage as an explanation of what is occurring in Kālidāsa's work would be misleading.

Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary presents a couple of very specific assertions that are difficult to explain given the contents of the verse and its context. Both assertions have to do with the portrayal of the antelope in the scene in two closely related analytical categories applied by Rāghavabhaṭṭa: the *anubhāva*s and the *sāttvikabhāva*s. The *anubhāva*s are the consequent physical manifestations of a stable emotion that evidence its presence in a character. The list of *anubhāva*s follows the description of the scene portrayed by Kālidāsa quite closely, but deviates from it in a couple of important instances. It begins by listing elements which are very clearly present in the text, the bending of the neck and the falling half eaten grass, but then adds other elements which are not present in the scene, the dryness

[16] The extent to which Rāghavabhaṭṭa knew the *Abhinavabhārati* is something that will need to be further explored. At this point it is unclear whether Rāghavabhaṭṭa knew of Abhinavagupta's work solely through citations in the works of other authors, such as Hemacandra, or whether he had access to his work directly. What is certain for now is that every time he mentions Abhinavagupta, he mentions him as the author of the *Abhinavabhārati* or as the commentator on Bharata's work. Despite being few in number, Abhinavagupta does stand out from all the other authors mentioned by Rāghavabhaṭṭa as he is always mentioned with great veneration. See for example, *sūtramūlabharataṭīkākārābhinavaguptapādācārya...* (Kāvyatīrtha 1958: 6), or *abhinavabhāratyāṃ bharataṭīkāyām abhinavaguptācāryair...* (Kāvyatīrtha 1958: 20). Both of these mentions occur in the commentary to the First Act and so far one other mention has been found in the commentary to the Second Act (Kāvyatīrtha 1958: 64). It was not possible to undertake a careful examination of these mentions in their respective contexts as they were not directly related to the topic at hand.

of the lips and throat, the pallor of the face and the trembling body. The first of these, namely the dryness of the lips and throat, can be derived from the description of the gaping mouth of the antelope from which the half-eaten grass falls to the ground. Nonetheless, isolating it and including the, logically coherent, dryness of the mouth and throat resulting from the mouth being open, begin to deviate from the simple analysis of elements found in the text. The final two elements are peculiar in that they are not only absent from the verse, but also describe two features which are logically incoherent given the description of the antelope. Ascribing pallor to the face of an antelope, however frightened it may be, deviates considerably from the naturalistic description we find in Kālidāsa's text, and the act of trembling would be in sharp contrast with the description of the antelope leaping energetically as it flees. Both of these last two *anubhāva*s go against the contents of the text, but integrate a more general description of the *anubhāva*s associated with the *rasa* of fear. This list of stock *anubhāva*s seems to be drawn word for word from a series of verses that Rāghavabhaṭṭa cites at the end of his commentary on *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7.[17] The addition of these two elements can be seen as an attempt at strengthening the claim that this verse is evocative of the *rasa* of fear, but it also has a secondary function of anthropomorphising the antelope to a considerable degree.

Anthropomorphising the display of the antelope's fear becomes necessary when one considers the final aesthetic factor included by Rāghavabhaṭṭa in his commentary, the *sāttvikabhāva*s. Unlike the first three types of factor listed (*vibhāva*s, *anubhāva*s and *vyabhicāribhāva*s), *sāttvikabhāva*s are not essential for the production of an aesthetic experience, but are necessary in the context of the enactment of an emotion by an actor. The inclusion of a *sāttvikabhāva* is unexpected when considering the verse, as we have no indication that the character of the fleeing antelope was meant to be portrayed

[17] *taduktam —*
rakṣaḥpiśācādidhanuṣpāṇyāder bhīṣaṇākṛteḥ |
darśanaṃ śravaṇaṃ śūnyāgārāraṇyapraveśayoḥ ||
śravaṇaṃ cānusaṃdhānaṃ bandhūnāṃ vadhabandhayoḥ |
evamādyā vibhāvāḥ syur atha netrakarāṅghriṇaḥ ||
madhye madhye stambhakampau romāñcānāṃ cayas tathā |
śuṣkoṣṭhatālutā kamprahṛdayatvaṃ vivarṇatā ||
mukhasyātha parāvṛtya vīkṣaṇaṃ svāṅgagopanaṃ |
palāyanaṃ svare bhedo gātrastambho vilakṣatā ||
kāṃdiśīkatvayugdṛṣṭir anubhāvā bhavanty amī |
stambhādayo 'śrutatyaktā dainyam āvegacāpale ||
śaṅkāmohāv api trāsāpasmāramaraṇādayaḥ |
yatra saṃcāriṇaḥ sthāyi bhayaṃ syāt sa bhayānakaḥ iti || (Kāvyatīrtha 1958: 17).

