

Birds of a Feather: Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's *Haṃsasandeśa* and Its Intertexts

YIGAL BRONNER

HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

Courier poetry is perhaps the richest and most vital literary genre of premodern South Asia, with hundreds of poems in a great variety of languages. But other than dubbing these poems “imitations” of Kālidāsa's classical model, existing scholarship offers very little explanation of why this should be the case: why poets repeatedly turned to this literary form, exactly how they engaged with existing precedents, and what, if anything, was new in these many poems. In hopes of raising and beginning to answer such questions, this essay closely examines one such work, the *Haṃsasandeśa* of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa (fl. ca. 1400), and its close correspondence with two important intertexts: Kālidāsa's *Meghasandeśa* and Vedānta Deśika's *Haṃsasandeśa*. I argue that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's work is an intricate mosaic that is put together from pieces—both absences and presences—that are taken from both these poems and that make sense only if we are familiar with their sources, and that this mosaic is nonetheless a surprisingly new and independent statement. On the basis of this analysis, I go on to suggest that novelty in the genre is partly made possible (and manifest) precisely through dense engagement with the vocabulary, figures of speech, situations, and other building blocks of the intertexts, a practice that often results in a heightened mode of density.

1. INTRODUCTION

A resident of Alakā, Kubera's mythical northern city, gets exiled to the south as a punishment for neglecting his duties. He is lonely, lovesick, and worried about the well-being of the beloved he left behind. At some point toward the end of his exile, he decides to send her a sign of life and a message of encouragement, for which purpose he identifies a rather unlikely courier. This whole incident is detailed in a short poem in Sanskrit that uses the Mandākrānta meter and consists of two parts. In the first, the hero leads his airborne courier above much of the Indian subcontinent and across the Himalayas, all the way up to Alakā. In the second, the courier is gradually directed to the miserable beloved and asked to deliver a moving message that describes the hero's efforts to summon her through artwork, imagination, and dreams, efforts that fate is quick to disrupt.

Sound familiar? Think again. This is not a description of Kālidāsa's famous *Meghadūta*, known as *Meghasandeśa* in the south (hereafter *MS*), but of a poem written about a thousand

I started thinking about this essay while I was teaching Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's works to a particularly gifted group of Sanskrit students at the University of Chicago in the fall of 2010, and I continued to shape my ideas in conversations with Charles Hallisey, David Shulman, and Gary Tubb, who were among the participants in a group that first met to discuss courier poems in Madison, Wisconsin, at a preconference during the 40th Annual Conference on South Asia (October 2011). Earlier versions of this essay were delivered at the 15th World Sanskrit Conference in New Delhi (January 2012) and at a meeting of the India Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (April 2012). I thank the participants in both meetings for their insightful comments, and I am also indebted to the anonymous readers of this essay for their extremely useful suggestions.

years later, probably at the close of the fourteenth century, the *Haṃsasandeśa* of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa (hereafter *HSVBB*).¹ Given even the few details I have already mentioned, it is easy to see why the sole printed edition of this poem—brought out by an obscure publisher in 1941 and based on a single imperfect manuscript—never became the target of any serious analytic study.² Even if it momentarily appeared on the radar of a handful of scholarly surveys, it was deemed a particularly slavish imitation of Kālidāsa’s masterpiece, one of dozens if not hundreds.³ Indeed, at first glance, the resemblance the “daughter” poem bears to its “mother” is particularly striking, including its frequent use of vocabulary that is lifted straight from Kālidāsa’s template, such as *niyatavasati* (permanent address) and *ā kailāsāt* (all the way to Kailāsa), to give examples only from the very beginning of the poem.⁴

But we should not rush to equate repetition with repetitiveness. From its stunning opening words to its beautifully alliterative closing stanza, the *HSVBB* sets out to innovate and to surprise its reader every step of the way, and I will argue that its methods of achieving this effect provide a particularly useful starting point for a much-needed study of innovation in the vast corpus of courier poems, perhaps the richest and most vital of South Asia’s premodern literary genres.⁵

In this paper I would like to discuss some of the ways in which Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa uses this immensely rich textual corpus, the result of a thousand years of intense courier activity, in order to say something new about yet another courier. In this discussion, I will repeatedly invoke the analytic tool of intertextuality, which has often been blunted through its employment for two equally futile tasks: the rather mechanical identification of sources or “influences” in essentially dyadic structures, and the license to hear anything in a text’s “echo chamber” in a manner that is presumably unstructured and hence unrestricted by authorial intention.⁶ Instead, I argue that innovation in this world is enabled by an intricately structured and conscious engagement with a plurality of significant intertexts. In the case of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s poem, I will show that novelty arises primarily through a reflexive engagement with the important “mother” poem, through an equally playful conversation with a highly influential but now largely ignored “sister” poem, and through correspondence with a pool of additional texts, some in languages other than Sanskrit. I believe that it is the combination of these intertextual relations (or axes) that charges the *HSVBB*’s well-worn format and subject matter with new energy.

1. From information about his patrons and contemporaries that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa provided in many of his works, it can be demonstrated that this poet worked in Vijayanagara’s court during the 1380s and later in Kondavidu under King Peda Kōmaṭi Vēma (r. 1402–1420) in the early 1400s (Somasekhara Sarma 1948: 470–73; Sriramamurti 1972: 69–76). For a speculation that he composed the *HSVBB* early in his career, see n. 16 below.

2. The poem was published in 1941 by Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri in Calcutta as number 4 in the short-lived *Śaṃskṛta-Dūta-Kāvya-Saṃgraha* Series. The edition is actually based on two manuscripts, but the second is a paper copy of the first. The published edition’s title page calls it the *Haṃsadūta* rather than the *Haṃsasandeśa*, but it is the latter name that appears in the colophon and also seems to have been in vogue in works of the time (for example, Unni’s list of courier poems in Kerala mentions four *Haṃsasandeśas* but no *Haṃsadūta*; Unni 1985: 9–31). Of course, several works in the genre, beginning with Kālidāsa’s classic itself, go by both *-dūta* and *-sandeśa* endings alternately.

3. For example, “This is a close imitation of the *Meghasandeśa*” (Sriramamurti 1972: 72).

4. Compare *HSVBB* 1.1 and 1.6 with *MS* 43 and 11, respectively, for these set phrases. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the text of Kālidāsa’s poem are to S. K. De’s 1957 critical edition.

5. Initial surveys of the genre include Aufrecht 1900; Chakravarti 1927; Radhakrishnan 1936, 1939; De 1957: 6–8; and Unni 1985: 7–32 (for the particularly productive Kerala scene). See also Unni 1987: 4–10 on Kālidāsa’s impact on poets in the south more generally.

6. For more on this topic, see Bronner 2010: 257–65.

2. IT'S ME AGAIN: ON PARODY AND ITS LIMITS

It is crucial to understand that from the very start Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa sets out to undermine key aspects of the Kālidāsa template he is using. To begin with, contrary to the precedent set by Kālidāsa and followed by many other courier poets, the *HSVBB* seems to need no introduction. It does not start by describing its hero's plight from a narrator's viewpoint and makes no apologies for his strange choice of courier.⁷ Instead, the poem begins in medias res and in the hero's own voice: we immediately hear him requesting a gander to carry his message. Note the respectful but affectionate designation he uses in approaching the bird: *saumya* (O good Sir!). Kālidāsa's demigod hero, the yakṣa, has already addressed his cloud in this fashion, but only later in the work, after they have become acquainted, and certainly after the poet has introduced both him and the cloud to us (*MS* 49, 83). The redeployment of *saumya* in the very first verse of the *HSVBB* is an early indication that repetition does not always amount to repetitiveness, and that familiar items may serve new tasks in this poem.

Even more startling than the absence of an introduction is what the hero says when he is introducing himself, ostensibly to the gander but really also to the readers. It turns out that the speaker is not just another lovelorn fellow in exile but the original yakṣa himself, the hero of Kālidāsa's famous poem, and it is hard to think of an opening line that is more intertextually charged than his first three words, *so 'ham yakṣaḥ*, which could be translated variously as "It's me, the yakṣa," "I'm that yakṣa," or perhaps even "It's me again, the yakṣa." Finally allowed to tell his story after a millennium, the yakṣa is in a hurry to set the record straight and correct a whole range of things that Kālidāsa got wrong. For one thing, he wishes to reveal his identity. Kālidāsa deliberately kept him anonymous—the *MS* famously opens with *kaścit . . . yakṣaḥ* ("A certain yakṣa," *MS* 1)—and intentionally employs indefinite language in touching on various aspects of his biography. By contrast, the yakṣa in the *HSVBB* immediately gives his name, Dakṣa, as well as that of his beloved, Kāndarpalekhā (*HSVBB* 1.1), and later supplies other information that Kālidāsa never disclosed, such as the exact amount of time left on his exile calendar (two months; *HSVBB* 2.120).⁸ Moreover, there are many things that Kālidāsa got terribly wrong, such as the actual location of the yakṣa's exile (not in Rāmagiri but much farther away, on Mount Malaya, near the southernmost tip of the Indian Peninsula), the route that the courier is to travel, and, of course, the courier's identity: not a cloud but a gander.⁹

Where is this new information coming from, and what is its significance? Clearly there is an element of parody here. Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa carefully chooses his words so as to echo and tease Kālidāsa's. The words *so 'ham yakṣaḥ* carry a playful dig at the intertext's *kaścit . . . yakṣaḥ*, and naming the yakṣa Dakṣa may be a humorous note on the fictional nature of Kālidāsa's character, as in other rhyming names of the Joe Shmoe variety.¹⁰ But many of the changes and innovations mentioned thus far make little sense in the context of Kālidāsa's *MS*, although some of them may be traceable to a larger discursive domain that emerged around it. For example, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa may have taken his tally of the remaining months of exile from the vast commentarial literature that emerged on Kālidāsa's poem,

7. As noted by Dharmagupta while commenting on the *Śukasandeśa*, the structure of courier poems following the Kālidāsan example necessitates a short opening section (*ādivākya*) that introduces the acts and choices of the lonely lover. On Dharmagupta's discussion, see Unni 1987: 16–21 and also section 8 below.

8. In referring to the *HSVBB*, I am following the numbering scheme of the published edition: the work is divided into two parts, but the verses are numbered consecutively from beginning to end, with a total of 121 verses.

9. This fact, too, is cleverly packed into the pregnant opening line because the reversal and hence the identification of *so 'ham* and *hamṣa* have a long history in Sanskrit that goes back to the Upaniṣads.

10. I am grateful to Gary Tubbs for this suggestion.

where such calculations abound.¹¹ If this is the case, our author may have intentionally introduced into his courier poem information that first originated from the discursive intertextual space created around Kālidāsa's, or it may be that by Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's time the *MS* was no longer separable from the traditions found in its commentaries. But all of this does not explain the most important changes that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa has inserted into the yakṣa's story, namely, the relocation of his place of exile, the dramatically different path on which the courier is sent, and, of course, the courier's identity.

In this context we should note another intriguing aspect of the *HSVBB*. It seems reasonable to assume that authors of poems in this genre send their couriers to regions and places with which they, the authors, are personally associated. This, presumably, is why Ujjayinī, the supposed seat of Kālidāsa, occupies such a prominent place at the heart of the cloud's journey in the *MS* (*MS* 27, 30–38). Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa is known to have lived and worked in two Deccani kingdoms. He was first associated with Vijayanagara, probably in the last decades of the fourteenth century, and then joined the court of Vemabhūpāla in Kondavidu, in the Āndhra country, where he wrote this king's biography (*Vemabhūpālacarita*), among other works.¹² Indeed, the meager scholarship about this author is virtually confined to his Āndhra connections in books such as *Contribution of Āndhra to Sanskrit Poetry*.¹³ But if one assumes that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa sent his courier to visit his favorite locations in Āndhra, one is in for a surprise. The gander does fly through the skies of Āndhra, but this leg of his flight is swift and uneventful, with hardly a stopover. Not only does the gander not see Vijayanagara and Kondavidu, the cities with which the poet was associated, but he also comes across no other city or community at all in the region. The same poet who in his *Vemabhūpālacarita* lovingly describes the towns and temples that his king crossed during his military campaigns mentions no king, temple, polity, town, or village belonging to the Deccan.¹⁴ Only three terse verses are dedicated to this entire region, and in them we hear only of the rivers Kṛṣṇā (and its tributary, the Tuṅgabhadra; *HSVBB* 1.37) and Godā, next to which, the poem briefly notes, Rāma and Sitā lived during their exile (*HSVBB* 1.38). There is nothing in Āndhra that the gander should see before entering its great river systems, and the swath of land between them is laconically referred to by the fact that it would take three to four days to cross it (*[kṛṣṇām] uttīrya tricaturadinollaṅghitādhvā sameyā | godām; HSVBB* 1.38). After this, the gander is immediately directed to the jungly region at the foot of Mount Vindhya and then to Vindhya itself, both of which are occupied only by elephants, bees, and

11. The numbers, however, vary. Vallabhadeva is of the opinion that seven to eight months have passed (*katicit saptaṣṭān māsān*, ad verse 2, p. 2 in Hultzschn's 1911 edition); Mallinātha gives a more decisive estimate of eight months (*katicit māsān aṣṭau māsān*, ad verse 1.2, p. 4 in the 1959 Kashi Sanskrit Series edition), which, as he goes on to explain, means a remainder of four months; and, in fact, many southern commentators read an extra verse into the poem that specifies that the remainder is actually four months (*māsān anyān gamaya caturo*, verse 2.43 in P. N. Unni's 1987 edition). Another fact that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa supplies about himself, namely, the reason for his exile, seems to invoke the ongoing rich exegetic discussion emerging around the *MS* more directly. Kālidāsa states only that the yakṣa was cursed because he neglected his duties (*svādhikārāt pramattaḥ, MS* 1.1). In the *HSVBB*, however, the yakṣa reports that he disobeyed the orders of his master (*ājñābhagnāt; HSVBB* 1.1). Although this may seem like a very minor variation, the commentarial literature of the period describes at some length the nature of Kubera's order and the reasons for the yakṣa's failure to comply with it, and it seems only reasonable to assume that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's language here is based on this discussion. See Unni 1987: 11–13 for a brief summary of the growing commentarial discussion about the source or context for the narrative frame of the *MS*.

