

Study Guide for Kalidasa: *The Recognition of Sakuntala*

Source: Kalidasa: *The Loom of Time*. Penguin Books.

Your assignment is to read *Abhinjanasakuntalam* (*The Recognition of Sakuntala*) plus its related notes. Begin by reading the biographical note in the front of the book, the Introduction, Sections I, III, VI, VII, X, and XIII and Appendix III on pp. 320 & 321. There are two kinds of notes in this book. Terms which are used in more than one of the works are explained in alphabetical order in the glossary on pp. 283-305, and other notes on the play appear on pp. 334-339 as well as in footnote. Be sure to use these notes to explain obscure references, etc.

The claim that the ancient Athenians invented drama may hold true for the West, but Indian writers argue that theater was highly developed even earlier in Sanskrit. No plays survive from those early times, however, and the dates of Kalidasa, the greatest of the Sanskrit playwright, while much disputed, are clearly centuries later--perhaps a millennium later--than Aeschylus and his fellow tragic writers. *Abhinjanasakuntalam* and Kalidasa's other plays were written for a refined court audience. The dialogue of the upper-class characters was delivered in Sanskrit, the classical language, and that of women and commoners in *prakrit*, the common speech. Despite these lofty origins, Kalidasa's plays have remained popular.

There is no tradition of tragedy in India, and Kalidasa's plays always have happy endings. In Hinduism, everyone has an infinite number of chances to achieve enlightenment and liberation from the wheel of rebirth. A life that ends badly is only a prologue to another opportunity. Hence the basic premises on which tragedy is based are lacking.

Sakuntala is by far the best-known of Kalidasa's plays. In Delhi there is a modern auditorium called the "Sakuntalam Theater." The play was translated into German and English in the 18th Century, and greatly impressed the great poet and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who created a version of the story in German and helped to spread knowledge of Kalidasa in the West. The initial consonant is pronounced "sh," and you will often see the title rendered as "Shakuntala."

Benediction

Just as ancient Greek drama was part of a religious ritual (honoring Dionysus), so there is a religious aspect to classical Hindu drama. The play begins with a hymn of blessing which would have been sung rather than recited. The play would have been enhanced throughout by dances and songs. The "Benediction" is addressed to Lord Siva in his eight Rudras, or forms, mentioned each in turn and listed in the footnote on p. 169. The Creator is Brahma, who otherwise plays little role in Hindu devotions. Note the insistence on the multifaceted nature of the divine, so different from the Islamic insistence on its unity. For the devout Hindu, this play is more than a captivating love story: it is a religious drama on at least two levels. On the simplest level it teaches the doctrine of *karma*, that our experiences are influenced by our acts earlier in this life and in past lives. It is also an allegory of the relationship between the worshiper and the sacred. Each play is also expected to convey a certain set of emotions and attitudes called a *rasa*. Here the *rasa* is composed of various forms of eroticism and love. It also has a political aspect in that the playwright is flattering the royal line of the ruler for whom he is writing.

Prologue

Goethe was so impressed by this traditional Indian dramatic device of introducing the play through dialogue between the actors and the director that he added such a prologue to his *Faust*. Sanskrit poetry, like Japanese poetry, is generally classified according to season. Note the image of the bees in the Actress' song. What associations do bees seem to have in this play?

Act One

The earliest version of this story is told in the *Mahabharata*, and would have been known to everyone in the audience. It is characteristic of Hinduism, however, that there is no insistence on following an "orthodox" version, and that there are always alternative traditions, such as the one that Kalidasa follows. Be sure to read the short excerpt from *Mahabharata* on pp. 320-321 and compare what the audience might have expected to see with the actual action of the play. Note especially how the actions and character of Duhsanta have changed. Whereas Westerners are used to religion demanding a single standard of morality for everyone (or at most having slightly

different emphases for men and women), in Hinduism that which is good for a person of a certain age, social standing, or caste, may be bad for another. Each person must follow his or her *dharma* (duty). Most kings loved to hunt, but it was disapproved of by Brahmins, and hunting is forbidden in the sacred grove where the ascetics live. Suta compares the king to Siva (also spelled "Shiva"), alluding to a myth in which Siva, angered because he had not been invited to a great sacrifice, pursued and killed the "lord of the sacrifice" who had transformed himself into a deer. Indra is a storm god who is depicted in the Vedas as driving a chariot drawn by a pair of horses. Clearly the stage cannot have been vast enough to depict the pursuit of the deer realistically. What means does the poet use to convey the chase vividly? According to the Introduction to this volume, what is significant about the deer the king is chasing? Note how the poet keenly observes the visual effects of traveling at great speed in language that resembles modern filmed space travel effects.

