

The Poetics of Ambivalence: Imagining and Unimagining the Political in Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*

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Abstract There is something quite deceptive about Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, one of the most popular and oft-quoted works of the Sanskrit canon. The poem conforms perfectly to the stipulations of the *mahākāvya* genre: it is replete with descriptions of bravery in battle and amorous plays with beautiful women; its language is intensified by a powerful arsenal of ornaments and images; and it portrays its main hero, King Vikramāṅka VI of the Cālukya dynasty (r. 1076–1126), as an equal of Rāma. At the same time, the poem subverts these very aspects of Sanskrit literary culture: the poetic language is thinned down at a series of crucial junctions; the Rāmaness of the hero is repeatedly undermined; and the poet consistently airs his ambivalence toward, if not utter resentment for his immediate cultural milieu, his own patron and subject matter, and the very task of a court poet. The article argues that Bilhaṇa's ambivalence and alienation are the hallmark of his work, and that the poet constantly and consciously struggles with and comments on what he sees as the utter incompatibility between poetry and political reality. It also demonstrates that Bilhaṇa's unique, personal voice resonates in his many afterlives and in several collections of poems attributed to him posthumously. I argue that it may well be a sign of recognition of what was truly innovative in his poetry that the tradition has credited Bilhaṇa with such additional lives and corpora.

Keywords Bilhaṇa · *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* · Cālukyas · *Kāvya* · Bāṇa · Ambivalence · Alienation · Kashmir

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Introduction: The Place of a Poet

Compared with the scant knowledge we have about the time and place of most Sanskrit poems, there is an abundance of information about *Life of Vikramānka* (*Vikramānkadevacarita*, hereafter *VDC*) and its author Bilhaṇa. We can date the work with rare accuracy to the 1080s, most probably to the short period between 1085 and 1089.¹ The place is Kalyāṇa, or Kalyāṇi, capital of the Western Cālukya dynasty, during the long reign of its victorious monarch Vikramāditya VI (also known as Vikrama or Vikramānka, r. 1076–1126). We also know much about the life of Bilhaṇa before the composition of the *VDC*: his upbringing in Kashmir, which he left after completing his education sometime between 1062 and 1065,² and his subsequent career as a professional poet in some of the major centers of the Indian peninsula, such as Mathurā, Kānyakubja, Pryāga, Vārāṇasi, Somanātha and the court of the Ḍāhala king Karṇa in Mt. Kālañjara, before his arrival at Kalyāṇa. The availability of this information is related to two salient features of the *VDC*: its explicit historical subject matter and its substantial biographical afterword. Bilhaṇa went out of his way to tell his readers where and when to place him. In more than one sense, a major theme of his work is precisely the place poets occupy in the world.

In this connection it is worth mentioning the place that later tradition allotted Bilhaṇa. The *VDC* is one of the most frequently quoted Sanskrit *kāvya*s. Dozens of its verses have been cited in anthologies compiled throughout the subcontinent. Many more verses of sources unknown to us have also been ascribed to Bilhaṇa by anthology compilers.³ Quite a few later poets (from Mañkha in Kashmir to Veṅkaṭādhvarin in the deep Tamil country), literary theorists (such as Ruyyaka and Appayya Dikṣita), and commentators (like the famous Arjunavarmadeva in his commentary on the *Amaruśataka*), to say nothing of Kashmir's chronicler Kalhaṇa, have referred to, praised, or quoted Bilhaṇa.⁴ In addition, Bilhaṇa has had an unusual posthumous career as the author of the renowned and much-loved *Caurapañcāśikā*—"The Fifty Poems of the Thief." Indeed, he is sometimes referred to simply by the nickname *cora*, "the Thief."⁵ There is no way of verifying

¹ Pathak (1966, 61) and Warder (1992, 614).

² As noted already by Bühler in the introduction to his 1875 edition of the *Vikramānkadevacarita* of Bilhaṇa, p. 23. Cf. Raghavan (1978, 842) and Kawthekar (1995, 17–18) for an estimate of 1062.

³ For the details and numbers, see "Afterlives and Afterthoughts: Bilhaṇa's Posthumous Career and its Lessons" section below.

⁴ For very useful initial lists, see Misra 1976:107–109 and Sternbach 1980:101. For Arjunavarmadeva's nod to Bilhaṇa, see "Afterlives and Afterthoughts: Bilhaṇa's" Posthumous Career and Its Lessons" section below.

⁵ See, for example, *Viśvagūṇadarśacampū* of Veṅkaṭādhvarin, verse 549, where the Thief is the second in a long list of canonical poets. Note, however, that there were those who viewed Bilhaṇa and the Thief as two separate authors. An example is the Telugu author Peddana, who mentions the two separately in a list of glorious poets of the past (*Manucaritramu* of Peddana, 1.7). Clearly, much work needs to be done on the story of the Thief, which became extremely popular around the sixteenth century and circulated in languages such as Telugu, Marathi, and Tamil, in addition to Sanskrit.

that Bilhaṇa did compose this collection, and indeed, the ascription seems quite doubtful.⁶ Still, this popular collection somehow attached itself to Bilhaṇa and created for him a new biography. According to the *Caurapañcāśikā*'s framing narrative, recorded in later works such as the *Bilhaṇakāvya*, the poet had an illicit love affair with a princess entrusted to him as a Sanskrit student. Her father came to know of this affair and was about to execute Bilhaṇa, when the poet recited impromptu fifty poems. Each poem begins with the words "even now" (*adyāpi*) and ends with "I remember her" (*tāṃ smarāmi*), with longing descriptions of the beloved young princess in between. The king was so moved that he pardoned Bilhaṇa and gave him the hand of his daughter.⁷

Like many such late medieval narratives, this (after)life of Bilhaṇa deals with the tense, indeed, dangerous relationship between poets and patrons and the power of poetry in deciding matters of life and death.⁸ Beyond such recurring patterns, however, the story also picks out themes from Bilhaṇa's own poetry, his autobiographical account in the *VDC*, as well as several other afterlives attached to him. These consistently portray a poet living on the edge: he is hired for his poetry, in trouble because of his poetry, and sometimes out of trouble, again, thanks to his poetry. An ambivalent and almost renegade figure, he is occupied with carving a space for himself in a world that he perceives as essentially hostile and unworthy of his poetry. He is thus always on the road, ever on the verge of insulting his local interlocutors, always somewhat distanced from his subject matter, and at times explicitly resentful of his patrons. This article sets out to show that a new poetics of ambivalence and alienation is the most distinctive feature of the *VDC*, the Thief's main work.⁹

Setting the Right(?) Tone: Bilhaṇa's Introductory Appeal to His Audiences

Bilhaṇa sandwiches his extensive narrative of King Vikrama's exploits—constituting the bulk of his 18-canto poem—between two personal statements: a short preface and a much longer biographical afterward. The preface is a statement about the author's literary ideals and the sociopolitical environment he inhabits, apropos the crucial question of the work's reception. Bilhaṇa addresses several audiences in connection with his quest for approval: a large pantheon of divinities, the collective of canonical poets, contemporary literati and critics, and the entire class of kings, which includes his former, current, and future patrons. Perhaps surprisingly, Bilhaṇa

⁶ One of the verses of the collection—the first in the northern recension—is quoted by Bhoja and hence must predate Bilhaṇa (Raghavan 1978, 842). In her study of the different recensions of the poem, Miller reached the conclusion that the ascription, although far from certain, is not entirely impossible (Miller 1971, 188–189).

⁷ The *Bilhaṇakāvya*, which is presented as if it were Bilhaṇa's own autobiographical account of this whole affair, offers one version of this story. See *Bilhaṇakāvya* ascribed to Bilhaṇa, 1–74 and 125–164, for the narrative framing the embedded love poems (75–124). For a synopsis of the story, see Kawthekar (1995, 42–45).

⁸ See, for example, the narratives recorded in Granoff (1995, 373–374, on the tension between King Bhoja and Dhanapāla); cf. Shulman (1992, on the Tamil corpus).

⁹ Bilhaṇa's other extant work, a drama titled *Karṇasundarī*, is the subject of Granoff forthcoming.

feels most confident of winning the endorsement of the first group. This is because only the divinities can be trusted to recognize good poetry when they hear it.

More specifically, the poem's first eight verses, which function as its necessary invocation, depict the deities as occupying a world of relative harmony. The realm of gods and goddesses is by no means monochromatic or free of tensions. On the contrary, what makes them so special is that they are perfectly capable of containing contrasts. The divinities are portrayed as complex entities made of conflicting elements, each of which embodies its opposite. Take, for example, Bilhaṇa's invocation of Goddess Pārvatī for the protection of his readers:

Her single breast looms large:
it reaches almost up to her mouth
to receive word, as it were, about the whereabouts
of the other.
That's our Daughter of the King of Mountains
when she is half herself and half her lover.
May she protect you!¹⁰

This verse, with its daring imagery and playful attribution of human agency to insentient entities (*utprekṣā*), both of which are typical of Bilhaṇa, begins with an acute sense of asymmetry, split, and loss, epitomized by the image of a woman's sole, towering breast, longing for its missing pair. But this split turns out to be the outcome of, and hence the icon for, the tightest possible union, as Pārvatī, Daughter of the King of Mountains, combines herself with her lover, Śiva, to create a single new body: she is literally made of, or carries, half his body alongside half of hers (*priyārdhasthitim udvahantyaḥ*). It is this Pārvatī—successfully containing both bodies, genders, and divine powers—whom Bilhaṇa invokes. In fact, Pārvatī appears in his preface only in this combined (*ardhanariśvara*) form. Her partner Śiva, for his part, is also a symbol of tensions contained, because he manages both to soothe Pārvatī and to address his other lover Sandhyā at the same time (1.6).