12. Somasekhara Sarma 1948: 470–73; Sriramamurti 1972: 69–76.

13. See, for example, Sriramamurti 1972: 69–76.

14. One particularly long and masterful description in the *Vemabhūpālacarita* is that of Dakṣārāma, its Bhīmeśvara temple, and its red-light district (pp. 191–205).

heavenly nymphs but no humans (1.39). There is thus no mention whatever in the poem of the people and culture of Āndhra, let alone of the Telugu language.¹⁵

In stark contrast, the Tamil country occupies a uniquely prominent place in the *HSVBB*. Although the distance that the gander has to cross in Tamil airspace is a tiny part of his cross-subcontinental journey, exactly half of the fifty verses detailing the journey are dedicated to its Tamil leg (*HSVBB* 1.12–36), and a great deal of attention is given to the Tamil landscape, with all its cultural, religious, and historical richness. Indeed, this first, southernmost segment of the gander's travels is to be done leisurely, with recommended detours and overnight stops at various cities, temples, and rivers, but as soon as the courier is directed farther north, there is a sudden change of pace. The vast territories from the edge of the Tamil land in the south to Alakā in the far north apparently lack attractions and resorts, and so it seems no longer advisable for the gander to check in for a night. Instead, the yakṣa hastens his courier (e.g., *HSVBB* 1.49, 51) through areas that, with the exception of Rāma's capital of Ayodhyā and the river Ganges, seem increasingly bleak and hostile. These include Gaṇḍagī, with its dark, poisoned water that the gander should not drink, even if it is thirsty, and with its inedible fruits (*HSVBB* 1.52); the gruesome field of the Kurus, a "slaughterhouse of a whole race of evil kings" (*kunṛpatikulāghātabhūmim*, 1.53); and the dark and dangerous Krauñca Pass in the Himalayas, where one has to navigate blind (1.58, on which more below). It is only past the Himalayas, on Mount Kailāsa, in the second part of the poem, that the gander will again reach friendly territory. Here it will find relatives and pleasurable spots and will be advised to rest and regroup before delivering its message.

Nothing we know about the poet's biography seems to explain these deviations from the Kālidāsan template and the disproportionate emphasis on Tamil space. It is possible, of course, that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa had undisclosed Tamil roots, and that he composed his courier poem at a period when he was not associated with any Āndhra polity, perhaps in his youth.¹⁶ But it is also possible, and in fact equally likely, that the explanation lies not so much in the poet's personal history as in that of his genre and primary intertexts. As it turns out, the *HSVBB* corresponds very closely with another courier poem, the *Haṃsasandeśa* of Veṅkaṭanātha (also known as Vedānta Deśika; the poem is hereafter referred to as *HSVD*), written much closer to Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's time.¹⁷ In this poem it is Rāma himself who asks a courier to carry a message to Sītā, held captive in Rāvaṇa's castle in Laṅkā. As I show below, the ties between the two poems are undeniable.

3. GANDER AND COMPANY

Let us begin with the most obvious point of resemblance between the two poems, namely, the choice of a courier, which is identical in both. But it is not just this one correspondence that calls to mind a relationship between the two identically named works, but a series of airtight echoes. Think, to take a random and rather simple example, of the reference to the gander's ancestry at the beginning of the *HSVBB*, where the yakṣa asks the bird to remember its forefather, the great gander who served as the god Brahma's vehicle, before starting its journey (*dhyātvā haṃsaṃ tava kulaguruṃ taṃ viriñcaupavāhyam*; *HSVBB* 1.7). The implication is that a descendant of such an altruistic and able ancestor will neither refuse

15. E.g., *HSVD* 1.20.

16. The *HSVBB* is one of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's few works that does not come with information about its time and place. On the basis of information from other works, though, Somasekhara Sarma believes that this author "seems to have spent his early life at Vijayanagar in educating himself" (Somasekhara Sarma 1948: 470).

17. Vedānta Deśika's standardly given dates are c. 1268–1369.

nor fail to carry out the mission given to him by the exiled yakṣa. There is, of course, a precedent for this in Kālidāsa's poem, where the yakṣa alludes to the cloud's ancestry from a glorious family of clouds and his role as Indra's personal aide (*jātaṃ vaṃśe bhuvanavidite puṣkarāvartakānām | jānāmi tvāṃ prakṛtipuruṣaṃ kāmarūpaṃ maghonaḥ ||*; *MS* 6). But it is hard to miss the direct allusion to the words of Vedānta Deśika's Rāma, who, in turn, appeals to his gander's role in carrying Brahma by using the very word for vehicle, *aupavāhya*, that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa also uses (*āhuḥ siddhāḥ kamalavasater aupavāhyaṃ bhavantam*; *HSVD* 1.6). What we see even in this simple example is the potential complexity of the multitextual interaction. Here we have a case where Kālidāsa provides Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa with the paradigm, namely, an appeal to the messenger's ancestry and ties to certain divinities, whereas Vedānta Deśika supplies him with the value or gander-specific inflection.¹⁸

This complexity can intensify exponentially because our author's playful engagement with his intertexts is constantly used for all sorts of richly innovative purposes. Consider, for example, the important question of who will be keeping the courier company during his travels. In Kālidāsa's poem the cloud must part from its dear friend (*priyasakham*), a mountain that sheds tears born of longing whenever the two reunite (*MS* 9). It is thus a relief that the cloud is to be accompanied by a flock of ganders, of all birds, all the way to Kailāsa (*MS* 11, 23, 73). Then there are the rivers on the way, which are the cloud's partners in a series of highly erotic encounters. And although, given the rather nebulous nature of this courier, the issue of a "she cloud" does not come up, we are told at one point that the cloud is traveling with a "wife," Lady Lightning (*khinnavidyutkalatraḥ*; *MS* 38), and at the very end of the work the yakṣa asks the cloud never to be separated from this partner (*mā bhūd evaṃ kṣaṇam api ca te vidyutā viprayogah*; *MS* 111). In Vedānta Deśika's poem, this same question is given a somewhat different answer. Rāma's gander has to ask leave of the lotus pond (*padmini*; *HSVD* 1.15), whose relationship with the bird is closely based on that of the cloud and the mountain in the mother text. Luckily, clouds will accompany the gander, one of Vedānta Deśika's many deliberate and playful inversions of Kālidāsa's intertext.¹⁹ Here, too, there are rivers to be met, although the erotic dimension of these encounters is now significantly downplayed. But it is only in Rāma's very last words to the gander that we hear of the gander's actual female partner, a goose. Rāma, like the yakṣa in Kālidāsa's poem, wishes for his messenger that in all future journeys it will never part from its mate ("You can roam freely / through all worlds. You'll be joined, / my dear gander, by your Queen Goose, / perfectly attuned to you in all ways / like Lakṣmī to Viṣṇu"; *svairam lokān vicara nikhilān saumya lakṣmyeva viṣṇuḥ | sarvākārais tvadanugunayā sevito rājahaṃsyā ||*; *HSVD* 2.48), although this female goose, so far never mentioned in the poem, has no part in the gander's journey toward Sītā.²⁰

Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa, by contrast, sees no reason why the reward for helping another separated couple should be the helpers' own separation (perhaps only Rāma could be selfish enough to request this from his courier), and he asks the gander and goose to travel in tandem. To signal his wish to break from the cruel precedent set before him, the verse wish-

18. For Vedānta Deśika, however, the ancestry of the bird is slightly different. It is Brahma himself who was the first gander, capable as he was of parting the ocean of the Vedas (*HSVD* 1.6: *vedodanvad vibhajanavido vaṃśajam viśvamūrteḥ*; Sanskrit geese are proverbially capable of separating different liquids), and it is the current gander, rather than its ancestor, who carries Brahma around (*aupavāhyaṃ bhavantam*). Also, we should note that in the *HSVBB*, the appeal to the courier to remember his ancestry is found a bit later in the plot than in both precedents, once the initial request has been made and as part of a list of things that the courier is to do before departing. As we have already come to expect, repetitions are never exact.

19. See Bronner and Shulman 2006: 12–16.

20. Note also the comparison of the birds' union to that of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, another form of Rāma and Sītā, still waiting to be united. All translations from the *HSVD* are from Bronner and Shulman 2009.

ing the courier never to suffer the lonely fate of his sender, found at the very end of many intertexts, is replicated right at the start of what is now a joint journey:

*anvetu*²¹ *tvāṃ priyasahacarī seyam ārdrānurāgā*
kṣantum nālaṃ kṣaṇam api ca yā viprayogaṃ tvadīyam |
no ced yāsyaty aham iva bhavāñ chocanīyām avasthām
ko vā loke virahajanitām vedanām soḍhum iṣṭe || (HSVBB 1.3)
 Take your beloved companion along!
 Her love is so tender she cannot survive
 even a second without you.
 The last thing I wish you is to be like me,
 which, I'll admit, is pathetic.
 Who in the world is strong enough to endure
 the tortures of separation?

Bits from the mother poem (*kṣaṇam api . . . viprayoga*)²² and the sister poem (where the union of goose and gander is eventually promised) are combined to create something that is quite different from both. The yakṣa wishes that his courier never suffer his plight, and hence he sends it on what now becomes a strictly conjugal journey, which is only natural since, as is well known (for example, from Kālidāsa and Vedānta Deśika), geese fly to Lake Mānasa, on the slopes of Mount Kailāsa, in order to nest. From this point on, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa goes out of his way to remind readers that the traveling of the courier is done in tandem (HSVBB 1.3, 1.4, 1.9, 1.11, 1.17, 1.51, 1.58, 2.75, 2.121). For example, the gander and goose are asked not to delay on the way (HSVBB 1.4), but the gander is instructed to ensure that the goose never succumbs to exhaustion, so that whenever this tender creature feels tired, the gander is to allow it to rest in forest clearings and to feed it with lotus honey directly from its beak (HSVBB 1.9).²³

Some of these references to the goose are, again, cases where a Kālidāsan template, such as the request that the courier not tarry or the instructions for resting on the way (e.g., *MS* 13, 22), is given a new, avian inflection, following Vedānta Deśika's sister poem, but now suited for a pair of birds. In other instances, however, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa seems to engage Vedānta Deśika more directly while never forgetting the Kālidāsan precedent, as we shall see in a particularly striking example in section 5 below. More generally, however, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's strategy can be seen as a clever compromise between his two main intertexts. Like Kālidāsa, he allows the gander to have a female companion, albeit one that is female not just in the grammatical sense. Thus the poem describes the two birds as a loving couple of husband and wife and includes their lovemaking and lovers' quarrels (e.g., HSVBB 1.17, 51). This allows the poet to counter Vedānta Deśika's somewhat puritan reaction to Kālidāsa's *HS*: as in the *HSVVD*, the eroticism of the encounters with rivers is toned down in the *HSVBB*, but now it gets directly and repeatedly channeled into the conjugal unit of gander and goose.