In Hinduism, the ideal final stage of life is asceticism: the practitioner goes to live in the forest without worldly possessions, engaging in prodigious feats of meditation and self-denial, hoping to achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Skilled ascetics could accumulate so much spiritual power that they sometimes posed a threat even to the gods, as we shall see later. Few people actually achieve the extremes of the ascetic ideal, but such people are highly respected and honored. There is no pressure, however, for each individual to emulate the ideal, since if one is not ready for such austerity in this life there will always be opportunities to carry it out in lives to come, when one has accumulated the necessary *karma*. The King's arrows are cruel in the context of the Hermitage; the audience would respect this view without necessarily agreeing that they themselves should stop hunting or eating meat. What simile does the ascetic use to describe the effect of arrows on deer? Note that heaps of flowers are common sacrificial offerings to the gods. How do the ascetics link the king's role as a benevolent ruler with their objections to hunting. The blessing of the ascetic foreshadows the ultimate theme of this play: the birth of a son who will one day be the greatest of kings. In Western drama foreshadowing is used to heighten suspense or to create a sense of doom threatening human happiness. In Sanskrit drama foreshadowing instead creates a sense of purpose, of inevitability, linked to the concept of *karma*. The wheel, symbol of the reign of the benevolent emperor Asoka, is pictured on the flag of modern India as a symbol of Hinduism. Fire is central to Hindu ritual. Originally animals were sacrificed and burned as in Judaism or ancient Greek practice, but fruits, flowers, incense, etc. are more commonly sacrificed today. The Himalayas have long been famed as the site of particularly devout mystics, giving rise to the Western stereotype of the guru on the mountain top. How do the ascetics convey that they appreciate the king's skill with the bow despite their objections to his hunting? In what way does the king's description of the grove make clear that it is a place of penitential prayer and meditation, different from other areas of the forest? Note the significance of specifying that the deer feed on *dharba* shoots.

What do you think is symbolized by the king setting aside his jewels and bow when he visits the Hermitage? In the Western tradition, the suggestion of a love encounter in a hermitage would be considered blasphemous: but the king is not expected at his stage of life to be an ascetic: he is in the "householder" stage, appropriate for love and marriage. Note the preference for the natural over the cultivated, a common theme in much Western poetry as well. Keep track of the ways in which Sakuntala is compared to various plants. What characteristics link her to the trees? To other plants? Why is watering trees which are no longer blooming particularly virtuous? The ascetics wear clothing made of rough, simple materials such as bark. The fact that Anasuya says the vine has *chosen* the mango hints at the fact that although Sakuntala may be free to choose her own husband, like a princess, despite the many statements to the contrary. Note the strong emphasis on proper hospitality, very important in traditional Hinduism. Sakuntala is almost inhospitable to the king because of her embarrassment, and later her passion for him will cause her to be disastrously inhospitable to Durvasa. The traditional Indian ideal of feminine beauty involves a narrow waste, large, round breasts, and swelling buttocks. Explain the meaning of the quatrain at (19) beginning "Though inlaid in duckweed the lotus glows." The mango is often associated with love and is a "male" plant. Kama, the god of love, targets with mango-shoot arrows those he wishes to inspire with love. The image of two plants intertwined symbolizing a human embrace is also common in European poetry, where plants are often said to spring up from the graves of unfortunate lovers to intertwine in death. Here the symbolism is happier: men and women are meant for each other.

Sakuntala's behavior from here on must be interpreted as reflecting a highly desirable quality in a young woman: modesty. Do not jump to the conclusion that Sakuntala is not just as interested in love and marriage as her friends: she is simply more demure and hides it better. In all this talk about loving vines, remember that human souls could be reincarnated not only as animals but as plants. All living things are related in Hinduism. How does Sakuntala learn that she may be married soon? It is a cliché of courtly literature from all over the world that the exceptional youth--male or female--discovered in obscure surroundings must have a mysterious noble background. As we will see, Sakuntala's ancestry can be considered superior even to the king's. At (22) we encounter the image of the bee, referred to in the opening. What draws the bee to Sakuntala? Why is it appropriate for the bee to call to mind King Duhsanta? His speech at (24) begins by referring to his own greatness as "chastiser of the weakness" without revealing his true identity, but they see immediately that he is a noble. Note how Sakuntala reveals her true feelings in her aside to herself, though she coyly continues to brush aside her friends' teasing suggestions. There can be no

doubt that she has fallen instantly in love with the handsome young king. The Vedas are the oldest Hindu scriptures, and are still recited regularly.