A similar picture is found in Viṣṇu's household. Lakṣmī's image reflected in his sword is a constant reminder of Radhā, Viṣṇu's other consort and Lakṣmī's rival (1.5). This state of contained opposition is also manifest in the chromatic imagery Bilhaṇa employs to portray this god, who is compared with a black bee in a white lotus (1.2). The poem's opening verse contains another chromatic contrast when it describes Viṣṇu's sword. Its pitch-black blade reflects his handheld conch, which calls to mind the foam of the milky ocean that this god once churned (1.1). Viṣṇu's sword, then, is both black and white, solid and liquid, presence and memory—an amazing embodiment of coexisting opposites.

Why is the ability to contain opposites so important to Bilhaṇa? For one thing, it seems that frictions and tensions are a precondition for creativity, so long as they can be managed. Consider, in this connection, Bilhaṇa's all-important appeal to Sarasvatī, Poetry embodied:

¹⁰ VDC 1.4: ekastanas tuṅgatarāḥ parasya vārtām iva praṣṭum agān mukhāgram | yasyāḥ priyārdhasthitim udvahantyaḥ sā pātu vaḥ parvatarājaputrī || For a possible rejoinder in Telugu to this striking verse, see *Manucaritramu* of Pedanna, 1.4.

It is as if the planets envied the stardom of Guru,
 “Lord of Speech,” and searched for their own
 weighty words, that they ended up as pearls
 strung on Sarasvatī’s rosary.
 May She be favorable to you.¹¹

The planet Guru (Jupiter) is known as the Lord of Speech, a status that rouses the jealousy of the other planets; note again the playful lending of human emotions and motivations to nonhumans. Yet Sarasvatī is easily, and quite literally, capable of handling these covetous heavenly bodies, who in her palm suddenly seem as petty as their aspirations. The whole image harkens back to Subandhu’s famous verse about poets who have won Sarasvatī’s favor and who therefore behold the entire world as if it were a tiny, handheld jujube.¹² Containing and controlling the bickering worlds (and words), it would seem, are the sine qua non of poetry.

Moreover, the state of union and the containment of contrasts are unambiguous indicators of true success. Sarasvatī’s rosary with its bickering planets, just like Viṣṇu’s sword of contrasting colors and Pārvatī’s dual-gendered body, are signs of power and wholesomeness that are physically manifest for those capable of seeing them. Consider, likewise, Viṣṇu’s chest, which combines another set of opposites. Bilhaṇa portrays its dark surface as a virtual touchstone (*kaṣapaṭṭikā*), on which the gold of this god’s good fortune (*saubhāgyahemnah*) is displayed in the form of the luminous sheen of his consort Śrī (1.3). The reference is to the process of inspecting metals by rubbing them against a piece of fine-grained dark schist: only pure gold leaves an unmistakable bright streak on its surface. The mention of the touchstone is significant. Bilhaṇa is convinced that if the gold of his poem were tested on the gods and goddesses, it would immediately be recognized. One indication of his remarkable self-confidence is the fact that nowhere in the benedictory verses does he seek the gods’ protection or Sarasvatī’s inspiration for himself. It is only for his readers that he pleads with Viṣṇu, Śiva, Pārvatī and Poetry embodied, on whose grace (*prasāda*) he can presumably count. Since the divinities embody the yardstick of quality, Bilhaṇa sees their approval as guaranteed. If only one were writing poetry in the world of Sarasvatī and the gods.

But unfortunately the poet inhabits the human realm, which Bilhaṇa envisions as ridden with contradictions and full of gaps that are extremely difficult to bridge. The poet, we learn, works in a thoroughly divided world. He faces canonical poets and upstarts, traditional literary tastes and new fashions, great poets and lousy ones, a few good critics and a hoard of nasty and professional faultfinders, some sensitive readers among many dull patrons, and not more than a handful of noble monarchs amid a sea of crooked politicians. Bilhaṇa accentuates these harsh divides with a series of paired verses, in which every second stanza starkly contradicts the first. One verse warns the canonical poets (*kavīndras*) about present-day literary thieves who are eager to loot the treasures of their poems. These new poets are thus

¹¹ VDC 1.7: vacāṃsi vācaspatimatsareṇa sārāṇi labdhum grahamaṇḍalīva | muktākṣasūtratvam upaiti yasyāḥ sā saprasādāstu sarasvatī vaḥ ||

¹² *Vāsavadattā* of Subandhu, p.1: karabadarasadr̥ṣam akhilam bhuvanatalam yatprasādataḥ kavayaḥ | paśyanti sūkṣmatayaḥ sā jayati sarasvatī devī ||

reminiscent of the *asuras*, who were bent on grabbing the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*) from the gods during the churning of the ocean (1.11). But the following verse takes the exact opposite position. The great poets of the past have no reason to worry: the ocean of literature is inexhaustible, and upstart writers are welcome to loot whatever they want (1.12). In one verse the poet boasts that good critics will love his work even though it departs from the older patterns and employs a cutting-edge style (1.13),¹³ and in the next he bemoans the dullness of critics, who blunt good poetry in much the same way in which a hard rock blunts a knife (1.14).

More specifically, the opposition between two distinct poetic ideals is also presented in two succeeding verses. One extols the southern *vaidarbha* style, typically associated with Kālidāsa, as flowing pleasantly and without interruption like a “cloudless rain of nectar to the ears” (*anabhravṛṣṭiḥ śravaṇāmṛtasya*). It also is highly traditional, “the very birthplace of Sarasvatī’s elegant gestures” (*sarasvatīvibhramajanmabhūmi*), and safe to use: the success of *vaidarbha* poetry is “money in the bank” (*suabhāgyalābhapatibhūḥ padānām*). But the next verse praises the bolder “flashy” (*citra*) style, often associated with Bāṇa and his followers. Verse in *citra* contains a complex arrangement of poetic tropes, reminiscent of an intricate musical concerto (*pañcamanādamiṭracitroktisandarbhavibhūṣaṇeṣu*), and it too is never devoid of Sarasvatī: poets who compose in this style are so illustrious that it seems as if this goddess, Poetry embodied, always plays her lute inside their mouths (*sarasvatī yadvadaneṣu nityam ābhāti vīṇām iva vādayantī*).¹⁴ Sarasvatī is thus capable of manifesting herself in two very different styles, and the implication is that our poet, too, is proficient in using both in the same poem. Thus he too has the ability to embody contrasts—the very sign of quality. But whether the petty critics can appreciate such a fine mixture is an altogether different question.

Bilhaṇa, in other words, has an internal compass, but he feels that the realm he occupies is so polarized and its inhabitants are so misguided that his clear sense of direction will do him little good. This notion is expressed most intensely when the poet turns to address his readership directly. This is done in a series of verses that spell out some irreconcilable divide, usually in the first metrical half, and then heighten this divide with an illustration (*dr̥ṣṭānta*), typically in the second half: a poet’s genius captivates the wise but not the dull, just like a fine needle can pierce a pearl but not a rock; readers who appreciate good poets know when to avoid ill ones, not unlike the musk deer that grazes the fragrant *granthi* leaf and avoids mere grass; poetasters can fool dull-minded critics but never sophisticated ones, just as water can extinguish fire but not the luster of precious stones (1.16–18).

Moving from the general to the personal, Bilhaṇa notes that ever since he left his homeland, he has been living and working in an environment totally devoid of cultural refinement:

¹³ The contrast is between *vaidarbha* and *vaicitrya* styles. More on the similar tension between *vaidarbha* and *citra* in the following paragraph.

¹⁴ *VDC* 1.9–10. Is Bilhaṇa alluding here to the Gaudīya style? If so, the contrast he refers to may be also regional, not just aesthetic, pace Pollock (2006, 220).

Poetic Genius must be Saffron's fellow citizen.
 Here's how I know: I haven't come across
 a trace of either, ever since I left
 the jurisdiction of Śāradā.¹⁵

Saffron, a rare and expensive spice, is a specialty of Kashmir. Bilhaṇa believes that the same is true of the equally rare quality of poesy. In fact, he has no qualms about saying to the face of his audience in the Deccan—to the degree that he, in fact, considers them a worthy audience—that they have no true poets in their midst and must import his like from the remote Himalayan valley.¹⁶ Indeed, the verse uses a pun (*śleṣa*) to drive the point home: Kashmir (*śāradā-deśa*, or land of Goddess Śāradā) is indeed the jurisdiction of Poetry (*śāradā-ādeśa*, taking Śāradā as a synonym for Sarasvatī). True, the author's celebration of himself as a rare commodity from Kashmir can be understood as lending prestige to his Cālukya employers, who managed to acquire his services. But the local audience could not have failed to detect a certain disdain in Bilhaṇa's voice.

I return to the Kashmiri component of Bilhaṇa's identity later, but for now let us stay with the more general sense of alienation as a condition of his being a poet. Surely there is pride in being the one true poet, the imported saffron that gives the otherwise watery local soup taste and color. But the preface also betrays the loneliness of a poet who almost by definition operates outside the jurisdiction of Poetry, with no one as his equal or peer. Indeed, because fools populate all literary salons, one's gift becomes a liability (1.23). What appreciation can Bilhaṇa expect from those who would find even the succulent sugarcane unpalatable (1.20), and who, like camels, would always choose a thorny bush over a lush grove (1.29)?

