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Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 109, No. 4. (Oct. - Dec., 1989), pp. 577-580.

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DAMAYANTĪ'S SVAYAMVARA

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This paper proposes a new reading and translation of *Mahābhārata* III. 54. 26, the passage in which Damayantī chooses her husband. It also discusses the equivalent passage in the Old Gujarati version, first edited and translated by Ernest Bender, to whom this contribution is dedicated.

THE CLIMAX OF THE FIRST five chapters of the “Tale of Nala” (Nalopākhyāna) as told in the *MBhP* (= Poona Ed., III.50–54) occurs, of course, when Damayantī makes her ‘self-choice of husband (*svayamvara*). The princess enters the arena (*raṅga*), is confused by the appearance of five men who all look like Nala, but eventually makes the correct choice after distinguishing those characteristics which separate the features of gods from those of men. She then formally chooses Nala as her husband according to the proper practice (*dharmeṇa*).

How Damayantī indicates her choice at this point is described in the text as follows (III.54.26):

*vilajjamānā vastrānte, jagrāhāyatalocanā
skandhadeśe 'srjac cāsya, srajaṃ paramaśobhanām
varayām āsa caivainam, patitve varavarṇinī*

The passage has been translated most recently by van Buitenen (*The Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, p. 328) as, “Bashfully she touched the hem of her garment and threw over his shoulders a most beautiful garland; and thus the fair woman chose him for her husband.”

Let us first deal with the translation of the second two *pādas*. The quoted interpretation appears incorrect in part because the simple root *srj* only means ‘release, free, discharge’, never ‘cast, throw’. It occurs occasionally with *puṣpavarṣa* ‘shower of flowers’, as in *Rām.* 5.17.3 (Gorresio) . . . *pādapān* . . . *srjataḥ puṣpavarṣāṇi* ‘(he saw) trees releasing showers of flowers.’ But this conceit is modelled after the employment of *srj* with simple *vṛṣṭi* ‘rain’, a usage which stretches back to the *Rigveda*.¹ Since Damayantī uses a garland (*sraja*) as part of the ceremony and not individual flowers, the appearance of *srj* in the passage is

altogether unwarranted. Glossing over this difficulty by translating the verb as ‘threw’ does not solve the problem simply because this meaning is excluded for the root in question.

The solution is obvious when parallel passages are compared, since the verb *saj* ‘hang’ is used to describe the action of bestowing a garland upon someone else. Cf. *MBhP* III.264.33cd–34ab:

*sugrīvasya tadā mālām, hanūmān kaṅṭha āsajat
sa mālayā tadā vīraḥ, śuśubhe kaṅṭhasaktayā*

Hanūman then hung a garland on Sugrīva’s neck. The hero then looked resplendent with the garland hanging on his neck.

In this passage there cannot be any doubt that *āsajat* is the correct reading, even though all the manuscripts of the Southern recension read *āsrajat*, since the figures *kaṅṭha āsajat* and *kaṅṭhasakta* (not **-srṣṭa*) are stylistic variants of each other.² The most convincing parallel, however, occurs in the narrative dealing with the *svayamvara* of Kuntī (Prthā), which was omitted from the Poona edition but which appears in the Calcutta edition at I.4415–18:

*tataḥ sā raṅgamadhyastharī,
teṣām rājñām manasvinī
dadarśa rājaśārdūlam,
pāṇḍum bharatasattamam*

Thereupon the wise girl saw Pāṇḍu, the best of the Bharatas, standing in the middle of the arena, the real tiger among those kings,

¹ Cf. I.38.8, V.62.3, IX.100.3.

² Compare also *kaṅṭhasaṅjana*.

*simhadarpaṃ mahoraskarṃ,
vṛṣabhākṣarṃ mahābalaṃ
ādityam iva sarveṣāṃ,
rājñāṃ prachādyā vai prabhāḥ*

daring like a lion, great-chested, bull-eyed and mightily strong, eclipsing like the sun the radiance of all the kings.

*tiṣṭhantaṃ rājasamitau,
purāṃdaram ivāparam
taṃ dṛṣṭvā sānavadyāṅgī,
kuntibhojasutā śubhā
pāṇḍuṃ naravaram raṅge,
hṛdayanākulābhavat*

Seeing Pāṇḍu, the best of men, standing like incomparable Indra amid the assembly of kings, the beautiful, faultless-limbed daughter of Kuntibhoja became confused at heart in the arena.

*tataḥ kāmaparītāṅgī,
saktṛpracalamānasā
vrīḍamānā srajam kuntī,
rājñāḥ skandhe samāsajat*

Thereupon, her body overcome with love, her mind suddenly wavering, acting with modesty, Kuntī hung a garland on the shoulder of the king.

This last stanza, with its keywords *vrīḍamānā srajam . . . skandhe samāsajat* that mirror *lajjamānā . . . skandhadēse 'srjac cāsya srajam . . .*, leaves no doubt that it is necessary to emend *asrjat* to *asajat* in the passage dealing with Damayantī's *svayamvara*, although the manuscripts attest no variants at all.