We now learn that Kanva is only Sakuntala's stepfather. An Apsara is a beautiful divine woman such as those depicted on temple carvings. They often figure in myths as tempering the excessive power achieved by extreme ascetics, as here. Such power is not necessarily bad just because the gods are fearful of it. In Hinduism, the gods are not supreme. There is a larger spiritual order to which gods and humans alike are subject. In what way is Sakuntala like a flash of lightning? The King's description of Sakuntala at (29) contains all the stereotypes of intense erotic passion, though he pretends to think that they are the result of her labors (which, after all, have hardly been extreme). The ring which will play so large a part in the following plot is now offered. The play is often referred to as *The Ring of Recollection*. How can the king tell she is interested in him though she does not look at him? Why do you think that at this precise moment the off-stage warning against the king's coming is uttered? What is the symbolism? The "tusk" is of course an elephant. The King's hunting party has started a stampede. Why do you think Sakuntala is suddenly afflicted with a number of problems which prevent her leaving immediately?

Act Two

Comic figures such as Madhavya are standard in Hindu drama. He speaks *Prakrit*, the language of ordinary people, rather than Sanskrit. His complaints about the hunt could be interestingly compared to the complaints of the herald about warfare in one of the early scenes of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Heavy hips are considered highly desirable in a woman, partly because they are associated with the bearing of healthy children. "May you live long" is a standard address to a king upon greeting or leaving him. Note how the General acknowledges that hunting is disapproved of in certain quarters. See endnote 12. Why do you suppose the General hopes Madhavya will continue to oppose hunting? The desire to hunt is here called a "strong passion," and such passions are major obstacles to enlightenment; but in fact the king's passion for hunting has been overwhelmed by another, even stronger passion. Endnote 7 explains why Sakuntala may be beyond the reach of Madhavya even though he is King. What do the metaphors listed at (11) have in common, beginning with "A flower whose fragrance none has dared to smell"? The latter part of this speech suggests that such divine beauty could only be produced by the accumulation of great amounts of good karma in previous existences. The tribute the hermits pay is their devotion which brings the blessings of the gods on the kingdom.

Note how the first hermit, despite his own asceticism, approves of the king's dedication to the worldly life: each must play his appropriate role. Gods (Rama in particular) and great Kings are often portrayed as destroyers of demons. Again, the dialogue foreshadows the next important plot development, which simultaneously (and not coincidentally) provides the king with the excuse he has been longing for to stay with the hermits. How is the rushed courtship of the king justified in a way that was not the case in the *Mahabharata*?

Act Three

This act begins and ends with the king alone, framing his intensely romantic encounter with Sakuntala and setting it off in contrast. Cooling salves were used in high summer, and can also signify that the user is burning with passion. The churning of cream into butter is one of the most common activities of Indian life and a frequent symbol for creation. Kama's flowered arrows are again referred to. When Kama disturbed Siva's meditations, he wrathfully destroyed the love-god with fire emanating from his third eye. Note how Duhsanta tracks Sakuntala almost like a detective. How does each of the "clues" remind him of some attractive aspect of his beloved? The heat of her passion has literally cooked her lotus-blossom bracelets. Which of the symptoms of love which the king lists are familiar from the love-sickness symptoms used by Western poets such as Ovid? What does the metaphor about the river flowing to the ocean imply about the status of Sakuntala herself? Like many lovers in Western fiction, she is so far gone in love that she will soon die if she does not find relief. Therefore the king cannot properly be blamed for courting her so hastily. Why is it important that the king learn of her love by overhearing her rather than more directly? Why do you think that Sakuntala refers specifically to the Inner Apartments as the place the King must be longing to return to? With typical Hindu emphasis on variety, there are no fewer than eight kinds of marriage described in traditional law, of which Gandharva is the voluntary union of a couple in love without any ceremony or consent of their parents. Although it is rarely invoked, theoretically it is as binding as any other kind of marriage. However, it depends entirely on the trustworthiness of the man. The story of Siva's destruction of Kama is again alluded to at (34). The offstage voice calling for Sakuntala to leave refers to the traditional belief that sheldrakes, though devoted couples in the daytime, always slept apart at night. Just as the king began his pursuit of Shakuntala by tracing the "clues" left behind by her passage, so at the end of the act he contemplates the traces left behind of her time with him (39). At the end of the scene we hear of the demons which threaten to disturb the ascetics' rituals. Is the king himself in any way similar to these demons and to the wild elephant which disturbed them earlier?