Indeed, toward the end of the short preface it becomes clear that Bilhaṇa feels most alienated when it comes to kings, the protagonists and patrons of his poetry. The contradictions that he has to manage when dealing with these difficult customers are the harshest. Think of the writer as a goldsmith, his poetry as the ornaments he fashions from gold or precious stones, and the king as the client. This is a standard metaphor that Bilhaṇa repeatedly invokes in order to express his profound doubt about the whole exchange (1.16, 18–19). For all he knows, his customer may be a brutish savage who simply has no clue about the value of the poet's craft:

The number of fine feats on their résumés
 is zero. Can someone tell me why such kings
 assemble teams of poet laureates? Why in the world
 would berry-wearing forest dwellers
 appoint a jewelry designer in residence?¹⁷

Note the emphasis on résumés (*cāritra*, echoing *carita* in the poem's title). A king should be able to provide his poet with at least a few achievements to work with, for

¹⁵ VDC 1.21: sahodarāḥ kuṅkumakesarāṇām bhavanti nūnaṃ kavitaṅvilāsāḥ | na śāradādeśam apāsya dṛṣṭas teṣāṃ yad anyatra mayā prarohaḥ ||

¹⁶ See Cox (forthcoming) for a fine discussion of this verse in the context of the larger circulation of commercial and cultural commodities between Kashmir and the deep South.

¹⁷ VDC 1.25: kiṃ cārucāritravilāsaśūnyāḥ kurvanti bhūpāḥ kavisaṃgrahena | kiṃ jātu guṅjāphala-bhūṣaṇāṇām suvarṇakāreṇa vanecarāṇām ||

the process of poetic imagination cannot be entirely foundationless. Or perhaps it can? Bilhaṇa reaches the apex of his bitterness when he claims, conversely, that what kings actually do or do not do is of no significance whatever. It is only the poet's craft that matters. One may be a perfect ruler and be entirely forgotten if there is no true poet by his side (1.26). Moreover, the poet has the power to turn a hero into a villain and vice versa. Rāvaṇa's ignominy and Rāma's glory are cases in point. Both these lasting images from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are indicative of the power of First Poet Vālmīki and of nothing else (*sa sarva evādikaveḥ prabhāvaḥ*). To make sure that the message is not lost (one should never take such things for granted when operating outside the jurisdiction of Poetry), Bilhaṇa spells out the necessary conclusion: "Kings better not rub their poets the wrong way!" (*na kopanīyāḥ kavayaḥ kṣitīndraih*, 1.27).¹⁸

Before concluding the preface, Bilhaṇa hastens to add that King Vikrama, his current patron and subject matter, is by no means unworthy of praise. On the contrary, so illustrious are the deeds of this king that any poem of which he is the hero will be admired regardless of its literary merit (1.28). Indeed, the pearls and gems are already supplied by the history of the Cālukya dynasty; all that the poet/jeweler has to do is to string them together, and the outcome is sure to be a perfect piece of jewelry (1.30). But these declarations, although they may certainly soften the previous message, still cannot wipe it clean. The bitter and cynical tone has already sunk in, and the listeners—King Vikrama, whose fellow monarchs Bilhaṇa has just torn to shreds, and his courtiers, whose literary sensitivity he has just denounced in no uncertain terms—must now be on the edges of their seats, nervous to examine the ornament that the master from Kashmir has crafted in his workshop.

On Thickening: Imagining the Political in the *VDC*

It is not as if they were not nervous to begin with. King Vikrama had a few skeletons in his closet that called for treatment by the most delicate hand. By the mid-1080s there was probably no one in the Cālukya kingdom who had not heard of the fate of King Vikrama's siblings, his older brother Somadeva (also known as Someśvara II) and his younger brother Jayasiṃha. Vikrama had imprisoned or executed the former and had arrested or exiled the latter.¹⁹ It would take a truly gifted poet to put a positive spin on these embarrassing events, and so the courtiers might have been willing to swallow some insults from their arrogant acquisition from Kashmir if, as he insinuated, he had the capacity to turn even a villain into a hero. But the fact that Bilhaṇa even mentioned this in his preface alongside his ominous reference to monarchs with dismal résumés must have caused the king's men's hearts to miss a beat, and his brief praise for Vikrama may not have entirely eased their concerns when he turned to his actual subject matter: the kingdom's sensitive political drama.

¹⁸ The same point is strongly reiterated in the work's penultimate verse (*VDC* 18.107). See McCrea in this issue, for a translation and discussion of both verses and their implication.

¹⁹ See the discussion of these "blots" on "the fame of Vikrama" in Pathak (1966, 62).

Bilhaṇa begins his narrative by going generations back, narrating the official story of the Cālukyas' mythic origin from the god Brahma's cupped hand, or *culuka* (1.46).²⁰ Turning to more recent memory, he begins with the exploits of Tailapa, Vikrama's great-grandfather, and gradually works his way down to his father, Āhavamalla (also known as Someśvara I). The courtiers can gradually relax. The Cālukya monarchs, it turns out, have heroically protected and expanded their realm, thereby proving to be worthy of their divine origin and of Bilhaṇa's craft. Consider, for example, the following description of Tailapa, still in the work's first canto:

In the battlefield, it was the heat of his valor
that made his hand sweat, so that his sword—
a living form of Death to his foes—grew thick
with pollen from the flurry of flowers
that Indra kept pouring.²¹

It is not the actual skirmish with his enemies that makes a true hero like Tailapa swelter, but the sheer impact of his own hot valor. This internal quality, which also manifests itself externally in the successful handling of his foes, attracts the attention of the gods, those ardent connoisseurs of bravery, and their king, Indra, shows him his highest token of appreciation, a rain of flowers. Perspiration and pollen combine to coat Tailapa's sword, which his enemies view as the very embodiment of the dark god of death, with a colorful layer. The blade's thickening (*nibiḍatva*) is its divine and poetic stamp of approval. As with Viṣṇu's scimitar in the opening verses, Tailapa's varnished, multicolored sword is the touchstone of his distinct qualities.

Bilhaṇa continues to meditate on this same sharp object:

His sword is black as a woman's eyeliner.
The fame born of its tip is white.
Here's why: it pillages paleness
from the cheeks of enemies' wives,
wan as a chunk of sugarcane.²²

Again, chromatic contrasts somehow coexist in Tailapa. Fame is conventionally white in *kāvya*, but Bilhaṇa proposes to explain how it is that Glory emerges so bright from the dark surface of his scimitar by resorting to another signature attribution. Fame's strange whitening, after all, takes place just at the time when the faces of his foes' wives also become ashen as they fear the worst when their husbands battle Tailapa. Fame is thus imagined as a robber, plundering their

²⁰ For a summary of this and similar origin myths of the Cālukyas in inscriptions and other sources, see Banerjee (2004, 185–187). For a discussion of the various shifts in the official genealogy of the Kalyāṇa Cālukyas and their new interest in historiography, see Pollock (2006, 148–161).

²¹ VDC 1.70: śauryoṣmaṇā svinnakarasya yasya saṃkhyeṣu khaḍgaḥ pratipakṣakāḷaḥ | purandarapreri-tapuṣpavṛṣṭiparāgasanḡān nibiḍatvam āpa ||

²² VDC 1.71: yasyāñjanaśyāmalakhaḍgapaṭṭajātāni jāne dhavalatvam āpuḥ | arātinārīśarakāṇḍapāṇḍu-gaṇḍasthalinirluṭhanād yaśāmsi || For further discussion of the question of the dark origins and nature of royal fame in this verse and others, see McCrea in this issue.

paleness. Note that it is not uncommon in *kāvya* to conflate military and erotic conquests or even to index one's martial achievements by the losses suffered by fair women on the other side.²³ But Bilhaṇa's imagery and attribution of agency to fame are original, and his combination of the pallidness of the women's cheeks with the sword's eyeliner black is striking, bringing his fascination with chromatic and emotional contrasts to new heights. Moreover, the wording involves more than just the import of vocabulary from the erotic to the heroic domain. The long compound spanning almost the entire length of the verse's second half incorporates a five-word sequence lifted straight from Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* (*śara-kāṇḍa-pāṇḍugaṇḍa-sthali*, "cheeks wan as a chunk of sugarcane"), where the context is indeed erotic.²⁴ So our poet, too, is involved in an act of plundering. The author who later came to be known by the nickname "the Thief" stole from Kālidāsa's coffers an entire chunk of poetry, just as he had warned that poets do.²⁵ At the same time, he put this stolen line to a radically new use, thereby proving his other earlier point, namely, that *kāvya* cannot be exhausted by such theft. All in all, the verse is an incredible example of Bilhaṇa's poetic intensification or "thickening": contrasting colors, images, attributions, emotional "flavors" (*rasas*), and words from significant intertexts are carefully interwoven into the description of Tailapa's sword in a manner that calls attention both to this king's heroism and to Bilhaṇa's genius.

Similar images of weaponry continue to appear as the poet finally turns to King Vikrama, the work's main protagonist. Indeed, Bilhaṇa expands his methods of intensification by resorting to imagery that transcends the visual. Consider, for example, the following reference to Vikrama's bow by an envoy eulogizing the king in canto 5:

Your bow is soul mate to your arm.
 What foe in the front line can tolerate
 its twang, amplified by the wailing
 of the doe-eyed darlings
 back home?²⁶

Note again the movement from embodied valor—here in the form of Vikrama's arm, from which the bow is as inseparable as a soul mate (*praṇayin*)—to the perceptible, external strum of his bowstring. Indeed, terrifying for the ears of enemy soldiers in the firing line, this sound is somehow carried all the way home, where it is manifest in the concurrent crying of the soldiers' bereaved wives. This amplification of the bow's twang by means of a different sound quality from afar is, therefore, just like the colorful thickening of Tailapa's sword, a token of universal recognition of true quality. Moreover, this verse is uttered by an envoy whose

²³ For a discussion of a similar description of "might in the negative" and a conflation of military and erotic conquests in the corpus of the Sena poets, see Knutson (2010, 7–11, 19–25).