on stage by an actor. While it is important to bear in mind the limited information we possess of how these *nāṭaka*s were meant to be performed, it seems to be well accepted that animals were not portrayed directly on stage and were at most alluded to by the actors or the narrator. However, leaving aside this question, the idea that the antelope was meant to be portrayed on the stage by an actor is contradicted by the stage direction at the beginning of the first act. In the available recensions of the play, the indication is always very clear and calls for the entry of only two characters onto the stage, King Duṣyanta and the Charioteer, in the act of pursuing an antelope.[18] This makes it all the more implausible that an actor physically portrayed the antelope.[19]

At this point it would not be farfetched to see Rāghavabhaṭṭa as over-interpreting verse 1.7 of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, though it is not yet clear what led him to make these interpretative leaps. The inclusion of trembling (*kampa*) in the aesthetic analysis of the verse is particularly curious. It is hard to know what exactly went on in Rāghavabhaṭṭa's mind as he wrote this part of the commentary, but one could reason through the evidence available and make an informed guess. Rāghavabhaṭṭa knew the *Abhinavabhāratī* and refers to it in his commentary, though not in this particular section. There are other authors he mentions often when it comes to the conventions of theatrical works and *alaṅkāraśāstra*, but it was not possible for me to find these works and study them. Limiting ourselves to the *Abhinavabhāratī* allows us to pick up a small detail, which might have been instrumental in shaping Rāghavabhaṭṭa's understanding of the verse. Shortly after Abhinavagupta delineates his theory of the production of *rasa*, he continues to describe what it means for an emotion to be generalised and not entirely personal. The technicalities of Abhinavagupta's aesthetic theory are not within the scope of this article, but the following line should allow us to shed some light on what Rāghavabhaṭṭa might have misinterpreted:

> *tata eva na parimitam eva sādhāraṇyam api tu vitatam, vyāptigraha iva dhūmāgnyor* bhayakampayor *eva va* |

[18] Both the Devanāgarī recension and the Kashmiri recension, while differing in form, present the same direction. The Devanāgarī reads: *tataḥ praviṣati mṛgānusārī saśaracāpahasto rājā rathena sūtaś ca.* While the Kashmiri one reads: *tataḥ praviśati rathayātakena mṛgānusārī cāpahasto Duṣyantaḥ sūtaś ca.*

[19] The present analysis has not developed the possibility that Rāghavabhaṭṭa's slightly odd comments could be evidence of a variant theatrical practice, because there is a lack of historical evidence that animals were portrayed by actors. This being said, Rāghavabhaṭṭa's statements might be recording a theatrical practice in which actors enacted certain animal characters, or portrayed specific aspects of them. One could imagine the actor generically portraying fear when the verse is being sung, perhaps by trembling and looking over his shoulder with eyes aghast. Read in this light, Rāghavabhaṭṭa's explanation could serve as a window into theatrical practices that diverged from textual prescriptions. One can only hope that more traces of such practices emerge in other sources, allowing us to move beyond mere speculation towards a well-grounded hypothesis.

> As a result of this, the state of generality involved is not limited (*parimita*), but extended (*vitata*)—as happens at the moment in which is formed the idea of the invariable concomitance (*vyāpti*) between smoke and fire or, in fact, between *trembling and fear* (Gnoli 1968: 56).

The mention of trembling (*kampa*) in connection to fear, just after the discussion of *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7, may have led Rāghavabhaṭṭa to believe that the trembling being referred to here had to have some connection with the aesthetic analysis of the verse. Furthermore, the way in which *kampa* and *bhaya* are used in the above explanation is akin to the way in which *sāttvikabhāva*s are understood to function. One sees an involuntary corporeal movement and infers something that cannot be seen: its corresponding emotion. Thus, in the case of fear, upon seeing a person trembling one infers that they are afraid. As *sāttvikabhāva*s are an essential element in the theatrical representation of an emotion, it is not implausible that Rāghavabhaṭṭa read this sentence, or even had it at the back of his mind, and might have inferred that the antelope is not only meant to tremble in fear but also to be represented on stage.

4.2. Other commentators and the problem of visual representation

A recent article by Daniele Cuneo and Elisa Ganser, has shed some light on a couple of other commentators of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, specifically on the interpretation of verse 1.7.[20] While these two later commentaries are not as detail-oriented as Rāghavabhaṭṭa's in their analysis of the verse, the voices of these commentators constitute important evidence of the debate enduring long after Rāghavabhaṭṭa's time, and the relative marginality of Abhinavagupta's theories within the broader history of Indian aesthetics.