Act Four

The physical union of the lovers is delicately left off stage. It becomes apparent that the Gandharva marriage has been consummated and the king has been gone for some time. Note the ominous foreshadowing in Anasuya's second speech. Duhsanta is fated to forget his bride even before the fatal curse is uttered. The incident by which Durvasa's rage is aroused may seem slight, but the duty to travelers is a sacred one. Because the girl forgot to honor Durvasa, Duhsanta will forget to honor her. How does this shift the responsibility for the lapse of memory, compared to the *Mahabharata*? When Anasuya somewhat mollifies Durvasa, he cannot take back his curse, but he modifies it. Similarly, when in Greek mythology Hera blinded Teiresias, Zeus could not undo the divine curse, but compensated for it by giving him internal sight: the gift of prophecy. A more familiar example is the partial undoing of the curse in "Sleeping Beauty." Even the noble moon, which through its association with healing herbs gives life, must set. The metaphor refers to the departure of the king. Kanva is informed of Sakuntala's pregnancy in a way that makes clear that the gods are involved. Note the emphasis on the child she carries. Unlike most Western love stories, this is a great love because it will produce a great offspring. Hindus ritually wash at sunrise, before eating. What hopes do the women have for her child? Note how Sakuntala is adorned by a miracle (caused by her stepfather's powers), another sign that this union is blessed, despite its inauspicious beginning. An Indian bride's feet are decorated with red lac. Brides are expected to weep upon leaving the family home for their husband's. Sarmistta, the daughter of the king of demons, married Yayati according to the Gandharva rite and gave birth to Puru, founder of the line from which Duhsanta is descended. Thus the parallel to Sakuntala involves both her apparently "low" origins and the noble destiny of her son. The song by the invisible spirits further endorses this union, which is clearly blessed by many forces even while it lies under the curse of Durvasa. Why is such a situation more plausible in this setting than in, say, a Christian setting? Even the vines with which Sakuntala was earlier identified "weep" at her departure by shedding their leaves. Kanva clearly understands the necessity of this marriage in a way that is truly exceptional for a Hindu father. His acceptance of it would be more striking for an Indian audience than a modern American one. The parallel between Sakuntala and the vine having been reaffirmed, how is her identification with the doe also reasserted?

The lessons that Kanva gives Sakuntala in being a good wife are highly conventional. What qualities do they seem to value? Sakuntala is alarmed at her friends' suggestion that she use the ring to remind Duhsanta of her identity because it implies that he may indeed forget her. Since they have never told her of the curse, she does not understand the true urgency of their warning. The saying "A daughter is wealth belonging to another" is common in cultures which use dowry. Boys are preferred partly because they bring wealth into the family, whereas the marriage of a daughter is a major expense. A Western equivalent to this saying is "A daughter's a daughter until she's a wife, but a son is a son for the rest of your life." But why, according to Kanva is he satisfied to "lose" Sakuntala?

Act Five

The greatest differences between the *Mahabharata* version and Kalidasa's come in this act. Look for the way in which the king's motives are emphasized. Note how the forgetfulness of the Chamberlain foreshadows the forgetfulness of the king. The sun, the Cosmic Serpent, and the king must all labor unceasingly. "The sixth" referred to is the king's legal tax noted earlier. Note how Duhsanta is praised as a hard-working, dutiful lord although we have earlier seen him at leisure. It is important that his good character be established firmly. The umbrellas refer to provide shade (Latin *umbra*) from the heat of the tropical sun rather than shelter from rain. The King illustrates "kinship's perfect pattern" because he treats his subjects as if they were all his relatives. The *vina* is a traditional bowed string instrument. How is Lady Hamsavati's song another instance of foreshadowing? What is the king's reaction to the coming of the hermits? What does it reveal about his character? Note how alert the king is to any fault he may have committed. When the ascetics enter, they foreshadow the disaster to come through their feelings of unease. What is the meaning of the poem at (13)? How does the king's reaction to Vetravati's praise of Sakuntala's beauty illustrate his character? What metaphor springs up in the king's struggles to remember that reminds us of his earlier enthusiasm for Sakuntala? Why does Vetravati praise him as virtuous for hesitating? The king is at first cynically skeptical of Sakuntala, but her outburst which begins "Ignoble man" is convincing in its natural spontaneity. What hint is there in his comments to himself that the King is being attracted to her all over again? Sakuntala's final words indicate she wants to die; but instead of being swallowed by the earth, she snatched up into the sky by the Apsara Misrakesi. Even this miracle cannot convince the king of the truth. What does convince him that Sakuntala's words may well have been true?