²⁴ *Mālavikāgnimitra* of Kālidāsa 3.8.

²⁵ Indeed, the same verbal root *luṭhaṇa* (looting) is used to describe both literary theft (*VDC* 1.11) and the pillaging of paleness (1.71).

²⁶ *VDC* 5.34: tvadbhujapraṇayicāpanisvanaḥ kair asau samarasīmni sahyate | vyaktim eti ripumandireṣu yaḥ kranditadhvanibhir eṇacakṣuṣām ||

speech, we are told, *is* Sarasvatī (5.30), so that it may be that Poetry herself, through the envoy and ultimately the poet, signals her own recognition of Vikrama's unworldly valor by adding to the strumming of the bowstring (*nisvanaḥ*) a hypnotic, hissing alliteration (*asau samarasīmni sahyate*). Bilhaṇa has an ear for sounds that consist of, manifest, or mask other sounds (e.g., 5.19, 40), just as his eye is tuned to colors that contain their opposites and other complex textures.

Bilhaṇa also resorts to quite different means of poetic intensification. Particularly prominent in this context is his consistent attempt to fashion King Vikrama in the mold of Rāma. Bilhaṇa alludes to the Rāma template already at the outset when he narrates the origin of the Cālukyās: like Rāma, the first Cālukyās descended to earth after the gods appealed to Brahma to save the world (1.40–57), and their original capital was the city of Ayodhyā, “where Rāma lived with Sītā after defeating Rāvaṇa” (*prasādhya taṃ rāvaṇam adhyuvāsa yāṃ maithilīśaḥ* 1.63). Then, when nothing in the North is left unconquered, the Cālukyās move south, where their subsequent successful campaign, not unlike Rāma's, reaches all the way to the southern shores and then to the island “kingdom of Vibhīṣaṇa” (1.64–66).

More important, Bilhaṇa repeatedly identifies Vikrama himself with Rāma. Rāma is not invoked in the context of Vikrama's triumph over a demonic enemy—a pattern that, Sheldon Pollock has argued, came to dominate Sanskrit political imagination shortly after the time of Bilhaṇa, coinciding with the rise of Muslim power in South Asia.²⁷ Rather, the Rāmization of Vikrama highlights the latter's aversion to power and love for his siblings, even when they turn against him.²⁸ Indeed, portraying Vikrama as a brother-loving Rāma is at the heart of Bilhaṇa's poetic project, precisely because of the political circumstances described earlier. Consider the moment when the close resemblance between the protagonist and his mythical model is first announced. This takes place in the second canto, when Āhavamalla is performing an elaborate set of rituals to Śiva in order to beget sons. Appeared, Śiva tells Āhavamalla:

Your efforts have won you two sons.
But a third, born between them, is the gift
of my goodwill. With his mighty two arms
he will fetch Fortune
even from the ocean's other shore,
just like Rāma.²⁹

Like Rāma, Vikrama's birth results from divine intervention, and he too is predicted to bring Fortune (*śrī*) from across the sea. But the comparison is somewhat imperfect. Rāma rescued Sītā, Śrī embodied, from the demon island of Laṅkā, whereas in Vikrama's case *śrī* refers either to a lesser overseas victory that certainly involves no demonic other or to his marriage to Candralekhā, a princess from a

²⁷ See Pollock (1993).

²⁸ For an extensive discussion of male intimacy in the *VDC* see Cox in this issue.

²⁹ *VDC* 2.53: sutadvayaṃ te nijakarmasambhavaṃ mama prasādāt tanayas tu madhyamaḥ | payonidheḥ pāragatām api śrīyaṃ sa dorbalād rāma ivāhariṣyati ||

neighboring kingdom whose family traces its origin back to *Laṅkā*.³⁰ An even more striking discrepancy is the explicit mention of *Vikrama* as being sandwiched between his two brothers. This is because *Rāma* is the paradigmatic older brother, first in line to the throne and a father figure to his younger brothers—*Lakṣmana*, in particular, often goes by the epithet *Rāmānuja* (“*Rāma*’s junior”).³¹ *Vikrama* is famously not the oldest son, and *Bilhaṇa*’s portrayal of him as a middle-born *Rāma* signals his bold plan to somehow turn this liability into an asset.

The daring approach resurfaces in canto 3, when *Āhavamalla* is about to choose his heir apparent. Ignoring seniority altogether, he wishes to confer this status on *Vikrama*. The father’s words “ring like the anklets of *Sarasvatī*” (3.29) when he tries to convince his beloved middle-born to consent (3.31). But *Vikrama* feels that *Āhavamalla* is entirely blinded by his fatherly love for him. His answer is affectionate and beautiful—he too is compared with *Sarasvatī* here (3.33)—but amounts to a polite refusal. Disregarding the order of birth, he warns, would amount to destroying the family’s good name (3.36–38). *Someśvara* should therefore be king, while *Vikrama* himself will happily embrace the status of the king’s loyal foot soldier (3.39). To drive this point home, *Vikrama* cites the negative example of *Daśaratha*, *Rāma*’s father:

By transgressing order and making *Bharata*
his heir, *Rāma*’s father went down in infamy:
To this day, wherever you turn, he is known
as “the pawn of women.”³²

This clinches the argument. Threatened with the ignominy of *Daśaratha*, who was maneuvered by his wife *Kaikeyī* to anoint the junior *Bharata* and to exile the firstborn *Rāma*, *Āhavamalla* appoints his senior son heir apparent. What is remarkable here is that *Bilhaṇa* casts *Someśvara*, *Vikrama*’s brother-turned-enemy, as the family’s *Rāma* and puts *Vikrama* in the role of *Bharata*. Note, however, that this unprecedented reversal of the *Rāma* template serves to establish *Vikrama*’s remarkable indifference to power and his utter refusal to unseat his brother, even at the price of turning his father down. Thus *Bilhaṇa* cleverly insinuates that it is precisely because *Vikrama* is such a devoted younger brother that he is the real *Rāma* in the family. This trend intensifies later in the work, in the aftermath of *Āhavamalla*’s death. With his father dead, *Vikrama* is said to willfully embrace exile in a manner that is reminiscent of *Rāma*’s behavior after the death of his father. Even when *Someśvara* marches after him with his army, *Vikrama*, just like *Rāma* before him, is keen on avoiding conflict at any cost. It is only when war with

³⁰ Warder (1972, 48). This verse resonates with the official language of *Vikrama*’s inscriptions, and especially with a stanza that is repeated in both the *Nīlgunda* plates (1913–1914b, 153–154, lines 54–56) and the stone inscriptions from *Yēwūr* (Barnett 1912a, 278, lines 95–99) and is part of what Pollock has termed *Vikrama*’s “letterhead.” As Pollock (2006, 141 n. 55) notes, “The mythic meaning has for us entirely occluded the factual except for a few obvious correlations, e.g., that a *Cōla* king declared himself to be *Vikramāditya*’s vassal during some expedition to the south.”

³¹ On brotherly relationship in *Vālmīki* and on *Rāma*’s fatherlike position, see Goldman (1980).

³² *VDC* 3.40: *rāmaśya pitrā bharato* ‘*bhiṣiktaḥ kramaṃ samullaṅghya yad ātmarājye | tenoḥitā strījita ity akīrtir ādyāpi tasyāsti dīgantareṣu ||*

Someśvara is no longer avoidable and following a direct dictum from an increasingly impatient god Śiva that Vikrama, in self-defense, fights and captures his brother.³³

Bilhaṇa, in other words, is clearly aware of the problem inherent in applying the Rāma template to Vikrama's story, and he ingeniously turns this problem to his hero's advantage. Needless to say, there are other sides to this story. In fact, a later biography of Vikrama written by his own son appears to starkly contradict Bilhaṇa's version, according to which Someśvara was first crowned unopposed and then deposed following his attack on his peace-loving brother. In this other biography it is Vikrama who is made crown prince when he is only 16, presumably in order to assert his claim to the throne at the expense of his brother.³⁴ Or consider the diplomatic and military maneuvers of the exiled Vikrama, which appear to be a typical case of cementing external alliances in the hope of regaining power at home. These are portrayed in the poem as resulting from the prince's desire to benefit the kingdom that estranged him and as stemming from his deep obligation to protect friendly kings.³⁵ Bilhaṇa, then, is invested in portraying his protagonist as a disinterested party, forced to take part in the political game. He is a Rāma who did not want to become one, and it is this, more than anything else, that truly makes him Rāma-like.

In depicting his Vikrama as an unwilling hero who becomes king despite his resistance at every step of the way, Bilhaṇa follows Bāṇa, the famous court poet of Emperor Harṣa (r. 606–647). Bilhaṇa knowingly emulates Bāṇa's solution to a similar political problem. This is because, like Vikrama, Harṣa was sandwiched between an older brother (Rājyavardhana) and a powerful brother-in-law (Grahavarman), who was wedded to his younger sister (Rājyaśrī). But, as Bāṇa reports in his *Life of Harṣa* (*Harṣacarita*), all of Harṣa's potential competitors disappeared almost at once. When the older brother was in the front line fighting the Huns and the younger sister was away with her husband, the father (Prabhākara) suddenly died. Then the brother-in-law was assassinated by the king of Mālwa, and the sister was abducted. Harṣa's older brother set out to avenge this assassination and redeem his sister, only to be treacherously murdered by the king of the Gaudas. Harṣa alone was left, and he unwillingly assumed power only in order to rescue his sister and punish the evildoers. As I argue elsewhere, Bāṇa too may have been hired to put a positive spin on the ascendancy of a junior prince to power, which, as A. K. Warder has already noted, might have been "less exemplary."³⁶ Indeed, in both cases a second-born prince was fated to be king: Vikrama was ordained by Śiva, and Harṣa by the full set of physical

³³ Note, for example, that throughout canto 6, where the conflict between the two brothers unfolds, Bilhaṇa carefully and consistently calls Vikrama "prince" and Someśvara "king," thereby insinuating that the former respects the superior status of the latter.