What has simply occurred is that an artificial figura etymologica has developed within the poetic tradition which remade an original collocation *srajam asajat* into *srajam asrjat* by reshaping the vocalism of the verb to that of the preceding noun.³ The exact same influence of a preceding *r* or *ṛ* can also be discerned at *MBhP* I.46.10ab *anāgasi gurau yo me, mṛtsarparṃ āsrjat*, where again there are no variant readings in

³ This alteration seems to be extremely old insofar as the expression *kaṇṭhe mālaṃ parikkhipivā* is already found at *Jāt.* I.8 (p. 166), which appears built to corresponding Skt. *kaṇṭhe srajam srj*. Pāli usually employes *bandh* to describe how something is attached to the neck (cf. *Jāt.* I.5, III.226), but the old term *ā saj* survives in *kaṇṭhe āsatto kuṇapo* 'a corpse hanging on one's neck' (*M.* I.120).

the MSS. The passage is nothing more than a recounting of earlier *MBhP* I.37.3:

*rājñā parīkṣitā tāta,
mṛgayāṃ paridhāvātā
avasaktaḥ pitus te 'dya,
mṛtaḥ skandhe bhujamgamah*

A dead snake was hung on thy father's shoulder, my dear, by King Parīkṣit as he was racing about on the hunt.

Here again we are compelled to emend to *āsajat* in the former passage insofar as *mṛtsarparṃ *āsajat* and *avasakto mṛto bhujamgamah* express the identical idea.⁴

Further proof for the correctness of the suggested emendation comes from the independent tradition of the Classical poets. At *Raghuvamśa* VI.86–87 (ed. V. P. Joshi), Kālidāsa describes the manner in which Indumatī chooses her husband at her *svayamvara*:

*sā cūrṇagauram raghunandanasya
dhātrīkarābhyaṃ karabhopamorūḥ
āsañjayāṃ āsa yathāpradeśam
kaṇṭhe gunam murtim ivānurāgam*

The plump-thighed maiden let her nurse attach with her hands in the proper place, on the neck of the joy of Raghu, a garland, yellow with sandal powder, like love itself incarnate.

*tayā srajā maṅgalapuspamayyā
viśālavakṣaḥsthalalambayā saḥ
amaṃsta kaṇṭhārpitabāhupāsāṃ
vidarbharājāvarajam vareṇyaḥ*

With this garland composed of auspicious flowers hanging on the expanse of his broad chest, the desirable (suitor) thought that the younger sister of the king of Vidarbha had fixed on his neck the snares of her arms.

Let us now turn to the first two *pādas*. Apart from the fact that the epithet *āyatalocanā* is left untranslated, the translation glosses over two difficulties. The

⁴ The Calcutta ed. has *āsajat* correctly in this passage (I.1699), and because of this, the Petersburg *Lexicon* (VII:793, 795) proposed similar emendations in both passages already in 1875. Unfortunately these suggestions were not followed.

first is that *jagrāha* means 'takes hold of, grasps', and that being so, the second problem is that we expect an accusative complement with the verb, not a locative as appears in the text. Admittedly, the Petersburg *Lexicon* (II:835) lists, along with the passage under discussion, two other passages in which the root *grah* appears with a locative complement, and indeed both are related in that the locative is the same word *keśeṣu*. However, an examination of those passages reveals that the true object of *grah* is either an overt or implied accusative.

In the first passage, which is found at *MBhP* II.60.22cd, there is a properly expressed accusative:

*dīrghēṣu nīleṣv atha cormimatsu
jagrāha keśeṣu narendrapatnīm*

He seized the wife of the king by her long dark and wavy hair.

The second example is found at *Manu* 8.283:

*keśeṣu grhṇato hastau, chedayed avicārayan
pādayor dāḍhikāyām ca, grīvāyām vṛṣaṇeṣu ca*

Medhātithi in his commentary paraphrases the opening of the stanza as *keśeṣu brāhmaṇam grhṇataḥ sūdrasya*, supplying correctly the implied accusative which *grah* requires, and consequently the correct translation should run, 'Without any (further) consideration (the king) should cut off the hands of (a Śūdra) who grasps (a Brahmin) by the hair, feet, beard, neck and (= or) testicles'. The locative with *grah* in these passages expresses merely the part of the body where the grasping takes place.

If we return to the phrase *lajjamānā vastrānte jagrāha*, there can only be two choices in how to deal with its interpretation. Either we must supply a suppressed *nalām*, so that the translation would run 'Modestly she grasped (Nala) by the end of his garment', or we must emend the text to *vastrāntam*, so that the translation would follow as, 'Modestly she grasped the end of his/her garment'. I favor the latter alternative because the exact opposite of the expression *lajjamānā *vastrāntam jagrāha* is found at *Indische Sprüche*, 2nd. ed., 1780 (688):⁵

*kiṃ me vaktram upetya cumbati balān nirlajja
lajjākrte*

*vastrāntam śaṭha muñca muñca
śapathaiḥ kiṃ dhūrta nirvāncasi, etc.*

Why dost thou approach and kiss my mouth forcefully, thou immodest fellow feigning modesty? Let go at once of the end of my garment, cheat. Why dost thou deceive me with (false) promises, thou rogue?