Act Six

Fishermen were low-caste because they were involved in killing animal life; but this one sarcastically replies that the brahmins who consider themselves the very highest caste kill animals when they sacrifice them in rituals. Fish swallowing marvelous rings turn up in many folk tales, both Eastern and Western. Note how frequently the important actions, such as the king's recovery of his memory, take place offstage. Because the audience knows the story already, it is not crucial to evoke suspense and provide climactic moments as in Western drama; what is important is to evoke the relevant moods. The spring festival in honor of Kama is a wild celebration called "Holi,"

now dedicated to Krishna. Note that in the conversation between the two court ladies the image of the bee and the mango blossom is repeated. Typical of the Indian preference for variety, Kama--unlike Cupid--has no fewer than five different kinds of arrows, each of which causes a different kind of love. The king is not behaving like a tyrant in forbidding the celebration of the spring festival; his grief has actually prevented the coming of spring. Note that the king is a painter. Several prominent monarchs of both India and China were distinguished painters. What pious lesson does the king draw from his failure to remember Sakuntala? How does the state of the painting reflect the king's devotion to Sakuntala? The pairs of geese and deer which the king wants to paint symbolize love and marriage. The king is crazed by contemplating the picture and becomes jealous of the painted bee which hovers where he wants to be. Why does the king hide the painting when Queen Vasumati approaches, according to Misrakesi? Duhsanta's extraordinary honesty and decency is reconfirmed by his scrupulous reaction to the announcement of the merchant's death. At this time, widows were not allowed to inherit, but their unborn children might. Even though it means the loss of a fortune, he scrupulously inquires whether any of the widows is pregnant. The phrase "I had implanted myself in her" alludes to the belief that a man reproduces himself in his son. Duhsanta is in despair because it seems he will never have a son to be his heir. Note the female bodyguard; such guards were often used to guard the women's quarters without endangering their chastity. The king imagines that the voices taunting him belong to demons. The king is roused from his crazed stupor by this therapeutic challenge and reaffirms his skills as a demon-fighter, though mistakenly at first. The "twice-born" are upper-caste people like the king. The royal swan was supposed to have the ability to separate milk from water. How is the inevitability of *karma* stressed even as the king is called upon to kill the demon offspring of Kalanemi (35)?

Act Seven

The play takes place in three basic settings: the idyllic but lowly world of the hermitage, the dazzling but worldly palace, and the transcendent celestial regions. Duhsanta has had to pass through all these to perform his *dharma*. Again we have skipped a climactic scene: the king's victory over the demons. Sharing the throne of Indra was a proverbial extreme honor. "Golden sandal" refers to sandalwood paste, smeared on the chest as a refreshing, sweet-smelling salve. What is the king's virtuous reaction to Matali's lavish praise? The Ganga is the heavenly aspect of the Ganges River, the most sacred stream in India. Just as Duhsanta met Sakuntala initially because of his reverence for the ascetics on Earth, so he is reunited with her through his reverence for the divine ascetic Marica, son of Brahma and father of Indra, who is king of the gods. Thus he resembles Duhsanta, father of the king of men. He plays a major role in the creation myths. His penance is described in extreme form at (11). Marica is so absorbed in his meditations that he has lost all track of his body, so that a snake has shed its skin on his torso to create a second sacred thread (usually a piece of twine worn by all Brahmin males); but this is more than a symbol of mere negligence since a snake-skin thread is also characteristic of Siva.. Again the throbbing arm of the king foreshadows his reunion with his bride. A boy who rough-houses with lion cubs is obviously something out of the ordinary. Naughtiness in boys is often more than half-admired as a sign of manly spirit, as the king's speech at (15) makes clear. Note that the true consummation of this romance is not the reunion of the loving couple, but the encounter of the king with his son, destined to be the greatest of kings. Note the outline at (20) of the conventional view of the ideal life for a *Kshatriya*: wealth and power in youth, self-denial and spirituality in old age. One last time the king exhibits a sense of morality by not asking about Sakuntala. In many countries, particularly Muslim ones, it is considered highly offensive to inquire after a man's wife or in any way imply that he may have one. What attitudes toward women do you think are reflected in such customs?

Sakuntala's single braid is a sign of mourning. To what does she attribute her sufferings when the king falls prostrate before her? According to ancient Hindu thought the earth is composed of seven island continents. How does the final speech of the king reflect the ideas of the Brahmin-priests who dominated Hinduism? The last line reflects the highest wish of a pious Hindu: to be liberated from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). What can you say about the relationship of erotic love to religion in this play?