4. NORTHBOUND GANDER MEETS SOUTHBOUND ONE

I will have more to say about this tandem flight later, but first let me return to the all-important question of the route charted in the *HSVBB*. David Shulman and I have elsewhere discussed the ways in which Vedānta Deśika, in his gander poem, systematically inverts

21. I am following the emendation of the editor of the printed edition; the manuscript reads *manye tu*.

22. See also *na syād anyo 'py aham iva jano yaḥ parādhinavrttiḥ (MS 8)*.

23. Only the act of delivering the message is to be done alone, for which purpose the gander will first have to deposit the goose with relatives in Lake Mānasa (HSVBB 2.75) before reuniting in the final verse, as in previous poems (HSVBB 2.121).

many of Kālidāsa's choices in the *MS*. For example, we argue that Rāma's separation from Sītā, which formed the precedent and background for Kālidāsa's yakṣa, is brought to the fore in the *HSVD*, which thus presents itself as a sequel that nonetheless precedes the original. We also show that the courier, a gander that has just returned from a long journey to Alakā in the northernmost point on kāvya's compass, is now directed in the opposite direction, to Laṅkā, its southernmost tip.²⁴ It can be said that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa sets out thoroughly to undo these inversions. He places Rāma and Sītā back in the backdrop and returns to the original yakṣa; his poem is thus a sequel that provides the truth withheld by the original. This temporal uninverting also dictates a similar spatial move, and Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa, as we have seen, again redirects his courier to Alakā in the north. But simply stating that our poet sets out to undo prior inversions fails to capture the nature of his engagement with the route assigned to the gander in Vedānta Deśika's sister poem, an engagement that must have led to the relocation of the yakṣa far to the south of his original spot in Kālidāsa's *MS* and may have formed the *raison d'être* of the entire poem. This is because the two Ganders, not unlike Dr. Seuss's Zaxes, travel the very same route in diametrically opposite directions and with very different spiritual agendas.

To realize this, we have to examine both journeys, beginning with that of Vedānta Deśika's southbound gander. This bird is sent across five geopolitical units that make up the Tamil country before crossing the ocean to Laṅkā. The first unit is the Tirupaṭi area, where Viṣṇu Veṅkaṭeśvara's presence on Mount Aṅjana (which is also the serpent Śeṣa) is the primary focus, but which also includes the river Rushing Gold (*suvarṇamukharī*), whose banks are haunted by hunters and the moon-crested Śiva (an allusion to Śiva's temple in Kālahastī; *HSVD* 1.21–24). The second unit is Tuṅḍira and its capital Kāñcī. The directions given to the gander refer to Viṣṇu's becoming a dyke at the request of Brahma (since the flooding unleashed by the goddess threatened to disrupt his rite of creation) and focus on his Varadarāja temple on Elephant Hill, which is described at length. Also mentioned are the rivers Vegā and Kampā; in the mango grove next to the latter the presence of moon-crested Śiva is mentioned again (*HSVD* 1.25–34). Unit three consists of the Chola country and the Kāverī delta. The river itself, rich in pearls and areca trees, is prominently featured as superior to the Ganges, and various sacred locations around it are mentioned: Varṣa and White Cliff (probably Viṣṇu's temple at Tiruvallarai), Lunar Pond (said to be superior to Lake Mānasa in the north), a shrine of the goddess Nīlī, and, most important, a long description of Śrīraṅgam with its Śeṣa throne dedicated to Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī (*HSVD* 1.36–46). The fourth unit is the Pāṇḍya kingdom and its capital city Madurai. Here the main landmark is the Alagar Malai temple, located on Bull Mountain just outside the city, where Viṣṇu "the Beautiful" has brought a southern Ganges down to earth. Also mentioned is the fact that the Pāṇḍya kings, armed by Śiva, imprisoned the clouds to ensure a regular supply of rain (*HSVD* 1.47–50). The fifth and final unit is the southern coast, where the main points of interest are the limpid Tāmrparṇī and its various attractions (pearls, perfumed winds that blow directly from the aromatic sandalwoods growing on Mount Malaya, and the sage Agastya, who lives nearby) and the coastline with its palmyra and pandanus trees (*HSVD* 1.51–54).²⁵

Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's gander is sent on the same route, made of the same ecological and geopolitical units, but in reverse. Its journey begins with the southern coast, featuring the fragrant coastline (perfumed by winds that carry sandalwood scents from Mount Malaya,

24. Bronner and Shulman 2006: 12–16; 2009: xxiv–xxvi.

25. The desert region between the Chola and the Pāṇḍya realms is also briefly alluded to (*HSVD* 1.47), allowing Vedānta Deśika to capture another fivefold division, that of the five regions of the ancient caṅkam poetry (Bronner and Shulman 2009: xxx).

as well as aromas from the nearby cardamom fields) and the glassy Tāmraparṇī, with its plethora of pearls (*HSVBB* 1.8, 12–14). Then comes the Pāṇḍya kingdom, where Śiva helped build a dyke to stop the river Vaigai from flooding the city of Madurai, and whose kings, we are reminded, keep the clouds under arrest. Additional attention is given to Madurai itself, in whose beautiful mansions the gander can rest and mate with his goose (*HSVBB* 1.15–18). The third unit is the Chola country. The river Kāverī is again featured as a southern Ganges, and the coconuts growing on its banks are said to have scooped up and thus contain an essence from heaven. Again, there is a list of sacred sites, although, with the exception of a brief mention of Śrīraṅgam (said to be even more esteemed than Viṣṇu’s abode in Vaikuṅṭha), these are now located farther north and feature Cidambaram with its dancing Śiva, beautifully described, and Aruṅācala, home to Śiva’s fire-made lingam (*HSVBB* 1.19–28). The fourth unit is the city of Kāñcī, where Viṣṇu’s manifestation on Elephant Hill as a result of Brahma’s request is the first landmark. The focus, though, is on Śiva’s Ekāmbareśvara temple on the banks of the river Kampā (which mocks the Ganges), where Pārvaṭī worshipped the earth-made lingam under a mango tree, and where the gander should spend the night (*HSVBB* 1.29–34). The last and rather short unit is the northern Tirupati area. Mount Añjana is first mentioned as a playground of the ancient boar (*potrī purāṇah*) who is Viṣṇu before the gander is directed to Kālahastī, on the banks of Rushing Gold, where the god Śiva is at home (*HSVBB* 1.35–36).

It should be clear that at the heart of both gander poems the two authors chart a nearly identical map of the Tamil world. Stretching from the mountains in the north to the coastline in the south, it consists, first, of the very same ecological units, each with its typical flora and fauna. The map is also organized along the time-honored political and cultural division into the polities of Tuṅḍīra with its capital Kāñcī (originally ruled by the Pallava kings), the Chola country and the Kāverī delta, and the Pāṇḍya country around the city of Madurai, and as is common in courier poems, flirtatious women embody their communities.²⁶ Even more important, all five geocultural units are represented by sacred rivers, riverside shrines, and mountaintop temples, each of which is replete with a mythical past. The two poems thus share a strong intertextual relationship not only with each other and with Kālidāsa’s work and its commentaries, but also with the local purāṇas, Tamil texts in which these pasts are delineated and which began to extend their influence even outside the Tamil region around Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s time.²⁷ The two assigned routes converge on the same main dots of the Tamil sacred matrix, with the variation resulting from a different method of selection (on which more shortly). In fact, it is clear that the two poets share a vision of the Tamil geography as sacred, handily competing with the north and even with heaven itself. We are again advised to pay attention to the complex intertextual dimension of this southern local patriotism: it is not a coincidence that it is the northern places of worship visited by the cloud in Kālidāsa’s *MS* that are now said to be eclipsed, even though the practice of speaking of such places as “heaven on earth” begins with the mother poem itself.²⁸ In this connection it should be noted that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa closely follows Vedānta Deśika in sprinkling his

26. Compare *HSVD* 1.37 with *HSVBB* 1.28 for one example of the depiction of girls from the Chola country.

27. There is evidence that several Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers toured Āndhra around Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s time and spread their faith. Significantly, Vedānta Deśika’s son, Varadācārya (also known as Nainārācārya), is said to have been one of them (Somasekhara Sarma 1948: 315–16). As an example of the growing reach of Tamil sacred lore in the Āndhra country in this period, consider the dominant presence of the Śrīvilliputtūr story in the *Āmuktamālyada* of Kṛṣṇadevarāya, the subject of a University of Chicago dissertation currently being written by Ilanit Loewy Shacham.

28. See, in particular, the description of Ujjayinī as a “precious piece of heaven / bought, with their last karmic pennies, / and smuggled down to earth / by exiles from paradise / who overspent their piety” (*svalpībhūte sucari-taphale svargīnām gām gatānām šeṣaiḥ puṇyair hṛtam iva divaḥ kāntimatkhaṇḍam ekam*; *MS* 30).

poem with repeated digs at clouds. It is not by chance, for example, that both poets allude to the clouds' "imprisonment" in Madurai.

But it is precisely the close similarity between the two routes that enables us to see their crucial differences. Vedānta Deśika's Rāma sends his gander on a pilgrimage that—not surprisingly, given the identity of both author and hero—is decidedly Vaiṣṇava in nature. The southbound gander is sent to the main Viṣṇu sites in the country: Tirupati's Venkaṭeśvara temple, Varadarāja's shrine in Kāñcī, and Śrīraṅgam on the banks of the Kāverī. Śaiva shrines are very briefly alluded to but are unmistakably placed in the background in the *HSVD*'s sacred map. This is yet another way in which Vedānta Deśika inverts Kālidāsa's template, where Śiva, who resides outside Alakā, is the ultimate destination of the cloud's spiritual journey, and where Śaiva shrines form the heart of the cloud's pilgrimage as a devotee.²⁹ Here too, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa undoes his predecessor's inversion. In his poem the yakṣa redirects the courier to Śiva's abode outside Alakā (*HSVBB* 1.5), and his northbound gander is sent on a patently Śaiva voyage. The main Vaiṣṇava nodes from the sister poem are still on the map, but the focus now shifts from Tirupati to nearby Kālahastī, from Varadarāja's shrine to Ekāmbareśvara's just next door, and from Śrīraṅgam to Cidambaram's dancing Śiva and Aruṅācala's fire lingam farther to the north.³⁰

It is crucial to understand that it is not just the span of attention that the two poets dedicate to the sacred sites of one or the other god that sets their religious worldviews apart. Rather, the two ganders, one a Vaiṣṇava pilgrim and the other a Śaiva, are invariably instructed to treat the sites of the rival god with no more than touristic curiosity and only those of their deity as actual objects of devotion. Rāma directs his gander to bow before Viṣṇu in a variety of sites and promises the southbound bird that this god will shower it with the unbounded love of his gaze;³¹ he says nothing of the sort about Śiva, to whom he alludes only in passing. And Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa, who devotes considerably more space to Viṣṇu in his work than Śiva is allotted in the sister poem, nonetheless gives his gander instructions that entail the exclusive worship of Śiva, often using the same vocabulary and imagery as his Vaiṣṇava predecessor and promising his northbound courier equal rewards.³²

29. Śiva's residence just outside Alakā is mentioned by Kālidāsa at the outset (*MS* 7), and the cloud's journey includes extensive visits to Śaiva temples and sacred sites, in which the cloud is to participate in a variety of rites and forms of worship (*MS* 33–36, 43–45, 50–52, 55–56, 58, 60, 71). Vaiṣṇava sacred geography is mentioned briefly and only in passing, mostly at the periphery of the map (*MS* 1, 15; the cloud is also compared to this god's color, *MS* 57). But the cloud is never asked to visit a Viṣṇu temple and pay homage to this god or members of his family.

30. Note that of the matrix of the five lingams of Śiva, which are made of earth, air, fire, water, and ether and allow "the very elements of the universe, like the deity, [to be] localized in individual shrines in the Tamil land" (Shulman 1980: 82), a nearly complete set of four is given in the *HSVBB*. We find, in order of appearance, Cidambaram (ether lingam), Aruṅācala (fire lingam), Kāñcī's Ekāmbareśvara temple (earth lingam), and Kālahastī (air lingam). Only the water lingam of Tiruvānaikkā seems to be missing.

31. See, for example: "You, too, / can serve him with an ardent heart. / Join the crowd" (*saṃghaṣo badhyamānām śaktyā kāmaṃ madhuvijayinas tvaṃ ca kuryāḥ saparyām*; *HSVD* 1.22, apropos of Viṣṇu in Tirupati); "Go there, bow your head in homage / to this town" (*tām āsīdan praṇama naḡarīm bhaktinamreṇa mūrdhnā*; *HSVD* 1.27, speaking of Kāñcī in the context of the first mention of Viṣṇu's temple on Elephant Hill); "When you bow to him he'll take you in, / bathe you in his happiness, / and shower you with the exquisite bounty / of his eyes" (*aṅgikuryād vīnātam amṛtāsārasaṃvāḍibhis tvām āvirmodair abhīmatavarasthūlalakṣaiḥ kaṭākṣaiḥ*; *HSVD* 1.34, again speaking of Varadarāja on Elephant Hill); "Make sure you go there too, / my friend, / and bow in good faith / to the Śeṣa throne" (*śraddhāyogād vīnamītatanaḥ śeṣapūṭhaṃ bhajethāḥ*; *HSVD* 1.45, apropos of Śrīraṅgam).