In this passage the idea expressed by *nirlajja vastrāntam muñca* functions, to my thinking, as the precise contrary notion to *lajjamānā *vastrāntam jagrāha* and thus supports the proposal to emend the text with a proper accusative for *jagrāha*.

The two MSS K₁ and B₄ indeed read *vastrāntam* but their testimony only demonstrates the uneasiness which the scribes felt concerning the absence of an accusative with *jagrāha*. The underlying reading of the textual tradition was certainly *vastrānte*, but as in the example of *asṛjat* discussed above, the mistake goes back to the *Urtext* of the received recension. What occurred in the beginning was that locative *skandhadeśe* motivated the alteration of *vastrāntam* to *vastrānte*. Note that one cannot overlook the possibility that if there was a written version of the archetype, a sloppily noted *m* could be mistaken for *e*.

The question, however, still remains: whose garment has Damayantī grasped? Her own or Nala's? From the above-cited *Spruch*, where the lover is clearly grasping the garment of his beloved, it appears that Damayantī is holding in some fashion her own garment. What, then, is the *vastrānta*? To my mind, it cannot simply mean 'the end of the garment' in the sense of 'hem', but rather, it seems to me that *vastrānta* is the equivalent of the term *nīvī* which designates the end knot by which a woman's lower garment is secured. In Sanskrit erotic poetry endless mention is made of the *nīvī* of the woman's garment becoming undone, either by itself under swelling passion or by the initiative of the woman's lover.⁶ Moreover, among the various acts which are considered adulterous by the *Yājñavalkya Dharmasāstra*, touching the *nīvī* of another man's woman (or wife) is mentioned at 2.284:

nīvīstanaprāvaraṇasakthikeśābhimarśanam

(A man is to be charged with adultery) when there is touching of the end knot (of the lower garment), the

⁵ Verse = *Śṛṅgāratilaka* 10 (Gildemeister).

⁶ Cf. *Subhāṣitaratnakośa* 19.14/572, 19.16/574, 21.65/699, etc.

breasts, the upper garment, thigh or hair (of another man's woman).⁷

Consequently, when Damayantī grasps the end of the garment, she is taking hold of the end knot of her own lower garment, and this act itself most probably signifies sexual submission to Nala.

Ernest Bender, to whom this contribution is dedicated, edited and translated an Old Gujarātī version of *Nala* many years ago, and this interesting vernacular version of the ancient tale, called the *Nalarā-yadavadantīcarita*,⁸ also contains a description in stanza 76 of how Damayantī chose Nala as her *svayamvara*:

⁷ Parallels are found at *Manu* 8.357–58 and *Kaṭṭ. Arthaś.* (Kangle) 3.3.26, where the text requires emendation. In fact, the attested string *nīvī-stana-prāvaraṇa-sakthi-keśa-* in *Yājñ.* would be more sensible if *stana* and *sakthi* were interchanged. In this way the lower garment and the thighs, the upper garment and the breasts would form a natural pairing, and the general description of what is forbidden would move in the direction from the bottom of the body to the top. This is the usual method of description of a woman's beauty in poetry. Cf. *Kumārasambh.* 1.31–50.

⁸ *TAPS*, n.s., 40.4 (1950): 265–372.

neha.salūṇe loṇe-e, ālokaṁtī bāla
ghālai utakaṁṭhī atihī, nalaha kaṁṭhī varamāla

[And] as she gazed with eyes lustrous with love, she eagerly threw the garland of choice around Nala's neck. (Bender)

But the translation of the verb *ghālai* as 'threw', chosen undoubtedly under the influence of Hindi *ghālnā* 'throws', is as equally inappropriate for a garland (*mālā*) in this text as *asṛjat* is for *sraj* in the *MBh.* story. Turner (*CDIAL* III:240), however, reports that in Old Mārṅwārī and Old Gujarātī the verb *ghālai* only means 'puts, places' and consequently the phrase *ghālai . . . kaṁṭhī varamāla* is almost identical with *MBh. skandhadēśe* *'sajat srajam. Turner (ibid.), however, errs in ascribing *ghālai* 'puts, places' under the lemma **ghalyati* 'pours', since the verb belongs with Skt. *ghaṭayati* 'affixes; puts, places', Cf. *Gīta-govinda* (ed. Quellet) 12.25 (282) *ghaṭaya jaghane kāñcīm* 'place (or, fasten) the girdle on thy hips'. This late Skt. verb, as well as its Middle Indic relatives *ghālai*, etc., in the meaning 'joins, affixes; puts, etc.' ultimately derives from *grath* 'ties, joins', the details of which will be presented on another occasion.