³⁴ *Vikramāṅkābhyaṅga* of Someśvara p. 54. This work has reached our hands incomplete, and the extant text covers only a very small portion of Vikrama's story. Note also that in the *VDC* itself, Bilhaṇa depicts Vikrama as a defacto *yuvarāja* (esp. *VDC* 3.57ff.). For a more detailed comparison of the *VDC*'s version to other Cālukya sources see McCrea in this issue.

³⁵ For more on Bilhaṇa's sublimation of the political by means of the personal see Cox in this issue.

³⁶ See Bronner (2010, 53–55). The quote is from Warder (1972, 46).

marks that dot the limbs of born kings and that, “as it were, held fast to his arms and legs and, ignoring his protests, forcefully dragged him to the throne and placed him on it.”³⁷

Bilhaṇa is clearly aware of Bāṇa’s work, the only political biography in Sanskrit that has been passed to us from the first millennium CE. He emulates Bāṇa not only in portraying a hero predestined to rule but averse to his destiny, but also in inserting his own story into the poem about his hero. This intertextual nod is the final act of poetic intensification in Bilhaṇa’s project. Vikrama is not only a heroic fighter who, much like Rāma, will do everything he can to avoid war with his brothers. He is also, it is implied, an empire builder of Harṣa’s magnitude, and, like him, he is worthy of Bilhaṇa, a poet of Bāṇa’s caliber.

On Thinning: Unimagining the Political in the VDC

So did Vikrama and his men finally relax in their seats? Did not the poet from Kashmir give them his stamp of approval? After all, he cleared Vikrama of any wrongdoing and glorified him to the extent that V. S. Pathak dubs Bilhaṇa a “defence counsel,” and his poem a “defence plea” that lent the king “a halo of epic magnanimity.”³⁸ There are, however, numerous points in the VDC where Bilhaṇa appears to knowingly flatten the very poetic construction he has so meticulously built. These consist of conspicuous gaps and loud silences that are at least as potent as the intensifications and reverberations discussed earlier, and that allow the poet to express and even foreground an undying ambivalence toward his subject matter.

To begin with, consider the already-mentioned incongruity between the *Rāmāyaṇa* template and the story of Vikrama. A basic feature of the Rāma mytheme, as Pollock has demonstrated, is the birth through divine intervention of a creature who escapes the categories “god” and “human” in order to defeat a powerful demon who has already attained immunity from either.³⁹ The ten-headed Rāvaṇa, a monster terrorizing the world unopposed, is a necessary precondition for Rāma’s appearance. Moreover, as Pollock has also shown, one of the main breakthroughs of Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, when seen against the backdrop of the *Mahābhārata*, is that violence is strictly forbidden in the familial and the political arenas and is permitted only in the exotic, demonic realm. What the *Mahābhārata* “brothers,” says Pollock, the *Rāmāyaṇa* “others.”⁴⁰ But a demonic enemy is entirely absent from the VDC, where Vikrama’s major military achievements are indeed two hard-won victories over his own siblings. It is therefore not entirely clear why Brahma, Śiva, and the other gods should have intervened to bring forth the Cālukyās and, later, Vikrama himself, if the result is this intrafamilial power

³⁷ *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa, p. 119: anicchantaṃ api balād āropayitum iva siṃhāsaṇaṃ sarvāvayaveṣu sarvalakṣaṇair grhītaṃ.

³⁸ The quotes are from Pathak (1966, 58, 69, 71).

³⁹ Pollock (1991, 29–43).

⁴⁰ Pollock (1993, 283).

struggle. This is one point on which the poet is silent, a silence he himself foregrounds.

Take, for example, his description of the Cālukyas' origins from Brahma's handful (*culuka*) of ritual water. Brahma is in the midst of his twilight rites when Indra suddenly arrives to see him. As is often the case, Indra needs help with some emergency, and after some mandatory praises he gets right to the point:

My agents are reporting such turmoil on earth, Lord,
that due share of the sacrifice—
our timeless privilege as gods—
will soon become, I'm afraid,
a matter of memory.⁴¹

Precisely at the point where Bilhaṇa's predecessors—think, for example, of Māgha in the *Śiśupālavadhā*—would revel in describing the monstrosity and terrifying deeds, past and present, of a demon who has become the terror of the gods, Indra is extremely tightlipped. He merely notes that the world is in a state of turmoil (*viplava*) that endangers what, for the gods, is of crucial importance: the continued performance of sacrificial rites.⁴² There is nothing Indra can add, and soon he admits that he is loath to speak (*kiṃ vā bahūktaiḥ*, 1.43). It is as if the poet, too, is suddenly at a loss for words. Language unexpectedly becomes thin in a process that completely inverts the thickening described earlier. The divine, mythic frame almost collapses under its own weight, and its collapse is punctuated by the warning that concludes Indra's wry remark. The gods, by definition, never age (*nirjara*), but they are about to be reduced to a situation not unlike that of the elderly, when joys taken for granted in the past become the subject of fading memories.

Reluctance to elaborate, or even explicit protest against the obligation to develop some themes that are at the heart of the story, is voiced throughout the poem. Take for example a scene from much later in the work that is closely reminiscent of Indra's interview with Brahma. Here a close aide briefs King Vikrama himself:

When the rainy season grew old and its clouds paled
like white hair, one of the king's confidants
appeared and apprised him in private:
“There's something harsh I must report.
Please forgive me, King of Kuntala.
Regardless of the news he bears,
a king should never blame
a faithful messenger.”⁴³

⁴¹ VDC 1.44: niveditaś cārajanena nātha tathā kṣitau samprati viplavo me | manye yathā yajñavibhāgabhogāḥ smartavyatām eṣyati nirjarāṇām ||

⁴² One could perhaps argue that the verse alludes to the rise of Muslim rulers in South Asia, who in later literature are sometimes described as endangering the sacrifice, but there is nothing either here or elsewhere in the poem to support this hypothesis.

⁴³ VDC 14.1–2: vārdhakaṃ dadhati vāridāgame mūrdhajair iva ghanair vipāṇḍuraiḥ | vikramāṅkam upasṛtya nirjane kaścid āptapurūṣo vyajijñāpat || niṣṭhuraṃ kimapi kathyate mayā tatra kuntalapate kuru kṣamām | yat svakāryam avadhīrya gṛhṇate sevayaiva paritoṣam īśvarāḥ ||

This agent, too, is extremely reluctant to deliver his message, and his apology seems to be shared by the poet—another messenger who may want to be judged by his skill and dedication rather than by his subject matter. Incidentally, here, too, Bilhaṇa refers to aging, as if the matter in question would instantly turn one’s hair white.

The message that the messenger is reluctant to deliver is that Vikrama’s younger brother, whom he has appointed regent in Vanavāsa, has adopted a “highly disruptive policy” (*nayaviparyayo mahān*, 14.4). Departing from the just path (*nyāyamārgam apahāya*), the brother now enriches his coffers (*kurvatā tena kośam*) by exploiting all the subjects (*sakalalokapīdanāt*) and rendering the land desolate (*udvihāraharināḥ kṛtā bhuvah*, 14.5). This is as far as this brief, two-verse report goes. The informant does not even name the renegade Jayasiṃha. Instead, he launches into an elaborate description of elephants, a topic with which he, not unlike Bilhaṇa, is far more comfortable. He depicts these animals in great detail—their tusks, the secretion they emit when in heat, their fanlike ears—using the most luxurious poetic idiom. But how exactly are these magnificent beasts related to the problem at hand?

You lovingly bestowed on him
not a few of these fine elephants,
and with their force he’s plotting something
even the mention of which is a crime.⁴⁴

So despicable is the topic spoken of that the mere mention of it is criminal. All that the messenger can grudgingly bring himself finally to add is that by means of brutality and bribery the brother gained control over the “forest regions,” won the alliance of the Tamil king, and is now poised “to crush your army” (14.11–12). He then concludes his report:

To make a long story short. . .
I know it sounds far-fetched,
but trust me, king, it’s real:
It is a matter of days before he’ll confront you
on the bank of the Kṛṣṇā.⁴⁵

Again the language is laconic, businesslike, and unornamented. The speaker wishes “to make a long story short,” definitely not the typical *kāvya* impulse. Of course, disinclination even to speak of such treachery is in itself a trope, reflecting on the nobility of the king and his men. Thus in response to this briefing, the king is profoundly dismayed and indignant at fate, and he launches into a soliloquy about the utter inexplicability of such behavior by others, let alone his own brother (14.15–21). Still, I believe that this reluctance to speak also reflects the poet’s own ambivalence toward his subject matter. Bilhaṇa advances the plot reluctantly, in fits

⁴⁴ VDC 14.10: vatsalena bhavatā samarpitās tasya te kati na gandhasindhurāḥ | tadbalāt kimapi cintayaty asau yatkaṭhāpi vitanoti pātakam ||

⁴⁵ VDC 14.13: bhūribhiḥ kim athavā kathādbhutaḥ tattvam etad avadhāryatām nṛpa | kaiścid eva divasaiḥ sa saṃmukhaḥ kṛṣṇaveṇinikaṭe bhaviṣyati ||

and starts. After the soliloquy he digresses into a long description of autumn (14.23–45). Then he returns to narrate the pious Vikrama's repeated attempts to prevent a conflict by a variety of conciliatory gestures, all of which fall on Jayasiṃha's deaf ears (14.48–56), before concluding, again, with a protest: "Why say more?" (*brūmahe kim adhikam*, 14.57).