32. For example: "Bow to the dancer, the master of steps, / Śiva whose throat is black" (*ṇṛttakṛdābhīnayaacaturam nīlakaṇṭhaṃ bhajethāḥ*; *HSVBB* 1.24, apropos of Cidambaram); "Bow your head in homage, from a distance, / to this river of the gods" (*dūrād eṇām tridaśatāṇīm bhaktinamro bhajethāḥ*; *HSVBB* 1.46, apropos of the Ganges,

Consider, in this context, the following verse, in which Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa tells the gander of Śiva's fire lingam in Aruṇācala:

*kolākāro madhuripur adhas tvadvapuḥ so 'pi vedhā
draṣṭuṃ nobhau ciram aśakatāṃ yasya mūlāgradeśau |
sāphalyaṃ te sapadi bhavitā cakṣuṣoḥ paśyatas taṃ
sākṣātkāraṃ sakalam analastambharūpasya śambhoḥ || (HSVBB 1.26)*

The Killer of Madhu below in the shape of a boar,
and, dressed in your fine feathers,³³ the Creator,
both tried long and failed to see
the base and crest of that pillar of fire.
All *you* have to do is look, and at once
Śiva will reward your pair of eyes
with the fruit of revealing himself
in full form.

Śiva famously turned himself into an endless column of fire, the tips of which neither Viṣṇu, the mighty killer of Madhu, nor Brahma, the creator of the world, could reach. In the sister poem Rāma repeatedly invokes the image of Viṣṇu's supremacy over all other gods; apropos of Kāñcī, for example, he tells his gander, "The highest gods roam its streets, / crowned by particles of pure dust / stirred up when the Lord of Elephant Hill / gallops past on his horse" (*yadvithināṃ karigiripater vāhavegāvadhūtān dhanyān reṇūṃs tridaśapatayo dhārayanty uttamāṅgaiḥ; HSVD 1.27*). Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa inverts this hierarchy by referring his Śaiva gander to the story of the fire pillar, the form in which Śiva is worshipped in Aruṇācala.³⁴ Note that the yakṣa makes sure to allude to Viṣṇu's humble position "below" (*adhas*) Śiva and to his rather unattractive form as a boar.³⁵ Note also that the two eyes of the gander, a humble devotee, are promised a reward that even the two highest gods could not reap: a full view of the endless Śiva. This paradox is clearly reminiscent of Vedānta Deśika's Vaiṣṇava theology in the sister poem and elsewhere, but the language used to describe it also recalls Kālidāsa's poem, where the cloud, visiting Śiva's Mahākāla temple, is promised a full reward (*phalam avikalam; MS 34; see also MS 24*) for sounding its thunders during the morning puja.

In directing his gander in Tamil skies, then, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa constantly keeps in mind the spiritual voyage assigned the courier in the sister poem, and he makes sure to send his winged messenger on a very similar path but with an entirely different spiritual trajectory. In fact, at certain points along the way, he takes pains to rebut highly specific snide remarks that his Vaiṣṇava predecessor directed at Śiva. To demonstrate this, I will examine two pairs of examples. The first comes from the verse in which both works first introduce the Madurai area. I begin with the words of Vedānta Deśika's Rāma:

*nityāvāsaṃ vṛṣabham acalaṃ suandarākhyasya viṣṇoḥ
pratyaśīdan sapadi vinato bhāgadheyam nataḥ syāḥ |
yasyotsaṅge balivijayinas tasya mañjīravāntaṃ
pātho divyaṃ paśupatijaṭāsparśahīnaṃ vibhāti || (HSVD 1.49)*

Soon you'll arrive at Bull Mountain.

flowing down from Śiva's hair—the language is highly reminiscent of *HSVD 1.27*, quoted in the preceding note). Additional examples are given in the main text below.

33. *tvadvapuḥ*, literally "taking your body," that is, the body of a gander.

34. Shulman 1980: 42.

35. The boar shape of Viṣṇu is also mentioned elsewhere in the poem, when Viṣṇu in Tirupati is called "the ancient wild boar" (*potri purāṇah; HSVBB 1.35*).

Here Viṣṇu, “The Beautiful,” is always at home.
 Here the humble find fortune.
 Humble yourself.
 When God stretched his foot high,
 his anklet set free the heavenly river
 that fell straight into the lap
 of this shining mountain, shunning
 Śiva’s tangled hair.

In the first half of this verse Rāma explains the sanctity of Bull Mountain, just outside Madurai, where Viṣṇu “is always at home,” and instructs the pilgrim bird about the proper form of worship. In the second half he adds a layer of local lore by identifying the adjacent river with the heavenly Ganges. As the story goes, when Viṣṇu “stretched his foot high” in the process of defeating Balin (*balivijayinah*), his anklet set free the heavenly Ganges. This reference is then used to highlight the superiority of the Tamil landscape, which is where we come across a humorous put-down of Śiva. The local Ganges, Rāma points out, was touched only by Viṣṇu’s anklet before falling “straight into the lap” of Viṣṇu’s mountain. It thus escaped the lot of its northern namesake, which had to run through the untidy dreadlocks of Śiva, lord of the beasts (*paśupati*).

When he describes his gander’s arrival at Madurai, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s yakṣa is quick to settle the score:

*tvaddṛśyā sā bhavati madhurā śrīmatī rājadhānī
 saṃpadbhedair dhanadanagarīvibhramam darśayantī |
 devo yasyāḥ savidhataṭinīsetunirmāṇahetoḥ
 svairam mūrdhnā mṛdam udavahat svarnadīmālikena || (HSVBB 1.15)*
 Madurai, the sublime seat of kings,
 will come into view, displaying such riches
 you could easily confuse it
 with Kubera’s city far north.
 God himself once signed up with its river corps
 in the cause of building a levee,³⁶
 carrying sandbags on the very head
 that’s bedecked with the heavenly river.

That the material and spiritual assets of Madurai can compete with those of Alakā, Kubera’s city, should come as no surprise to readers familiar with Vedānta Deśika’s poem, where the Pāṇḍya country has already been said to possess “villages and towns teeming with temples, / by far superior to Alakā” (*param alakayā spardhamānair ajasram puṇyāvāsaiḥ purajanapadaḥ*; HSVD 1.50). Nor are we the least bit surprised to hear of a divine presence in the town, and of a story subordinating even the heavenly Ganges to a local stream. Indeed, note how Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa manages beautifully to capture the spirit of one of the most cherished games, or *lilās*, Śiva ever played in Madurai by referring to the Ganges. The incredible signing up of this supreme god as a simple laborer on the local embankments is marvelously underscored by the image of his carrying sandbags on the very head that meanwhile easily blocks the mightiest waterway in the cosmos.³⁷ But something about this image must also ring strangely familiar if we recall the dig from the intertext: exactly at the point where the sister poem had associated the Ganges with Viṣṇu’s anklet and disassociated

36. *avidhataṭinīsetunirmāṇahetoḥ*, literally, “for the purpose of building a levee at the nearby river.”

37. For a summary of this story, see Shulman 1980: 76–77.

it from the “tangled hair” of the lord of the beasts, the river from heaven is promptly restored to its place as bedecking Śīva’s locks.

For my second example, I turn to Kālahastī, again beginning with Vedānta Deśīka’s Rāma:

*stokomnagnasphuritapulinām tvannivāsecchayeva
drakṣyasya ārāt kanakamukharām dakṣiṇām añjanādreh |
āsannānām vanaviṭapinām vīcīhastaiḥ prasūnāny
arcāhetor upaharati yā nūnam ardhendumauleḥ ||
nirviśyainām nibhṛtam anabhiviyaktamañjupraṇādo
mandādhūtaḥ pulinapavanair vañjulāmodagarbhaiḥ |
avyāsamgaḥ sapadi padavīm samśrayānyair alaṅghyo
bandikuryus taṭavasatayo mā bhavantaṃ kirātāḥ || (HSVD 1.23–24)*

A little to the south of Mount Añjana

you’ll see the river, Rushing Gold,

slightly lifting her skirt in the hope

that you’ll nest on her shore.

With her waves she reaches out and gathers

flowers from the riverside groves,

her gift to the moon-crested god.

Enter her secretly, murmuring sweet cries,

caressed by the breeze from her shores

with its scent of scarlet flowers.

But don’t get too attached.

Hit the road, where no one can reach you.

Don’t get caught in the snares of the hunters

who haunt the river.

This passage immediately follows a loving description of Tirupati on Mount Añjana, where the gander is instructed to worship Viṣṇu along with gods and men (HSVD 1.21–22). By contrast, Rāma does not even name Śīva’s adjacent sacred site, Kālahastī, alludes to the presence of the “moon-crested god” only in passing, and certainly does not recommend him as an object for the gander’s devotion. Still, there is nothing that seems offensive in this description, and Rāma even refers to the river as collecting and offering “flowers from the riverside groves” to Śīva. Indeed, at first sight, this seems like a highly ordinary piece of courier poetry: an encounter with a river that is erotically and spiritually charged, a standard reference to the riverside flora and scented winds, a common reminder to the messenger not to tarry, and the occasional warning about roadside dangers. But the unostentatious notice on which the verse ends may be more biting than it seems. Is it a mere coincidence that Rāma warns his gander about hunters precisely where Śīva was famously worshipped by a particularly boorish devotee, Kaṇṇappar, a hunter whose libation consisted of his bloody, half-chewed catch?³⁸ Is Rāma actually wooing the gander away from the gory practice of worshipping the rival god lest it inadvertently become its sacrificial offering?

It is hard to answer this question with certainty, but examining the parallel verse from the *HSVBB* may offer some help:

*akṣṇor agre tadanu bhavitā kālahastī giris te
tasyopānte kanakamukharī nāma kallolinī ca |
tīre yasyāḥ kalitavasater mūrdhni śambhoḥ kirāto
gaṇḍūśambhaḥsnaṇavidhayā prāpa gaṅgādharatvam || (HSVBB 1.36).*

38. See Shulman 1980: 135–37 for a summary of the Kaṇṇappar story.

Straight ahead your eye will spot a mountain, Kālahastī,
 and on its slopes a river they call Rushing Gold,
 where Śiva made his home, and where a hunter
 once bathed this god's head with a mouthful of spit—
 his way to become one
 with the Bearer of the Ganges.

The location and presence of Śiva in Kālahastī are spelled out in the first half of the stanza, which consists mostly of straightforward road directions, before the reader is suddenly confronted with a set of startling events in the second. Emerging, as it were, from the shade of the laconic snide remark in the intertext, the hunter Kaṇṇappar comes into full view, as do his shocking way of showing his devotion and his equally shocking reward. By spitting his offering on the very head that holds the holy Ganges, this lowly devotee literally reached the state of bearing the Ganges himself (*prāpa gaṅgādharatvam*) and became one with his god. The verse thus proudly celebrates the bhakti ideal that the story of Kaṇṇappar embodies, namely, that the road to salvation is open to anyone who loves God passionately and is willing to give him all he or she has (Kaṇṇappar famously tops the offering of his chewed-up prey to Śiva with both of his own eyes). The impure and dangerous nature of the offering is by no means a drawback, nor should the inversion of hierarchy (man offering a divinity his leftovers) and its welcoming by the god come as any surprise to someone like Vedānta Deśika, who in his *Dayāsataka* speaks of himself as a beggar, with only his impure misdeeds as his gift, and yet expects the goddess Compassion to rush out to greet and embrace him.³⁹ It is hard to know how much of this theological interplay can be plausibly read into the verse, but it seems no mere chance that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa, while assigning his gander the route from the sister poem, only in reverse, and sending his courier to Kālahastī, makes sure also to reverse his predecessor's description by turning the hunter (*kirāta*) who was earlier named as this site's menacing hazard into its main attraction.

5. AIMING AT TWO TARGETS

Examples of close textual engagement with the *HSVD* continue long after the northbound gander ceases to ruffle the feathers of its predecessor over the sacred geography of the south. Even outside Tamil aerial territory, when the author more or less follows a route that was charted only by the mother poem, the *HSVBB* constantly borrows ideas, images, and at times whole phrases from the sister work, always in complex and innovative ways. Consider, for example, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's response to a unique and beautiful verse from the *HSVD*, in which Rāma directs his courier across the ocean. Here, first, are Rāma's words to his gander:

*sthitvā tatra kṣaṇam ubhayataḥ sailaśṛṅgāvatīrṃaiḥ
 srotobhedair adhigataguṇaṃ cāruviṣphāraghoṣaiḥ |
 lakṣyīkurvan daśamukhapurīṃ saumya patraprakṛṣṭo
 velācāpaṃ śara iva sakhe vegatas tvam vyatīyāḥ || (HSVD 1.54)*

There, my dear friend, two split streams
 pouring down from both flanks of the mountain
 supply the shore, curved as a bow,
 with its string and the pleasant twang
 of their torrent. Standing on the peak,
 aim yourself at the city of the ten-headed demon,
 and let go—like a well-feathered arrow.