It is interesting to note that the first commentator they discuss, Abhirāma Bhaṭṭa (17th c.), expounds a view very similar to the one held by Kuntaka, though formulated using a slightly different term. He states that the representation of the antelope is a simple case of a *svabhāvokti*, an expression of one's own nature, which is a widely attested *alaṅkāra* and is essentially a synonym of the term *svajātyucitahevāka* employed by Kuntaka. The existence of this commentator is so far the only other evidence of the continued presence of an interpretation of the scene broadly in line with Kuntaka's aesthetic theory. Surprisingly, Abhirāma Bhaṭṭa seems to raise the same objection to Rāghavabhaṭṭa's commentary outlined a moment ago, against his inclusion of a *sāttvikabhāva*. Abhirāma holds a strong position against the aesthetic relevance of characters that do not appear physically on stage, making

[20] For a more detailed discussion, see Cuneo and Ganser (2022).

it very clear that the role of the antelope is not, in fact, portrayed by an actor. This final point seems to be the crucial problem in the eyes of this first commentator, offering us an interesting perspective on the perceived importance of the visual representation of characters in a play.

The second commentary examined by Cuneo and Ganser is an anonymous work titled *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā* that very clearly responds to the objection raised by Abhirāma Bhaṭṭa. Highlighting the relevance of those portions of *nāṭaka*s which are not meant to be enacted on stage and only recited, he quotes a famous line from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* which states that, "the goddess Sarasvatī has granted audibility to what is visible."[21] In this one line the commentator makes it clear, very logically, that the aesthetic fruition of a literary work does not necessarily need to be mediated through its visual representation, but can also occur merely through reading or hearing it. This statement is also an appropriate objection to Rāghavabhaṭṭa's overzealous attempt at compiling a complete list of aesthetic factors for the verse, including those which refer to the role of an actor. The flight of the antelope need only be evoked orally, without the need for it to be physically portrayed by an actor for the spectators to clearly perceive the antelope's desperation and fright.

5. Reconsidering the scene of the hunt in its own context

This paper has attempted to shed light on the debate among Indian authors of aesthetics regarding the capacity of a non-human animal character to produce an aesthetic experience. The unique case of the flight of the antelope described in *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7 functions almost as a case study for the different ways in which one and the same text can be read and appreciated in different ways and from different points of view. From Kuntaka's appreciation of the verse for its naturalistic portrayal of an animal and no more, to Abhinavagupta's focus and valorisation of the aesthetic portrayal of fear, this one verse has allowed us to focus on two very different ways of understanding the role of non-human animals in *kāvya*. Furthermore, a look at the commentarial tradition on the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* brings to light further questions regarding the portrayal of animal characters on stage and the curious case of an overzealous commentary written by Rāghavabhaṭṭa. A final point that caught our attention is the lack of a live debate in the works of Kuntaka and Abhinavagupta. As was observed, their interpretations of *Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.7 are stated without justification or particular emphasis. By contrast, the various commentaries, beginning with that of Rāghavabhaṭṭa, show signs of disagreement in the

[21] *śrāvatvaṃ prekṣaṇīyasya dadau devī sarasvatī* || *Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.61cd (Kavi 1926: 27).

interpretation of the verse, and each commentator appears to be more interested in defending or demonstrating the validity of a particular interpretation.

As is often the case, this investigation is far from complete. There are many more avenues to be explored and greater care needs to be taken when reading these works of literature. If we were to ask who among these authors offers the right interpretation of the verse, the answer might still sway in Abhinavagupta's favour, for the simple reason that Kuntaka's denial of the aesthetic potential of the antelope to produce *rasa*, while certainly grounded in a long literary tradition, ends up being ideologically incapable of considering the fear of the antelope as nothing more than a conventional literary image. However, it is also the case that any attempt at theorising on aesthetics in such a narrow fashion, by focusing solely on a single verse inevitably leads one to lose sight of the context within which it is embedded.

If we were to broaden our view it would become apparent that the first scene of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, from the entry of Duṣyanta to the interruption of his hunt by the ascetics, is an intricate web of clever contrasts and subtle references that weave together moments of growing tension and release. In the midst of all this, the figure of the antelope necessarily occupies a central place in the narrative as it brings together the conflicting desires of the hunter and the innocent prey. Furthermore, the reading of verse 1.7 is made more interesting when read together with the list of benefits of hunting enumerated in the *Arthaśāstra,*[22] which was certainly known to Kālidāsa. In doing so, it becomes clear that Kālidāsa constructed this verse to include some very specific elements which are understood to be important goals of hunting as a sport. The result being an intriguing mix of perspectives woven together within a single moment, that imbue the verse with a moral ambivalence capable of simultaneously describing both the excitement in Duṣyanta's eyes and the terror reflected in those of the graceful antelope. A more thorough exploration of these elements will have to be reserved for a future discussion. Suffice it to say that any essentialising reading of a work as rich as the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* risks ignoring features of the text and its context that complicate its reading but render it all the more rewarding.

[22] "In the case of hunting, on the other hand, we have exercise; the elimination of phlegm, bile, fat, and perspiration; practice in hitting moving and still bodies; and discerning the minds of animals when they are angry, afraid, and at ease; as well as travel that is not constant," *Arthaśāstra* 8.3.46 (Olivelle 2013: 338).

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