Finally, when a showdown is no longer avoidable and Vikrama is forced to defend himself and his kingdom, Bilhaṇa seems to switch gears. He willingly dwells on a whole set of *kāvya*'s favorite battle objects, such as drums, conches, elephants, warriors, arrows, and swords. Heroism again comes to the fore, enhanced by various tropes and reverberations. These include lingering over the aesthetics of blood and carnage, an area where Bilhaṇa is very much at home. King Vikrama's actual warfare, then, certainly provides the poet with scope for description (*varṇanāspadam*), as he himself remarks, almost in relief (15.73). But the troubling identity of Vikrama's opponent is silenced. In the eighty-seven verses dedicated to narrating this crucial battle—an entire canto of the work—Bilhaṇa employs a whole set of generic synonyms for "enemy" (*para*, *pratipakṣa*, *ripu*, *prativīra*, *ari*, *dviṣad*, and so on). But the enemy's name never surfaces, nor is there anything in the text that remotely insinuates his identity. The entire drama of the battle is described, formulaically, as the rescuing of triumph from the jaws of defeat: the enemy troops initially have the upper hand until Vikrama single-handedly breaks their lines and leads his army to a marvelous victory. Only in the very last verse do we find a hint at the realities underlying this theater of bravery. Bilhaṇa reports briefly that the "thorn of the lineage" (*kulakaṇṭaka*) has been captured, that Vikrama "spoke to him, choked with tears of compassion," and then rewarded or pardoned him (*kāruṇyodgatabāṣpagad-gadapadaḥ sambhāṣya samtoṣya ca*, 15.87). After this, Jayasiṃha is never mentioned again.

On Ambivalence: Bilhaṇa's Poetic Stance

Bilhaṇa's poetic biography, then, is audacious and verbose on a whole range of topics, from the carcasses of elephants to Pārvaṭi's single breast, and from the king's warfare to his erotic exploits (a subject that I have left out of the discussion but that occupies a prominent position in the *VDC*). But in addition to topics that provide him with fertile ground for his imagination, there are those he would rather unimagine and gloss over. There are key moments when gaps between the intensifying mythical framework and the human actions to which it is attached become dangerously wide, and the whole poetic structure threatens to collapse. These silences and gaps, often foregrounded and thematized, reflect a basic ambivalence inherent in Bilhaṇa's poetry. This ambivalence is particularly conspicuous when we compare the *VDC* with one of its most important intertexts, the aforementioned *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa.

Both Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* and Bilhaṇa's *VDC* were quite unusual for their time because each poem depicted the tenure of a contemporary king and narrated its author's own life story. But there is a crucial difference in the way the works knit the biographical and the autobiographical together. For Bāṇa, the personal account is a prelude to the story of Emperor Harṣa. He begins by portraying himself: an orphaned

youth living on the fringes, making a name for himself by frequenting literary salons with a group of colorful friends. Then, out of the blue, comes the emperor's invitation to join his court. Bāṇa's first meeting with Harṣa is basically described as a falling in love. Indeed, the passage that describes Bāṇa as he moves from the exterior of Harṣa's royal camp, through a series of concentric walls and retinues, to the king's meeting hall, and then the movement of the author's eyes on Harṣa's body, feet to head, is fashioned after a description of a lovers' first meeting by Bāṇa's most important predecessor, Subandhu (in the parallel passage, Subandhu's hero Kandarpaketu first lays his eyes on Vāsavadattā, the beloved from his dreams).⁴⁶ Moreover, this meeting is the beginning of a meaningful relationship with the king, whose personality and charisma Bāṇa comes to admire. It is clear that the meeting with Harṣa marks the climax of Bāṇa's life and, indeed, subsumes it, for it is at this point that Bāṇa turns from narrating his own story to telling that of his new hero.

In the *VDC*, on the other hand, there is no mention of a meeting between Bilhaṇa and Vikrama, and there is nothing to suggest that the two had a personal bond. Moreover, Bilhaṇa's own story does not lead to that of his current patron but rather is appended to it. His is not the tale of a youth who suddenly had it made by landing the job of a poet laureate, but the memoir of a seasoned and cynical poet who has "been there, done that." The bulk of his account is a nostalgic and loving description of Kashmir, a land he left in his youth in order to embark on the career of an itinerant writer. Bilhaṇa is now contemplating a possible homecoming to Kashmir, where an unusually refined and generous king whose name also happens to be Harṣa has just ascended the throne (18.46). The implication is that joining this king may be the appropriate ending to the poet's story. As for Vikrama, the hero of the just-completed poem, he is presented in the addendum as just one of Bilhaṇa's many stints, another line in his curriculum vitae. Whereas Bāṇa embraces Harṣa wholeheartedly, then, Bilhaṇa maintains a distant, ambivalent stance throughout his poem. To examine this ambivalence, let us return one last time to the poem and consider its sixth canto, where the crucial events leading to Vikrama's coronation unfold.

This canto finds Prince Vikrama at the low point of his political career. Exiled from the capital Kalyāṇa, currently ruled by his hostile older brother Someśvara, and camped out on the bank of the Tuṅgabhadrā, he is frantically trying to create an independent power base. But his efforts, focused primarily on allying the neighboring Chola kings, suffer blow after blow. He marries the Chola princess, only to learn soon thereafter that the Chola king, his new father-in-law and ally, has been assassinated (6.7).⁴⁷ A military expedition to install the slain king's son on the Chola throne ends in a fiasco: within weeks King Rājiga of Veṅgi deposes Vikrama's newest ally (6.26). If these setbacks were not enough, Rājiga and Someśvara coordinate a joint attack on Vikrama: Rājiga from the front and Someśvara from the rear (6.27).

It is at this moment that Bilhaṇa seems most sympathetic to his hero. This is perhaps because the prince, like him, is exiled to a harsh terrain and faces almost

⁴⁶ Compare *Vāsavadattā* of Subandhu, 282–305, with *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa, 110–131. See also Bronner (2010, 49–50, 53–55), for a brief discussion of both passages.

⁴⁷ For further discussion of his ties with this Chola king, see Cox in this issue.

insurmountable adversities from opposing poles. Bilhaṇa describes Vikrama not very differently from the way he imagines himself: an individual who prevails in the most challenging situation by maintaining his moral compass and confidence. Indeed, by the canto's end Vikrama almost single-handedly defeats both attacking armies. Moreover, as we have come to expect, Bilhaṇa brilliantly turns Vikrama's political plight into a virtue. For example, his unceremonious coronation—carried out in the countryside with no fanfare nor witness—turns under Bilhaṇa's pen into an amazing celebration by nature itself: winds carry Ganges water to anoint him, lotuses are in charge of blowing the conches (which are really white geese), and elephants occupy the percussion section in a resounding celebration of cosmic proportions (6.94–98).

But as sympathetic as the poet is to Vikrama's predicament, he never forgets that serving this king is his own plight and exile. Bilhaṇa's resentment of this fact is particularly audible when he ostensibly speaks in Vikrama's own voice, reporting his thoughts after learning of his brother's imminent attack. Here he bemoans in no uncertain terms the treachery, hypocrisy, cowardice and utter wretchedness of certain bad kings (*kupāṛthiva*, 6.29), monarchs who depart from the path of justice (*avinayapathavartin*, 6.30) and are simply wicked (*dagdha*, 6.31, 33). As we already know from Bilhaṇa's introduction, the folly of such kings is one of his favorite topics, and it therefore comes as little surprise that he elaborates on it in this context. Slightly more surprising is the notion expressed here that power, even though it is bound to escape evildoing kings (3.29, 30), necessarily corrupts even the just ones. Thus the very association with Śrī—the embodiment of wealth and royal power who is never truly dependable in the first place (*no bhareṇa kṣipati padam*, 6.28)—necessarily taints a king (*kalaṅkam ātanoti*, 6.35).⁴⁸

Such thoughts, if indeed they are still in Vikrama's voice, serve to strengthen his image as averse to power. But it is hard not to hear in them also the voice of the resentful court poet, particularly when the speaker, as if unintentionally, switches from speaking about bad kings to speaking about kings in general. Take the following verse, for example, which is couched between two stanzas that specifically speak of evil monarchs—the adjective *dagdha*, “charred,” is particularly strong—but makes no such stipulation itself:

They're totally walled in by their gatekeepers.
Hell! Kings must think there's *nothing*
out there. They never take a second,
natural fools that they are, to worry about the world
that's coming.⁴⁹

There are several aspects of this verse—presumably conveying the king's inner thoughts—that, to my ears, ring with Bilhaṇa's distinct, private voice. First, the complaint that kings are totally out of touch with the real world, or see it as devoid of anyone who can harm or stop them (another possible translation for *sakalam api*

⁴⁸ For further discussion of Bilhaṇa's uniquely dark vision of Śrī see McCrea in this issue.

⁴⁹ VDC 6.32: sakalam api vidanti hanta śūnyaṃ kṣitipatayaḥ pratihāravāraṇābhiḥ | kṣaṇam api paralokacintanāya prakṛtijaḍā yad amī na samrabhante ||

vidanti hanta śūnyam), sounds far more natural in the mouth of an outsider than in that of a prince born to power. Second, the blunt assertion that kings are “natural fools” (*prakṛtijāḍa*) is not exactly what we would expect to hear from a proud scion of the Cālukya line. Third, the pun on the word “nothing” (*śūnya*) charges the verse with a very unusual tone. Kings, living in their strange aloof reality, come to think, not unlike Buddhists, that the world out there is empty or devoid of meaning (another meaning of *śūnya*), which explains their godless behavior. This leads to the verse’s stunning conclusion: kingship not only corrupts but is also inimical to one’s core values and is on a par with heresy (embodied here by a highly unsympathetic view of Buddhism). One wonders how well such a line was received by King Vikrama, its primary audience and patron.