39. See, for example, *Dayāsataka* 70; cf. Bronner and Shulman 2009: xli, 123. In the context of the Kaṇṇappar allusion it is also interesting to note that Vedānta Deśika imagines the goddess Compassion as a huntress and begs her to trap him, her devotee (*Dayāsataka* 95, 99; cf. Bronner and Shulman 2009: xliiv–xlv, 139–43).

This verse by Vedānta Deśika, with its striking visual image of an arrow shot from a bow, has no apparent parallel in Kālidāsa's *MS*. Instead, it corresponds to the specific geographic niche on the South Indian coast, the mission of crossing the ocean to “the city of the ten-headed demon,” and, of course, the feathered courier in question.

To the challenge posed by this verse, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa responds in the following marvelous manner:

*kṛtvā pakṣau viyati vitatau kiñcid ākuñcitāgrau
tenodīcā [*cīm?] stimitagamano bāṇamārgeṇa gacchan |
paścādyāntīm tamasi dayitām āśu samjñāpayethā
nādair līlāvalitataruṇīnūpurodghuṣṭakalpaiḥ || (HSVBB 1.58)*

Stretch both wings wide,
bend back their tips ever so slightly,
and head north, going still,
following the flight of an arrow.
But hurry! It's pitch-dark. Sound your trill—
it rings like a jingling anklet
on the foot of a girl who seductively saunters—
to guide your beloved
who is trailing behind.

As in Vedānta Deśika's poem, we again find an image of the gander aiming at a target and then letting go, like an arrow, and here too there is a reference not just to visuals but also to sound effects, although the twang of the torrent-turned-bow is now replaced with the trill of the flying gander, which Vedānta Deśika has already compared to the ringing of an anklet (*HSVD* 1.3, 2.1, 2.20). Grafting the anklet's audios onto the arrow image allows for several surprising effects. First, it is used to remind the reader, yet again, that the gander's is not a solo flight, and that it needs to guide its beloved goose, who is trailing behind, on the dark path. Second—and perhaps not unrelated to the added female presence—it creates a dramatic contrast between the “going still” (*stimitagamana*) of the gander and the seductive gait (*līlāvalita*) of the girl with the anklet.

Note, however, that the narrow that the gander now has to cross is no longer the strait between the Tamil coast and Lañkā, as in Vedānta Deśika's poem, where the gander is flying south, but the northern trail of the Himalayan Krauñca Pass, also known as “Gander Gate” (*haṃsadvāra*), as in Kālidāsa's poem (*MS* 57). As Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa reminds us in the immediately preceding verse, this path is basically a hole in the rock that was shot through and thus created by an arrow, that of Lord Bhārgava (*gaccheḥ krauñcaṃ gaganapadavīlaṅghanam śṛṅgajātaiḥ | madhye yasya prakṛtikathine mānasevāsīnām vo mārgam cakre sapadi bhagavān bhārgavo mārgaṇena || HSVBB 1.57*). The invocation of an arrow at this point is thus infused with meaning as a result of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's close engagement with both of his primary intertexts: the gander, stretching its wings out and curving back the tips of its feathers, flies like an arrow, and hence like the gander in Vedānta Deśika's poem, and it flies in the trail of an arrow, that is, the Krauñca Pass, just like the cloud in Kālidāsa's poem.⁴⁰ Both of these meanings are aptly packed into the pregnant clause *bāṇamārgeṇa gacchan*, “following the flight of an arrow.”⁴¹ We begin to realize the complexity of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's detailed and deliberate correspondence with his

40. In fact, a piece of Kālidāsa's parallel stanza (*tenodīcīm*) is deliberately redeployed here by Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa, if my emendation of the text is correct (the published edition reads *tenodīcā*).

41. This phrase may also refer to the unique path of the poet himself, a self-avowed follower of Bāṇa, whose name means “the arrow.” I am grateful to David Shulman for suggesting this interpretation to me.

literary targets. Our author has created an intricate mosaic that is put together from pieces—both absences and presences—that are taken from both poems and that make sense only if we are familiar with their sources, and yet this mosaic is a surprisingly new and independent statement. In the process of creation, he also throws new light on his intertexts and on the numerous components of the courier template itself—in this case the fact that on the last leg of his route, before reaching the final destination (and the end of the first part of the poem), the courier has to pass through a dangerous strait: a final leap of faith.

6. ALAKĀ AND LAṆKĀ

Even when the gander reaches Alakā, its final destination, the description is reminiscent not only of the millennium-old portrayal of this fabulous northern city by Kālidāsa but also of the sister poem's portrayal of Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa's capital far to the south. To begin with, consider the special attention Vedānta Deśika gives to Laṅkā's flags, which in one instance he imagines as taking part in a citywide royal welcome for the gander, and in another as signaling Laṅkā's challenge to heaven. Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's description of Alakā also includes two verses that feature its flags and employs very similar themes and images, as a comparison of the two pairs of relevant stanzas will demonstrate. Let us turn first to Vedānta Deśika's poem, beginning with the gander's moment of arrival to Laṅkā in the concluding verse of the work's first part:

*tasmin dṛśyā bhavati bhavataś cārusaudhavadātā
laṅkā sindhor mahitapuline rājahaṃsiva līnā ||
tvām āyāntaṃ pavanataralair yā patākāpadeśaiḥ
pakṣair abhyujjigamiṣur iva sthāsyati śrāvyanādā || (HSVD 1.60)*

There, nesting in the splendid sand, Laṅkā,
washed white with palaces, will reveal herself
just to you, like a queenly goose. You'll hear
her beckoning call. With streamers flapping
in the wind, she'll be whirling her wings
as she rises up to welcome you
on arrival.

Laṅkā's spotless mansions lend whiteness to the "royal goose," as it is now imagined to be, its white flapping streamers become "whirling wings," and its bustle a "beckoning call." The verse thus contains yet another combination of the seen and the heard, here in the form of two future participles, *dṛśyā* (literally, "to be seen") and *śrāvya* (literally, "to be heard") that frame the stanza. The result is that Laṅkā not only takes the shape of the approaching courier, something that readers of Kālidāsa's poem have already seen in the cloud's arrival at Alakā,⁴² but is also imagined as moving toward it in intense anticipation: normally "nesting in the splendid sand," the city now flaps its "wings" and all but takes off (*abhyujjigamiṣuḥ*) in order to welcome the landing winged messenger.

Flags continue to be part of Laṅkā's upward trajectory:

*adhyaśinā bahumaṇimayaṃ tuṅgaśṛṅgaṃ suvelaṃ
dikpāleṣu prathitayaśasā rakṣasā rakṣyamānā |
agre meror amaraṇagarīṃ yā pariṣkārabhūmnā
tvāhūyeva dhvajapaṭamayān agrahastān dhunoti || (HSVD 2.3)*

Poised on the jewel-studded peak of Mount Goodshore,
and well guarded by that Demon whose fame

42. MS 64. The image is further developed in HSVD 2.1.

is sung by the four guardians of the compass,
 this city, decked with gold, brandishes
 her banners as if poking fingers in the face
 of her rival, the city of the gods,
 on the roof of the world.

Rāvaṇa has famously conquered the city of the gods, looted its riches, and brought them all home to Laṅkā (as I note below, Vedānta Deśika's Rāma inventories some of the spoil). This remote southern city has thus basically replaced Indra's capital as the hub of the world, and so it is Rāvaṇa, not any god, "whose fame is sung by the guardians of the compass." In short, Laṅkā has every reason for "poking fingers in the face" of her rival city, located on "the roof of the world," and for this act, too, her banners come in handy.

Now let us turn to Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's poem:

*tām udbhūṭadhvajapaṭalatāmṛṣṭānakṣatrapaṅktiṃ
 dṛṣṭvā ramyāṃ dhanadanagarīm modamānaṃ bhavantam |
 dānasrotahkaluṣitajalaṃ majjatām diggajānām
 āneṣyanti prakāṭitamudām mānasaṃ tvatsagandhāḥ ||
 gacchan madhyenarapatipathaṃ vijanair vītakhedo
 gaṅgāsrotaḥsakalasarucāṃ ketanālīpaṭānām |
 karṇe kuryā nakhamukhamuhustādanodyadvipañci-
 nādodañcan navanavarasaṃ kinnarīgītabandham || (HSVBB 2.74, 76)*

A mass of banners that wipes the stars clean
 is the first thing you'll see of Treasurer's Town,
 a stunning city that already delights you.
 Then an escort of your kith and kin will lead you
 to where the elephants that hold the earth
 are immersed in ecstasy: Lake Mānasa,
 whose water is soiled only
 by their passion sap.
 Proceed right through the middle of King's Road:
 rows of streamers that distill the splendor of the Ganges
 will fan you and remove your fatigue.
 Open your ears: ceaselessly squeezing
 the strings of their lutes with lunette-like bows,
 heavenly nymphs will sing a recital
 that tastes entirely fresh.

The gander is again greeted with great fanfare and in a way that is reminiscent of the sister poem, even though the situation and location are quite different. There is no reason, for instance, for Alakā to be imagined as a queen goose flying up to meet the winged messenger, because the royal gander is already accompanied by one, and because real geese—the gander's "kith and kin" that actually nest in Heart Lake—take off and form an actual airborne escort.⁴³ Still, Treasurer's Town, so named after its king, Kubera, treasurer of the gods, also uses white streamers "that distill the splendor of the Ganges" to welcome the arriving gander. These streamers are now imagined as lines of fan-holding attendees, standing on both sides of King's Road to honor the high-ranking visitor. Alakā also shows an unmistakable upward trajectory that, as in the case of Laṅkā, is seen in its flags, "a mass of banners that hides the

43. The poem explicitly identifies the lake as their nesting place or home (*yasyā vāhyā bhavati sarasī mānasaṃ vo nivāsaḥ; HSVBB 2.71*), and we are later told that the gander's local relatives will take the goose in while the gander delivers its message (*tatratyeṣu priyasahacarīm tām imām saṃniveśya; HSVBB 2.75*).

row of stars.” Moreover, the sights that this welcoming city offers its guest are again supplemented with sounds, this time an enchanting recital produced by an ensemble of heavenly nymphs that tops off the red-carpet treatment. Finally, note that whereas the *dikpālas*, “the four guardians of the compass,” are forced to sing the fame of Laṅkā’s king, perhaps because their wives are kept captive in the city jail (*rodhaṃ yasyām anuvidadhate lokapālāvarodhāḥ; HSVD 2.2*), Alakā’s Lake Mānasa truly captivates the *diggajas*, the elephants of these guardians. Thus these magnificent beasts that normally hold the earth on their backs are now submerged in its waters “in ecstasy,” seasoning the water with their “musk.”

The pair of stanzas from Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s poem also contains some unmistakable echoes of Kālidāsa’s poem—think, for example, of Kālidāsa’s description of Alakā’s rooftops as “licking the sky” (*abhraṃliḥāgrāḥ prāsādāḥ; MS 64*), the recital for Śiva sung by the heavenly nymphs (*MS 56*), and the verbatim quote “will lead you” (*neṣyanti tvām; MS 61*), to mention only a few—but, again, the net result of all this borrowing and reworking is a set of strikingly new stanzas: Alakā welcomes us with a song that “tastes entirely fresh” (*navanavarasam*), as the poet himself may be hinting.

The shared imagination of flags is but one example of a larger phenomenon. Through the convex lens of courier poetry, the extremely remote citadels of Alakā and Laṅkā, one lying beyond the subcontinent’s northernmost mountains and the other beyond its southernmost coast, emerge as a closely related pair of twin cities. There are good reasons for the strange affinity between the two fabulous towns. For instance, they are governed by a pair of brothers, Kubera and Rāvaṇa, who share, among other things, a taste for luxury in general and a fondness for one fancy aircraft in particular: the *puṣpavimāna*, originally registered in Alakā and the property of Kubera, is stolen by Rāvaṇa and brought by him to Laṅkā (after defeating Rāvaṇa, Rāma gets to borrow it for a ride home to Ayodhyā). This coveted vehicle, moreover, is not the only item that the two rhyming cities, Alakā and Laṅkā, both claim, and this is true especially in courier poetry. Here both white cities, explicitly and implicitly compared to each other,⁴⁴ are repeatedly said to share unimaginable assets that eclipse even those of Indra’s capital, such as the wish-fulfilling trees of heaven, heavenly nymphs, and powerful divinities in residence. The presence of all these in Laṅkā is, of course, the result of Rāvaṇa’s regime of theft and terror. As Vedānta Deśika reminds us, Rāvaṇa brutally kidnapped Sitā and other goddesses (*HSVD 2.1, 2, 4, 6*), whereas the wishing trees, in whose fragrant juices Laṅkā is “immersed, top to bottom,” were “hailed away from heaven and transplanted, / without blinking an eye, by the gods themselves, / in their dread of the Demon” (*rakṣobhūtaiḥ svayam animiṣair āhrtasthāpitānāṃ mandārāṇāṃ madhuparimalair vāsitaṃ maulidaghnaḥ; HSVD 1.59*). Note that these trees’ juices were already mentioned in Kālidāsa’s poem as the source of Alakā’s fragrant winds and savory wines (*MS 62, 66*), and it is thus not surprising that they, along with other divine assets of the northern city, reappear in a new form in Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s poem:

*yasyām tattannidhiparicayāṃreḍitaśrivilāsās
tyāgaślāghāṃ suraviṭapino dūram udyāpayantaḥ |
dātāro na kvacidapi janā yācitāraṃ labhante
citraṃ yat tat sakalabhaḡavān ādimo bhikṣur āste || (HSVBB 70)*
There is no wealth they don’t already know,
those living replicas of Fortune, who eclipse by far

44. Vedānta Deśika not only crafts his description of Laṅkā after that of Kālidāsa’s Alakā but also explicitly compares Laṅkā’s captive goddesses’ “raids on the heart” to the gander’s “Heart Lake home” in Alakā (*HSVD 2.1*) and makes a reference to the presence of the *puṣpavimāna*, parked next to Rāvaṇa’s palace (*HSVD 2.6*).

the fame that wishing trees in heaven
 have amassed through charity:
 Why, givers in this town can nowhere even find a taker!
 And yet, amazingly, the god of everything
 is a fellow citizen,
 the world's number-one beggar.

The wealth of Alakā is unimaginable—it hosts “living replicas of Fortune,” or of Śrī, another name for Sītā—and inexhaustible, like the wishing trees in heaven, or, indeed, like Laṅkā. But unlike the southern twin city from the sister poem, into whose soil the wishing trees were involuntarily transported so that Rāvaṇa alone enjoy their fruits and into whose realm Śrī was abducted as his personal prize, here the emphasis is on the voluntary presence of assets (as we have already seen in the case of the elephants that hold the earth) and, even more, on sharing the wealth. Indeed, Alakā's charity is so intense that it has reached its limits, so that givers abound, but takers are nowhere to be found. Clinching this paradoxical description of sharing as amassing and of plenty as paucity, the poet concludes by referring to the city's highest-ranking divinity. It turns out that its greatest asset is none other than the freely roaming mendicant, Śiva, “the world's number-one beggar.”

Again, this paradoxical and humorous statement, like many of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's truly innovative lines, stems from something analogous to sedimentation in the age-old genre of courier poetry. Vedānta Deśika has modeled his description of Laṅkā on that of Kālidāsa's portrayal of Alakā, and Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa deliberately reemploys elements from his predecessor's description of Rāvaṇa's glassy citadel when he returns to depict Alakā. The result is an amazing increase in density, both spatial and temporal, a phenomenon the poet himself thematizes. Consider, in this connection, the following verse, in which the yakṣa directs the gander to his own private garden:

sīmā tattadvīṭipijānuṣām sampadām ārtavinām
yogyā bhūmir malayamarutām ālayaḥ śītalimnām |
gañjāsālā madhupasudrśām kelisaudham pikānām
udyānam me tava nayanayor utsavam tatra kuryāt || (HSVBB 83)
 It's the zenith of arboreal riches—
 on every tree at every season;
 a fitting place for the southern breezes,
 and home to cool ones;
 a treasury of beautiful bees,
 and a ballroom for partying cuckoos;
 Just wait until your two eyes feast
 on my garden.

The opening line of this verse describes the garden's wealth in terms of what seems to be a constant fruition of a vast variety of trees (note the repeated use of the reduplicated pronoun *tattad-* to create a sense of a complete set), normally yielding their fruits each in a different season. Perhaps I am reading too much into the adjective *ārtavinām*, modifying the arboreal “riches” (*sampadām*) and literally meaning “of the seasons.” But one has to recall that speaking of Rāvaṇa's Aśoka grove, where Sītā was held in the sister poem, Vedānta Deśika explicitly stated that “all six seasons work / round the clock, tending the trees / in his garden” (*nityodārām ṛtubhir akhilair niṣkuṭe vṛkṣavāṭim; HSVD 2.7*), and that in a verse of Kālidāsa's *MS* that the great Āndhra-based commentator Mallinātha believed to be inauthentic but on

which he nonetheless proceeded to comment, Alakā's trees and lotus ponds were said to be in constant blossom (*pādapā nityapuṣpāḥ . . . nityapadmā nalinyah*).⁴⁵ One also has to keep in mind that heroes of messenger poems often depict their hometowns as experiencing time in a uniquely holistic manner, in contrast to their own devastatingly fragmented notion of temporality, and that the yakṣa in our poem does not differ from his predecessors in this respect.⁴⁶ In addition to this temporal constancy, augmented, as we have seen, by intense intertextual resonances, the poet also depicts Alakā as embodying a strange spatial simultaneity. This northernmost city is somehow also “a fitting place for the southern breezes” that blow from Mount Malaya in the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, just as it is a home for local cool winds. In other words, Alakā is home to cool air currents from every end of the world, just as its gardens are home to “every tree,” and as its lake holds submerged the elephants from all corners of the compass. This amazing density is further augmented in the second half of the verse by the description of the garden as teeming with melodious bees and cuckoos, already familiar from prior descriptions of Alakā.⁴⁷ And it is this density or depth—the fact that each part of the garden is made of other gardens from other time zones, and that each word is made from other words from other poems—that makes it a feast (*utsava*) for the onlooker's eyes.⁴⁸

7. REIMAGINING IMAGINATION

The density only increases when Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's yakṣa turns to describe his beloved and entrusts the gander with a message for her. Here, in the most delicate and heightened part of any courier poem, the work's engagement with both its primary intertexts is intensified, with images and verbatim quotes being piled up to the point of dizzying anyone who has read them:

lekhām indor iva dinamukhe dīnatām aśnuvānām
bhagnopaghnām iva navalatām chāyayā mucyamānām |
meghāpāye saritam iva tām bibhratīm ekaveṇīm
dr̥ṣṭvā yāvad bhavasi karuṇāśokayor ekapātram || (HSVBB 101)

Like the crescent moon at the crack of dawn,

mired in misery;

like a tender vine on a broken branch,

renouncing her brilliance;

and like a rivulet whose cloud has left,

reduced to one plait.

As soon as you see her, you'll be filled with one blend:

compassion with anguish.

This richly alliterative verse is so profuse with bits from its intertexts that it is hard to know where to begin. Vedānta Deśika's description of Sītā with its long chain of similes is particularly dominant here, even though the emphasis is no longer on the beloved's being

45. The verse, found immediately after 2.2 (p. 78 of the 1959 Chaukhambā of the *Meghadūta* with Mallinātha's commentary), also includes references to the constant presence of bees and birds and to the fact that the moon is always full at night (*nityajyotsnāḥ . . . pradoṣāḥ*). Since Mallinātha lived sometime in the fourteenth century in the Deccan, it quite possible that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa was familiar with this and other *MS* verses of doubted authenticity as part of the large pool of courier poetry. In addition, many commentators on *MS* 65 explain that the six flowers it mentions represent the six seasons, concurrently present in Alakā (see, for example, Pūrṇasarasvatī, pp. 122–24 in Unni's edition).

46. See, for example, the echoing pair of *MS* 86 and *HSVD* 2.33 and Bronner and Shulman 2009: xxxi–xxxiii.

47. See, for example, the verse mentioned in n. 45 above.

48. For discussions of spatial and temporal depth in the *HSVD*, see Bronner and Shulman 2006: 16–22 and Bronner and Shulman 2009: xxiii–xl.

ridiculously out of place (“Like a burst of pure moonlight / in the dog-eater’s hut”; *śuddhām indoḥ śvapacabhavane kaumudīm viśphurantīm*; HSVD 2.13) and in great danger (“like a doe within reach of a tiger”; *vyāghropetām iva mṛgavadhūm*; HSVD 2.14), and Kālidāsa’s imagery and language are also never far behind. Thus the comparison of the beloved to a tender vine whose supporting branch has been broken and whose brilliance is receding (*bhagnopagnām iva navalatām chāyayā mucyamānām*) combines two very similarly worded images in the parallel portion of Vedānta Deśika’s poem, where Sītā is described as a flower tossed to the mud (*pañkāśliṣṭām iva bisalatām*, HSVD 2.14) and her arm-vines as losing their luster (*latābhiḥ . . . chāyayā kiñcid ūnām*, HSVD 2.21). The image of the lonely beloved as a fragile sliver of the moon (*lekhām indor iva dinamukhe dinatām aśnuvānām*) likewise appears twice in the parallel section of the sister poem, once in the context of surrounding clouds (*meghacchannām iva śaśikalām*; HSVD 2.14) and once, as here, at dawn (*sandhyārāgavyatikaravatīm candralekhām ivānyām*; HSVD 2.19), but it also harks back to Kālidāsa’s portrayal of the yakṣa’s beloved in the relevant portion of the mother poem (*indor dainyam . . . bibharti*, MS 81; *prācīmūle tanum iva kalāmātraśeṣām himāmśoḥ*, MS 86). The pregnant phrase “the cloud has left” (*meghāpāye*) is lifted verbatim from Vedānta Deśika’s work, although it is originally found in an entirely different context, wherein the gander is asked to start its journey now that the monsoon is over and “the clouds are history” (another dig at Kālidāsa’s MS),⁴⁹ while the image of the beloved in a single braid and the comparison between the braid and a river (*saritam iva tām bibhartīm ekaveṇīm*) are signature Kālidāsa (*ādye baddhā virahadvase yā śikhā dāma hitvā . . . ekaveṇīm*, MS 88; *veṇībhūtapratanusalilā tām atītasya sindhuḥ*, MS 29).⁵⁰

Even more important, both intertexts contain what seems to have become a standard component of courier poetry: a reference to the compassion that the messenger will feel on seeing the miserable addressee. Kālidāsa’s yakṣa predicts that the sight of his beloved will not leave the cloud dry-eyed (*tvām apy asraṃ navajalamayaṃ mocayiṣyaty avaśyam*) and points out, in one of his typically pregnant general statements (*arthāntaranyāsas*), that someone who has a soft (or moist) inner soul (*ārdrāntarātmā*) is naturally prone to compassion (*karuṇāvṛttiḥ*; MS 90). Vedānta Deśika’s Rāma, in turn, foresees an uncontrollable flood of sorrow for his gander and backs the prediction with a generalization of his own:

*dr̥ṣṭvā tasyās tvam apy karuṇām tādr̥ṣīm tām avasthām
śakṣyasy antaḥ svayam upanataṃ śokavegaṃ na soḍhum |
kravyādānām daśavadanavat kvāpi jātāv ajātāḥ
nālambante katham iva dayāṃ nirmalatvopapannāḥ || (HSVD 2.24)*

Seeing her in that heartbreaking state, you too
will not be able to hold back a surge of sorrow
swelling up in your pure heart. It would take a ten-faced
Rāvaṇa, who feeds on flesh, not to feel
a pinch of pity.

We can clearly see in these verses the building blocks that Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa uses to create the much more condensed line ending the stanza given earlier: “As soon as you see her, you’ll be filled with one blend: / compassion with anguish.” Both “compassion” (*karuṇā*)

49. HSVD 1.10. See Bronner and Shulman 2009: xxv–xxvi for a discussion of this verse and the significance of this phrase.