Afterlives and Afterthoughts: Bilhaṇa’s Posthumous Career and its Lessons

I have by no means exhausted the richness of Bilhaṇa’s vast *VDC*, but in keeping with the focus of this article, I wish to conclude by briefly examining some of the stories that attached themselves to Bilhaṇa’s legendary figure and the poetry that was ascribed to him posthumously. Although it is certainly plausible that some of the verses with which the anthologies credited him and that are not found in any of his known works were indeed by Bilhaṇa, it is eminently clear that many of them were not.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the intriguing consistency with which certain types of poems and anecdotes gravitate toward his persona must be seen, as in other cases, as a commentary on his poetic legacy.⁵¹ Afterlives of poets always strangely mirror their actual lives.

The corpus of verses ascribed to Bilhaṇa in later anthologies is remarkable. Ludwik Sternbach counted 170 such verses, which make Bilhaṇa one of the five most cited Sanskrit poets according to the data Sternbach provides: only Kālidāsa, Kṣemendra, Bhānukara, and Rājaśekhara have more verses attributed to them.⁵² Less than half these verses can be traced back to Bilhaṇa’s two extant works, and virtually all of those to the *VDC*.⁵³ There is only one verse from the other work whose ascription to Bilhaṇa is beyond doubt, the *Karṇasundarī*.⁵⁴ The selection of

⁵⁰ For the estimate that many of Bilhaṇa’s “new” verses are not genuine and for the possible confusion among anthology compilers between Bilhaṇa, Śilhaṇa, and Ralhaṇa, see Sternbach (1980, 98–101).

⁵¹ For a similar formulation regarding the Telugu *cāṭu* verses and oral narratives that accompany them, see Narayana Rao and Shulman (1998, 135–148).

⁵² See Sternbach (1980, 95) for the number of 170 verses ascribed to him, and Sternbach (1978, 42–45) for statistics on oft-quoted poets and the number of verses ascribed to each (here Bilhaṇa is credited “only” with 150 verses quoted in the anthologies, and if this more conservative number is true, Kāmandaka and Murāri also surpass him with 163 and 156 credited verses respectively). The data concerning Bilhaṇa’s quotes given in Misra (1976, 52–106) are very similar.

⁵³ At least 73 of the *VDC*’s verses are quoted once or more in the five anthologies Misra has checked, with a total of at least 103 instances (Misra 1976, 65–68).

⁵⁴ Misra (1976, 81–82). Misra’s identification of the *Karṇasundarī* verse in the *Subhāṣitaratnaḥ* is indicative of the speed with which Bilhaṇa’s poetry spread, because Vidyākara, the compiler of this anthology, was probably his contemporary. This confirms Bilhaṇa’s boast of enjoying widespread fame (*VDC* 18.88–89).

these quotes is itself never random and merits a separate discussion, but it seems reasonable to suspect that the vastly disproportionate preference for Bilhaṇa's *VDC* may, in part, reflect a fascination with its translocal concerns (including his appeal to audiences in far-off Kashmir), the place he carves for himself in this work (including in his preface and autobiographical afterword), and his unique personal voice in it. This impression solidifies when we consider some of the verses that are attributed to Bilhaṇa but that do not come out of any known work by him.

Let us begin with the simple observation that later tradition readily imagined Bilhaṇa, a poet whose entire career was spent in the plains of the Indian subcontinent, as belonging in the northern vale of Kashmir. For instance, less than a century after the composition of the *VDC*, the Kashmiri poet and chronicler Kalhaṇa gave Bilhaṇa an honorable mention in his magisterial account of Kashmir's court history, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. The very first word in Kalhaṇa's salute to Bilhaṇa is *kāśmīrebhyaḥ* ("from Kashmir"), a lexical choice that both appropriates the poet to his original homeland and echoes the opening of the second part of Bilhaṇa's autobiographical account, where he details his adventures as an itinerant poet.⁵⁵ Kalhaṇa briefly mentions some of the highlights of Bilhaṇa's career in the Deccan and then reports that as soon as the poet heard that Harṣa, a generous man (*tyāgin*) and a friend of real poets (*sukavibāndhava*), had become king of Kashmir, he realized that the hefty rewards conferred on him by Deccani kings were meaningless or fraudulent (*bilhaṇo vañcanāṃ mene vibhūtiṃ tāvatīm api*) and resolved to return home.⁵⁶ Kalhaṇa, then, echoes and magnifies Bilhaṇa's own sense of belonging in Kashmir and his contempt for the Deccan. His comment is also the first clue to a tradition according to which Bilhaṇa's tenure with Vikrama may have not ended on a happy note. At any rate, it was not just compatriots like Kalhaṇa who saw Bilhaṇa as part of the cultural heritage of Kashmir. Arjunavarmadeva, the thirteenth-century scholar from Malva and author of an important commentary on the *Amaruśataka*, may have begun the trend of referring to Bilhaṇa as "Bilhaṇa of Kashmir" (*Kāśmīrakabilhaṇa*). Indeed, he did so in connection with a verse he ascribed to Bilhaṇa, and it is likely that the sole reason for this ascription of a verse others have cited anonymously is its portrayal of the moon as "fairer than a Kashmiri maiden's breast."⁵⁷ No one has described Kashmir and its women more lovingly than the homesick Bilhaṇa, in the autobiographical section of his poem, and in the eyes of posterity he both belonged in the northern vale and "owned" it as a topic. It is perhaps not surprising that no verse describing the beauty of any Deccani site was ever ascribed to Bilhaṇa after his death.

It should also come as little surprise that in the corpus of verses posthumously attributed to Bilhaṇa there are two stanzas that indulge in mocking fellow poets: one

⁵⁵ *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa 7.935; cf. *VDC* 18.83. Incidentally, the first word of the first part of Bilhaṇa's autobiographical account is *kāśmīreṣu* ("in Kashmir," *VDC* 18.1), and the first word of the second part of this account is *kāśmīrebhyaḥ* ("from Kashmir," 18.86).

⁵⁶ *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa 7.935–937; cf. *VDC* 18.64.

⁵⁷ *Amaruśataka* of Amaru ad v. 32: *kāśmīrikucakumbhavibhramadharaḥ śubhrāṃśuḥ*; cf. Misra (1976, 74–75), where the pattern of citing this verse in the anthologies is detailed. The translation is by Ingalls (1965, 258).

ridicules poet wannabes who merely plagiarize the poems of others, and another sneers at those who prostitute Sarasvatī by exposing her naked.⁵⁸ Two verses may not seem like a whole lot, but many anthologies include only a handful of poems that critique poets (*kukavinindā*). Thus the fact that Śārṅgadhara credits Bilhaṇa with two out of only six such poems in his *Paddhati* is significant, indicating, perhaps, that Bilhaṇa came to be associated with this genre. Again, negative evidence seems to corroborate this notion: no verse in praise of poets (*kaviprasaṃsā*) has ever been ascribed to Bilhaṇa, a posthumous silence that highlights his omission to mention even a single predecessor by name in his vast *VDC*.⁵⁹ Possibly related to the two attacks on fellow poets are five allegorical poems (*anyokti, anyāpadeśa*) attributed to Bilhaṇa that deal with lions, elephants, and jackals. These poems assert that the roar of the lion is something that the elephant cannot match, and that if an elephant trumpets, it must be that it has not yet heard a real lion roar.⁶⁰ But it is the jackals, scavengers that feed off such majestic animals, that are the real butt of scorn here. The stanzas portray their cries as pathetic when compared with the lion's roar,⁶¹ warn the jackals that even a wounded lion can be dangerous if provoked,⁶² and bemoan the fate of some great elephants, whose bellow even lions once feared, but who have now fallen prey to jackals.⁶³ As with many allegorical verses, it is not always easy to determine their referents. But the poems' constant fascination with the animals' sound (*garjitam, ārava, dhvani*) suggest that they concern poets and their poetry, and especially the plight of the lone true poet (typically the lion) who is faced with lesser competitors (elephants) and with a crowd of nasty critics (jackals), the lowest creatures in the poetic food chain. If this interpretation is correct, it is easy to see why Bilhaṇa would be credited with these verses, even if he was not the one who composed them.

It is also not surprising that Bilhaṇa's preoccupation with the pettiness and niggardliness of kings did not abate in afterlife. There is another group of allegorical poems that the anthology compilers ascribe to Bilhaṇa and that concern the relationship between poets and patrons. These include, first, indirect complaints about patrons who are not sufficiently generous or whose benefaction is misguided. Here

⁵⁸ *Paddhati* of Śārṅgadhara 9.3–4; *Sūktimuktāvalī* of Jalhaṇa 5.1–2; cf. Misra (1976, 79–80). Note that in both anthologies the two verses are paired, although whereas Śārṅgadhara ascribes both to Bilhaṇa, Jalhaṇa credits Kṣemendra with the first and Ralhaṇa (a name sometimes associated with Bilhaṇa) with the second.

⁵⁹ The only scholars and poets whom Bilhaṇa mentions by name in this poem are those belonging to his family (*VDC* 18.75–85), Vālmiki, and one Gaṅgādhara, a poet whom Bilhaṇa has humiliated (*nītvā gaṅgādharam adharatām*) in the court of the Ḍāhala king (*VDC* 18.95). Consider, by contrast, the large corpus of poems in praise of poets ascribed to Bilhaṇa's influential predecessor Rājaśekhara, or his important predecessor Bāṇa, who may have inaugurated such praises in Sanskrit poetry. On the influence of Rājaśekhara on Bilhaṇa's *Karṇasundarī*, see Granoff (forthcoming); on Bāṇa's praise of poets, see Pollock (1995, 448–451).