50. The idea is that the beloved’s single braid can be untied only by her returning lover; the river, for its part, is reduced to a tiny plate in the absence of its lover, the cloud, and grows wider when the latter returns to fill it again with fresh showers. In Vedānta Deśika’s poem, however, Sītā wears her locks disheveled (HSVD 2.18). For the connection between hairstyle and the state of being away from one’s man, see Hildebeitel 1980.

and “anguish” (*śoka*) are taken straight from his predecessors’ relevant verses (Kālidāsa uses *śoka* in this context, and Vedānta Deśika employs both), although here—perhaps not inappropriately, given the sort of textual appropriation in which he is engaged—the emphasis is on combining and containing the two rather than on swelling and gushing. Indeed, despite the fact that the elements making this final line are so familiar, their blending has a strangely novel ring. This is primarily because of the added meaning that the two emotion names convey when they are juxtaposed in a single compound, in a way that immediately calls to mind the theory of aesthetic response (*rasa*). According to the reigning strand of this theory, the basic emotion of anguish (*śoka*), once experienced in a play or a poem, is transformed in the sensitive observer or reader into the purely pleasurable, aestheticized emotion of compassion (*karuṇā*). But interestingly, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s yakṣa predicts that his gander will experience both at once (*bhavaṣi karuṇāśokayor ekapātram*, literally, “become a single receptacle of both compassion and anguish”). Both the simultaneity of response and the order in which they are mentioned in Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s verse suggest a residue of anguish even in the supposedly rapturous aesthetic experience of compassion and thus call to mind a nascent view that challenges *rasa* theory in its classical form and holds that the experience of the nonpleasurable *rasas* is not completely free of displeasure.⁵¹

What is true of this verse is also true of this entire section of the poem: despite, or perhaps thanks to, its extremely dense intertextuality—the fact that this section actually consists of bits and pieces of its main prior texts—it yields a new statement about the state of mind of lovers and readers, if not about human psychology more generally. In particular, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa uses the verses describing and addressing the beloved—the “inner sanctum” of his poem—to present a polyphonic vision of the mind and a much more nuanced view of the powers of imagination than those seen in earlier works in the genre. Recall, in this context, that Kālidāsa’s yakṣa dwells at some length on his and his partner’s frustrating attempts somehow to summon each other through various imaginative or artistic means. Typically, it is the constant flow of tears, a symptom of the harsh reality, that prevents one lover from painting the other’s image on canvas, playing the other’s song on the lute, or falling asleep and dreaming of the other.⁵² The fault seems to lie not in the imaginative moments or creative states of consciousness (*saṃkalpa*, usually in the plural), however tenuous and fleeting, but in the tyrannical regime of fate, the real culprit in Kālidāsa’s poem.⁵³ Kālidāsa does recognize that, from an external point of view, the reality of dreams may be questionable, just as is, say, the reality of a cloud as a messenger. But his entire poem hinges on the voluntary suspension of such realizations in favor of complete empathy with the far richer and in that sense truer internal world of the lover, and a reader who fails to adopt this powerful, creative empathy—and the tradition seems to have had its share of such skeptical readers—fails to understand his poem.⁵⁴ As for Vedānta Deśika’s Rāma, although he is working with the same materials and blaming fate for his separation from Sītā, he is even more positive in his appraisal of the imaginative and meditative capacities than Kālidāsa’s yakṣa. Thus he

51. On this nascent view, see Tubb and Bronner 2008: 624–27.

52. *MS* 82, 102 (painting); 83 (playing the lute and singing); 87 (attempting to fall asleep).

53. Fate is always harsh (*vidhinā vairinā*; *MS* 99) or cruel (*krūrah . . . kṛtāntah*; *MS* 102). Imagination and dreaming, however, have promise, and at one point the yakṣa warns the cloud not to wake his partner at night, in case she has “somehow found me in her sleep” (*praṇayini mayi svapnalabdhe kathamcit*; *MS* 94).

54. See the *Kāvyaḷaṃkāra* of Bhāmaha 1.42–44 for a nonsympathetic response to the whole idea of messenger poems that perhaps includes a grudging acceptance of Kālidāsa’s cloud messenger. For the more empathic reader that the poem itself envisions, see *MS* 103, where the goddesses of the forest are described shedding tears at the sight of the yakṣa hugging the air while uniting with his beloved in his dream.

describes Sītā as actually holding him in her mind through yogic concentration and contemplation and states that he, too, can join her in his mind, so that the two of them actually overcome fate and attain a union that is just as real as, if not far more real than, any coming together. Given the divinity of Vedānta Deśika's characters, there is an important religious message here about the ability of uniting with god by means of the believers' mentation.⁵⁵

Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa, by contrast, offers a more complicated model of the mind and a more detailed and mixed appraisal of its various capacities. Particularly striking is the negative value placed on the mental and imaginative capacities, which are presented in his poem not as potent, albeit temporary, solutions to the problem of separation but also as painful, counterproductive, and even dangerous processes that can make it worse. Consider, in this context, the yakṣa's following description of his beloved:

*sā [many]ta kṣaṇam iva dinam kalpavad vāsateyīm
kuryād bodhād api bahumataṃ cetanāvaiparityam |
candrālokād api viśarasam candanād apy alātam
mandaspandād api ca maru[taḥ kalpaye]d vajrapātam || (HSVBB 97)*

A second seems like a day to her,
a night like an aeon.⁵⁶
She prefers insentience to mindfulness,
poison to moonlight,
coal to sandalwood balsam,
and she'd rather be hit by a hurricane
than be touched by the soft flutter
of the breeze.

The idea that time is experienced as endless by the separated lover is familiar to readers of both Kālidāsa and Vedānta Deśika,⁵⁷ although again, the old materials are presented in a new form. Here the experience of time is taken as a sign of the harmful state of mind of the beloved and the dangerous way she cognizes reality (*manyeta*, if this reading is correct). Likewise, although there is nothing new in the idea that lonely lovers are particularly vulnerable to soft and pleasant substances such as moonlight, sandalwood balsam, and the fragrant breeze, this is tied in the *HSVBB* to the imaginative faculty (again, assuming the correctness of the reading *kalpayet*, which nicely echoes *kalpavad* in the first line). But what is most striking and new about this verse is that this dark view of the mind is taken to its only logical conclusion in the beloved's wish to renounce it altogether and opt for insentience (*cetanāvaiparityam*).

The yakṣa's negative views of the mind in general and its imaginative capacities in particular are corroborated by his own experience, which he describes in his message:

*saṃkalpaughair manasi bahudhā bhidyamāne niśāyām |
nairantaryād api nayanayor muñcator aśruvarṣam ||
magnā kiṃ syām iti kila dhīyā tatra tatsannikarṣān
nidrā dūribhavati kimuta svapnasaṃdarśanāni || (HSVBB 116)*

At night, a deluge of imagination
shatters my mind to pieces,
and my eyes pour down a nonstop

55. See, in particular, *HSVD* 2.22–23 for a description of Sītā's meditative powers, and 2.40, where Rāma speaks of both of them as meeting and sharing a single bed.

56. Note the syntactic reversal in translating *kṣaṇam iva dinam* as "a second seemed like a day" instead of "the day was but a moment." I believe the poet placed *kṣaṇam* first for metrical rather than syntactic reasons.

57. See my discussion in section 6 for examples.

torrent of tears.
 “I better not drown”
 is what Sleep must be thinking
 as she keeps away from me,
 to say nothing of visions in dreams.

As in previous courier poems, the speaker, always in endless tears, finds it hard to fall asleep and dream of the beloved. But in this case imagination is not only the victim but also the main culprit, since it is a “deluge of imagination” (*saṃkalpaughaiḥ*) that “shatters [his] mind to pieces,” thereby causing a “nonstop torrent of tears.” Indeed, if in past poems, and especially in Vedānta Deśika’s, the mental capacities of the lovers played an important role in keeping the mind a focused and integrated unit, here they cause a complete and painful disintegration, a point that is highlighted by the conceit of sleep as an autonomous individual, sensing the dangers inherent in the fragmented subject and fleeing from him, along with “visions in dreams.”

The problem, then, is not that imagination is ineffective or useless, but rather that its effect is not entirely positive and is potentially threatening. This point is powerfully brought home in the message’s climactic description, directly engaging the statements about imagination found in its primary intertexts. In Kālidāsa’s poem there is the yakṣa’s beautiful description of himself as entering his beloved “body into body / the lean into the lean” (*aṅgenāṅgaṃ tanu ca tanunā*), but only from afar (*dūravartī*), “in his imagination, / while hostile fate blocks his path” (*saṃkalpais tais viśati vidhinā vairiṇā ruddhamārgaḥ*; *MS* 99). Then there is Vedānta Deśika’s emphatically optimistic statement about the powers of the mind: “Our bodies touch / in the southern wind. / Our eyes meet / in the moon. / . . . However far away / fate has taken you from me, / I still find my way / into you” (*dehasparśaṃ malayapavane dṛṣṭisambhedam indau . . . dūrībhūtāṃ sutanu vidhinā tvām ahaṃ nirviśāmi*; *HSVD* 2.40).⁵⁸ To these and other related verses in these two intertexts, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s yakṣa answers by providing the following description of his dream once he finally succeeds in falling asleep:

svapne labdhāṃ kathamapi samāśliṣya sānandabāṣpaṃ
[tvā]m utkaṅṭhāḅglapitavapuṣaṃ yāvad āmantrayāmi |
mīthyā nedaṃ punar iti mayā tatkṣaṇaṃ cintyamāne
tāvad daivaṃ vighaṭayati nau tūrṇam utpādya bodham || (HSVBB 117)

In my dream I find,
 can’t say how,
 and embrace,
 tears of joy in my eyes,
 you, who are frail from longing.
 But no sooner do I call your name,
 thinking, just then,
 “This can’t be untrue,
 not again,”
 than fate quickly wakes me
 and does us apart.

What strikes me most about this masterful verse is the reflexive and meandering way in which the yakṣa relates his dream experience. The attainment in the dream—that it is the beloved who is attained is still not mentioned—is the first thing he reports, as if accomplish-

58. See Bronner and Shulman 2009: xxxiii–xxxv for a discussion and full translation of these two verses.

ing it is easy, although this is immediately followed by the reflective adverb *kathamapi* (can't say how), suggesting the great difficulty inherent in this inner act.⁵⁹ Then follows *samāśliṣya* (literally, "having embraced"), and it may be significant that this gerund signifying the physical union is divided between the two sides of the *yati* caesura.⁶⁰ The act of embracing is followed by another adverb, *sānandabāṣpam* (with tears of joy), telling of the yakṣa's jubilant emotional state during this dreamed embrace, and for once it seems that imagination is capable of bringing about something other than tears of sorrow. Then the reader discovers the object of the yakṣa's embrace: "you" (*tvām*), who is immediately modified as "frail from longing" (*utkaṅṭhāglapitavapuṣam*). This modification portrays the dream union in realistic terms, since the yakṣa meets his beloved as she is in the here-and-now of the poem, not in some past or future state. But it also serves to introduce separation into this dreamed union and to contrast the two lovers: he is finding and embracing her, shedding tears of joy, while she is still experiencing separation from him.⁶¹ Apparently she has not yet recognized his presence, which suggests that their union is still not complete. He has to call her (*āmantrayāmi*), and at this point a suspenseful gap is opened by the use of the relative *yāvad* (no sooner), whose correlative *tāvad* (than) is more than a line away. Embedded in this gap we find a recorded piece of the yakṣa's conflicted consciousness, reflecting (*cintyamāne*) on his situation "just then" (*tatkaṣaṇam*). Ostensibly stating his confidence in the reality of the experience, the negative phrasing "this can't be untrue" (*mithyā nedam*) and the powerful presence of the word *punar* ("again") point to a dramatic realization that this union is indeed unreal, as were numerous similar experiences in the past.⁶² This, then, leads to the yakṣa's swift and cruel wakeup by fate, only to find that he is alone again.

Note how, in this detailed exploration of the self, the dream is experienced as both tangibly real and palpably unreal, joyous and bitterly painful, and therefore enabling a union while exacerbating the sense of separation. Seemingly, the second in each of these pairs sequentially follows the first, but in fact, they not only follow one another repeatedly, as part of the roller coaster of endless imaginations, but are somehow experienced simultaneously or mutually inseparably, just like *karuṇā* and *śoka*. This simultaneity is indicated by the zigzag progression of the reported dream and by the residual awareness of the reality of separation within the dreamed union itself.

What we have here, then, is a new and complex thematization of imagination, just shortly before the period when, as David Shulman shows in a pathbreaking book, this faculty is becoming the topic of heightened attention as part of a new theorization of the mind and the self in South India. For an in-depth study of imagination as it is now reimaged across texts and media in the region, the reader is referred to Shulman's book.⁶³ Here I wish to point out only that the imaginative and the intertextual processes seem inseparable in Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's poem. This is partly because, as we have seen throughout, novelty in his text—and this is true also of the new notion of imagination—becomes manifest only through his dense engagement with the situations, materials, and vocabulary of the intertexts. But

59. This very adverb already appears in the verse where Kālidāsa's yakṣa reports on his dream union with his beloved (*MS* 103). See also the synonym *kathamcit* when the beloved is dreaming of him in *MS* 94.

60. This is a rather rare phenomenon. In the entire poem, consisting of 484 metrical quarters (121 verses), I was able to locate only two other instances (*HSVBB* 61c, 99d) where a word is divided in the middle by the *yati* caesura.

61. In Kālidāsa's poem, by contrast, when the yakṣa describes his imagined union with the beloved, their symmetrical emotional state is described by the phrase "tears into flowing tears" (*sārenāsradravam*; *MS* 99).

62. Another possibility is to take *punar* as contrastive ("but," "however"), turning this thought fragment into a rhetorical question: "but isn't it false?" I am grateful to one of my anonymous readers for this suggestion.