⁶⁰ Two examples are *Sūktimuktāvalī* of Jalhaṇa 22.6 and *Paddhati* of Śārṅgadhara 915; cf. Misra (1976, 86–89).

⁶¹ *Sūktimuktāvalī* of Jalhaṇa 22.9; cf. *Paddhati* of Śārṅgadhara 913. Misra (1976, 76) notes that the verse is ascribed either to Bilhaṇa or to Ralhaṇa.

⁶² *Sūktimuktāvalī* of Jalhaṇa 22.8; *Paddhati* of Śārṅgadhara 908; cf. Misra (1976, 88).

⁶³ *Paddhati* of Śārṅgadhara 924; cf. Misra (1976, 80).

we hear of clouds that shower their rain not on parched trees but over the ocean, or of trees that fail to provide and are thus forever cursed by virtue of belonging in the same group as the famous wish-granting tree from heaven.⁶⁴ Or consider another poem ostensibly describing a tree:

Some trees are so ungrateful
that, desiring a better cover,
they one by one discard the leaves
that bore the brunt of frost.
The trees care not that thus they lose their shade;
nor that the leaves, more grateful,
even in their dying
lie at their feet.⁶⁵

As perhaps already hinted at by both Ingalls and Misra, what is unusual about this verse is that it goes one step beyond criticizing a tree for not providing travelers with fruit and shade, which would normally allude to a king/patron who fails to protect/reward his subjects/supplicants.⁶⁶ The emphasis here is, somewhat unusually, on the tree's ungratefulness toward its own leaves, which "bore the brunt of frost" and gave it its lush and beautiful look (*chāyā*, translated here as "shade," can also mean "beauty"). Is it possible to interpret this verse as a poet's complaint about the thanklessness of his patron whose naked form he covered with his luxurious words? If so, it would fit in with Bilhaṇa's notion of himself in the *VDC* as a jeweler who ornaments undeserving "berry-wearing forest dwellers."⁶⁷ Indeed, this interpretation gains credibility when we consider some additional verses that the anthologies ascribe to Bilhaṇa, verses that either allude to kings' ungratefulness and cruelty or describe Bilhaṇa's actual falling out with his employers.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Paddhati* of Śāringadhara 775 (for the first poem) and 988 (for the second). The second is ascribed to Ralhaṇa in Peterson's 1888 edition, but Aufrecht (1873, 119) mentions it as Bilhaṇa's (cf. Misra 1976, 95).

⁶⁵ *Sūktimuktāvalī* of Jalhaṇa 33.8. Cf. *Saduktikarnāmrta* of Śrīrāharadāsa, verse 1885, where the poem is ascribed to Acalasiṃha, and *Subhāṣitaratnaśoṣa* of Vidyākara, verse 1042, where it is cited anonymously (see Misra 1976, 93–94). The translation here is by Ingalls (1965, 307–308), and hence I follow the reading of Vidyākara: *soḍhapraudhahimaklamāni śanakaiḥ patrāṇy adhaḥ kurvate sambhāvyaacchadavāñchayaiva taravaḥ kecit kṛtaghnavratāḥ | nāmanyanta tadātānim api nijacchāyākṣatim taiḥ punas teṣām eva tale kṛtajñacaritaiḥ śuśyadbhir apy āsyate |*

⁶⁶ Ingalls (1965, 302–303) and Misra (1976, 94). For an example of such a verse, see *Kīcakavadha* of Nīivarman 3.2; cf. Bronner (2010, 64).

⁶⁷ It is worth noting that a verse that one anthology cites as Bilhaṇa's closely echoes *VDC* 1.25, with its image of a jewelry designer for the forest tribal (cited above in "Setting the Right(?) Tone: Bilhaṇa's Introductory Appeal to His Audiences" section). This verse culminates with the question "What would a laundryman do in a village of naked mendicants?" (*nagnakṣapaṇakagrāme rajakaḥ kiṃ kariṣyati, Sūktiratmahāra* of Sūryakaliṅgarāja, 32.33; cf. Misra 1976, 76).

⁶⁸ In the former category we can mention yet another pair of allegorical verses, this time about deer. The first of these bitterly bemoans the fate of an innocent deer that, thinking that it is entering a safe haven, actually enters the slaughterhouse (*Paddhati* of Śāringadhara 946). The second, which echoes a famous verse by Daṇḍin, speaks of the wisdom of forest deer: although they graze on simple grass, they are relieved of the need to pose as needy for the rich (*Padyaracanā* of Āṅkolakara Lakṣmaṇabhaṭṭa, p. 91; cf. *Kāvyaḍarśa* of Daṇḍin 2.339). See also Misra (1976, 72, 74).

Of particular interest here is a verse that later tradition not only ascribed to Bilhaṇa but also believed to be an authentic record of his speech in real life:

Let the king of Kuntala take everything that's in my house!
 Still, the treasure of Sarasvatī is every inch alive in my heart.
 Hey, good-for-nothings, cut the party out! Soon,
 carried on the backs of elephants whose ears flutter in hauteur,
 Fortune will march right back into my home.⁶⁹

Several distinctive features of Bilhaṇa's voice in the *VDC* are unmistakably audible in this verse. First, his utmost confidence in his poetry: the speaker knows that he has Sarasvatī inside him, safe beyond anybody's reach.⁷⁰ Second, his complete disdain for those around him, those "good-for-nothings." Third—and this, of course, is clearly related to the first two—the arrogance with which he assures his listeners of his recovery from what seems to be a shattering setback. Although he acknowledges that he has just lost all his worldly possessions, the speaker is certain that he will regain them "soon" (*acirāt*) and with great fanfare: Fortune will return to his abode on the back of elephants "whose ears flutter in hauteur" (*helāndolitakarṇatālakaraṭi*; incidentally, elephants and their fluttering ears are a favorite topic in the *VDC*). But perhaps the most striking allusion to the *VDC* in this verse is the identity of the villain who has raided the speaker's home and confiscated his belongings: it is the "king of Kuntala," which is how Bilhaṇa often calls Vikrama in his poem.

Could Bilhaṇa have offended Vikrama with his pervasive snobbery and/or his autobiographical account, a separate poem on Kashmir and its kings that tops "Vikrama's" poem, and did Vikrama really strip him of all the gold he gave him, to the cheers of the courtiers?⁷¹ Or does this verse better belong in Bilhaṇa's love episode? Some texts place it there, just at the point when Bilhaṇa is being dragged to the gallows for stealing the heart of the princess.⁷² It is even possible to situate it in Bilhaṇa's tenure with King Karṇa of Gujarat, in whose court he wrote the *Karṇasundarī* before taking a job with Vikrama, but whom he conspicuously fails to mention in the résumé he provides in the *VDC*.⁷³ It is impossible to determine the authenticity of this verse, let alone its exact context. But this dilemma only serves to underscore the remarkable consistency typifying our poet's many lives. Thus I would like to conclude by arguing that the persona that tradition has imparted to Bilhaṇa and the poetry that this Bilhaṇa may have continued to compose posthumously should be seen as an act of recognition of his unique voice in the

⁶⁹ *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* of Śrīdharadāsa, verse 2150: sarvasvaṃ grhāvartī kuntalapatīr grhṇātu tan me punar bhāṇḍāgāram akhaṇḍam eva hṛdaye jāgartī sārāsvatam | re kṣudrās tyajata pramodam acirād eṣyanti manmandiram helāndolitakarṇatālakaraṭiskandhādhīrūdhāḥ śrīyah || The 1965 edition ascribes the verse to Silhaṇa, but as Misra (1976, 92–93) notes, the 1933 Punjab University edition (which I was unable to consult) has Bilhaṇa as the author.

⁷⁰ Appropriately, this verse appears in the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* in the section titled "The Pride of the Genius" (*guṇigarva*).

⁷¹ As Krishnamachariar (1937, 165) believes.

⁷² As in the Kashmiri recension of the *Caurapañcāsīkā* (see *Caurapañcāsīkā* of Bilhaṇa, verse 1).

⁷³ For Bilhaṇa's snubbing of Karṇa and his digs at Gujaratis, see Pathak (1966, 58 n. 20).

VDC. This is the voice of a writer who knows that he can fully count on Sarasvatī's favors, but who is never at peace with his predecessors, colleagues, critics, and employers, who resents the cultural space he embodies, and who feels constantly out of place. It is also the voice of a poet who is ever ambivalent about his political subject matter, is disgusted with kings and their public relations, and is often quite blunt and audacious about this. In discussing the portrayal of poets in Jain biographies and hagiographies (the earliest of which dates to the first part of the thirteenth century), Phyllis Granoff noted:

The medieval poet was also a lone voice in a corrupt world. Seeking the favor of kings, he was nonetheless above the petty corruptions of the court and was often a reminder to a king of higher values in a world obsessed with power and self-aggrandizement. The medieval poet has an ambiguous relationship to his patron, and is superior to the king and his sycophantic courtiers. Wrongly accused, wrongly importuned, the medieval poet abandons an ignorant king without hesitation. In many cases the poet's disillusionment with the court becomes a general disgust with the world. . .⁷⁴

Much more research is required if we are to historicize this attitude that Granoff so perceptively described, an attitude that is not found, to my knowledge, in any first-millennium source. But the unusual coherence between Bilhaṇa's VDC and his many afterlives, the insistence of later sources and anthology compilers on associating so many verses that embody this approach with Bilhaṇa (and not, as far as I can see, with any of his predecessors), and the sense that there is something radically fresh in this poet's personal presence as we find it in the VDC all suggest that it was he who inaugurated this new voice in *kāvya*.

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⁷⁴ Granoff (1995, 354).

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