63. Shulman 2012.

another reason for the link between the imaginative and the intertextual is suggested in the unfortunately incomplete verse that immediately follows the one translated above, where the yakṣa concludes that being able to imagine beyond the present moment, as painful as this may be, is also key to one's survival:

*kiṃ vā kuryāṃ kati nu divasāñ jīvitaṃ dhārayeyaṃ
pāraṃ kiṃ syād virahajaladher ity alam te vikalpaḥ |
ā samprāpter janakatanayā bhartur ālambya dhairyayaṃ
dīnā rakṣobhavanavasatau . . . || (HSVBB 2.118)*

What else can I do? I have to stay alive
just a few more days.

Is there a shore beyond this sea of separation?

You just have to imagine.⁶⁴

All the way up to his coming, Sītā held on
to the grit of her husband, miserable though she was,
in the monster's den . . .

The verse breaks off just before the last *yati* caesura, and it is a pity that we do not know what else the yakṣa had to say about Sītā's mindset throughout her imprisonment by Rāvaṇa. But it seems significant that he alludes to it and to the subject matter of his sister poem precisely at the point at which he asks his beloved to keep imagining and believing.⁶⁵ Indeed, it is not just Vedānta Deśika's poem that is being evoked here, but also Kālidāsa's classic, where the Rāma and Sītā theme is constantly in the background (as commentators roughly contemporaneous with Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa were busy demonstrating in detail),⁶⁶ if not the entire pool of courier poetry. Imagination will take you across the ocean, but this leap also seems to depend, paradoxically, on its great depths. Seeing beyond the moment is veering into other texts.

8. THE MESSAGE OF COURIER POETRY: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Why are there so many courier poems? Scholars have all too easily explained this question away by dismissing the extremely prolific genre as "imitations" of Kālidāsa. Given this perceived pervasive unoriginality, all that most Indologists felt a need to do was to document the existence and extent of the corpus (and that, too, in a very partial manner) and comment how this or that poet, while "too often imitating Kālidāsa, sometimes even slavishly . . . occasionally shows traces of natural poetic grace."⁶⁷ But even if we set aside, for the

64. I understand *alam te vikalpaḥ* to mean that the imagination (*vikalpaḥ*) is potent or powerful enough (*alam*) for the task of seeing beyond the ocean of separation. A very different interpretation is that he is telling her: "enough" (*alam*) with such anxious thoughts (*vikalpaḥ*)," although for this to be the meaning, the instrumental (*vikalpena*) is more natural. It is unfortunate that no commentary exists to offer some help on this and other interpretative questions.

65. The most direct echo here is of *HSVD* 2.46, where, after having promised her that he will soon cross the ocean, kill Rāvaṇa, and take her home (2.43–44), Rāma asks Sītā to hang on by thinking of precedents such as those of Śacī, Indra's wife, and Pārvatī, Śiva's wife. The *HSVBB* offers a few other interesting references to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, although those are mostly apropos of localities relevant to the Rāma story, Ayodhyā in particular (1.48–50).

66. See Unni 1987: 11 for Dakṣiṇāvartanātha and Mallinātha on this topic.

67. There are quite a few articles dedicated merely to recording "imitations" of Kālidāsa, from Aufrecht 1900 and his discussion of "Nachahmungen" all the way to the present. The quote is from Barnett's discussion of Dhōyī (Barnett 1927: 349). Even Unni, who has contributed more to the study of courier poetry than anyone else, comments: "Later writers who tried their hands at this mode of composition only emulated Kālidāsa and did not present any originality. Naturally later sandeśakāvya did not get sufficient attention from lovers of literature" (Unni 1985: 32).

moment, the question of originality, my discussion of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's poem at the very least indicates that the position assigned to Kālidāsa's *MS* as the genre's sole inspiration can no longer be accepted. As I have shown, Vedānta Deśika's *Haṃsasandeśa* is just as important an intertext for Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's namesake work as Kālidāsa's *MS*, and to fail to understand the close textual engagement of this work with its southern sibling is to fail to understand the poem.

Indeed, to believe that Kālidāsa's *MS* alone reigned in the kingdom of courier poetry is to assume that nothing ever really changed in this genre in the millennium and a half after its composition. But the fact is that things changed and changed quite quickly. The *HSVBB* could not have been composed much later than thirty years after the death of Vedānta Deśika around 1369. This suggests that within decades of its composition the *HSVD* became a highly influential work, a poem that an aspiring courier poet like Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa could not have ignored and one with which he could trust his readers to be familiar. Nor should we presume that the influence of the *HSVD* was limited to the Tamil region and the lower Deccan in the period immediately after its composition. The broader impact of Vedānta Deśika's poem needs far more research, but his *Haṃsasandeśa* seems to have enjoyed lasting popularity well beyond its area of composition because it left a traceable mark on much later courier poems composed in areas as far away as Kerala and Bengal.⁶⁸ Moreover, it is likely that the *HSVD* was not alone, and that there were other influential courier poems in other regions. This seems particularly true of the *Śukasandeśa*, probably a rough contemporary of the *HSVD*. As Unni has already demonstrated, the *Śukasandeśa* was quoted soon after its creation by the Malayalam poem *Uṇṇunilisandeśa* and other works in both Sanskrit and Malayalam.⁶⁹

Another poem worth mentioning in this context is another *Haṃsasandeśa* by the Kerala-based author Pūrṇasarasvatī (hereafter *HSPS*). This particularly beautiful and totally unstudied work, also probably of the same period as the *HSVD*,⁷⁰ is engaged in a project closely akin to that of its contemporary namesake: both redeploy the basic Kālidāsan template for religious voyages that involve different aspects of god Viṣṇu (the *HSVD* has Rāma send a message to Sītā in Laṅkā, whereas the *HSPS* has Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā receive one from a woman follower who is madly in love with him); both place their senders in the south and celebrate the main centers of worship in the Tamil country (although the route in the *HSPS* has an important Kerala component, whereas the *HSVD* dismisses Kerala as unworthy of visiting).⁷¹ There thus seems to be some connection between the two works, and there are also occasional close echoes between the *HSPS* and the *HSVBB* (although nothing like the

68. Examples include several *Haṃsasandeśas* from Kerala that are surveyed in Unni 1985, and especially the two anonymous poems mentioned on pp. 24–25 and 30–31 (Unni himself speculates about the influence of Vedānta Deśika on the latter work, composed in the nineteenth century). Then there is the *Bhramaradūtakāvya* by the seventeenth-century Bengali poet Rudra Nyāyapañcānana. This poem, like the *HSVD*, has Rāma send a messenger, this time a bee, to Sītā, just after the return of Hanumān from Laṅkā. From the very first verse, the poem betrays close familiarity with Vedānta Deśika's. Compare, for example, the last half of the first verse of both poems: *pratyāvṛttiṃ manasi vimṛśann āñjaneyasya ninye dīrghākālpaḥ [*paṃ?] kathamapi tadā dīrghadīrghāny ahāni ||, Bhramaradūtakāvya* 1.1; and *pratyāyāte pavanatanaye niścītārthaḥ sa kāmī kalpākārāṃ kathamapi niśāṃ āvibhātam viśeḥ ||, HSVD* 1.1. It should also be noted that both poems have their messenger sent to a similar set of sites en route to Laṅkā, as I mention below.

69. See, for example, the comments in Unni 1985: 6 (on the influence of this poem on the *Uṇṇunilisandeśa*), 13 (with regard to Udaya's *Mayūrasandeśa*), and 16 (apropos of Vāsudeva's *Bhṛṅgasandeśa*).

70. For Pūrṇasarasvatī's date and works, see Unni 1987: 66–80.

71. For Kerala, compare *HSPS* (25–33) with *HSVD* 1.18 (*sahyāsanno 'py anatisubhaḡaḡ paścimo nityavarṣaḡ*). Obviously, the *HSPS* ultimately goes beyond the south and culminates in the Mathurā area (*HSPS* 38f.).

systematic engagement of the latter with the *HSVD*), so that all three gander poems are indeed birds of a feather.⁷²

The picture that emerges from even the minimal available data suggests a pattern far more complex than the simplistic notion of endless and purposeless “imitations” of a single source. Between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries there seems to have been a sudden surge of engagement with Kālidāsa’s *MS* throughout South Asia in a variety of languages and in regions as remote from one another as Gujarat in the northeast and Sri Lanka in the far south.⁷³ This textual engagement, although by no means uniform, seems to be part of regional efforts to envision and create local maps—political, cultural, linguistic, religious, and sectarian—and thus is often done in conversation not just with the classical Kālidāsan template but also with local traditions and texts.⁷⁴ Moreover, at least in some areas this new engagement quickly resulted in highly influential courier poems such as the *HSVD*, poems that later works, produced in increasing quantities, engaged in complex, multiparty conversations.

To say more about the unfolding of courier poetry in the absence of additional research and data would be irresponsible, and one can only hope that the long and multifaceted history of this genre will become the subject of renewed scholarly attention.⁷⁵ But I believe that my study of the *HSVBB* allows me to posit tentative observations about the possibilities for innovation in this genre and the way these involve intertextuality. To begin with, I argue that it is precisely through repetition—or what others have called “imitation”—that courier poetry managed to reinvent itself so successfully. Of course, there are many ways to repeat even a single work such as Kālidāsa’s *MS*. It is well known, for example, that poets have reused truncated verses from it while topping them off with new endings, composed sequels (and perhaps also prequels) to the yakṣa’s story, produced Kālidāsa-like verses and inserted them into manuscripts of the *MS*, and, of course, composed additional courier poems that replicate key aspects of Kālidāsa’s original.⁷⁶ The point is that these and other modes of replication are by definition innovative insofar as they engage or even activate an older work. As the famous “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” by Borges serves to remind us, even to reproduce the original text verbatim is to create a new text.⁷⁷

72. I will mention here three echoes between the *HSVBB* and the *HSPS* that seem to me particularly significant. When describing the river Tāmraparṇī, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa mentions the aromas from the seashore cardamom fields (*velām elāvanaparicitām*; *HSVBB* 8). While this feature is not found in the *HSVD*, it agrees almost verbatim with Pūrṇasarasvatī’s description of Kerala (*velām elāvanasurabhitām*; *HSPS* 32). The second example has to do with Śrīraṅgam, which both poems describe as the eternal and best abode of Viṣṇu. Compare *HSVBB* 21 (. . . *maṅgalaṃ raṅgaṃ agre | yad vaikuṅṭhād api bahumataṃ śāśvataṃ dhāma śaureḥ*) with *HSPS* 14 (*kalpāpāye ’py avigatalayam . . . śrīraṅgākhyam puram atha viśer dhāma bhaumaṃ tridhāmaṇaḥ |*). Finally, note that the speaker in Pūrṇasarasvatī’s poem also refers to the gander’s role as Brahma’s vehicle (*aupavāhya*; *HSPS* 6) when requesting its service as a courier.

73. For Gujarat, see the *Samdeśa Rāsaka* of Abdul Rahman. (I am grateful to Andrew Ollett for our conversations on this poem and for helping acquire a copy of its edition.) As for the Sri Lankan materials, see Godakumbura 2010: 183–208.

74. Hopkins 2004; Bronner and Shulman 2006; Pieris 2010.

75. This is the goal of an international group of scholars led by Charles Hallisey that gathered for the first time at a preconference during the 40th Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, October 2011. I have benefited greatly from the group’s initial conversation and would like to thank all the participants for the extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also want to thank Professor Hallisey for inviting me to take part in a workshop on Sinhala *sandēśa* poetry that took place in Colombo in August 2012, from which I learned a great deal.

76. For a brief discussion of these methods, see De 1957: 6–8, 23–24.

77. Rodriguez Monegal and Reid 1981.

More specifically, my reading of the *Haṃsasandeśas* by Vedānta Deśika and by Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa points to a whole range of intertextual strategies that infuse this line of courier poetry with innovativeness. These include, first, elements of parody (as we have seen in the naming of the yakṣa in the *HSVBB*), digs directed at the intertext (the most obvious of which is the repeated put-down of clouds in both gander poems), and a great variety of inversions: temporal, spatial, and other (for instance, the reversal of roles between clouds and ganders). These are probably the simplest and most basic modes of intertextual practices that the two poems employ, but even they allow for great complexity as soon as more than one text is brought into the conversation. For example, we have seen that the *HSVBB* undoes some of the *HSVD*'s inversions of the *MS* or redeploys a gibe such as "the clouds are history" (*meghāpāye*) in an entirely different context, thereby taking the sting out of it. A closely related phenomenon is the way the response of text 3 to text 2 packs a punch by invoking text 1. Think, for instance, of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's pointed responses to Vedānta Deśika's snide remarks about Śiva in Kāñcī and Kālahastī as charged by the precedent of Kālidāsa's *MS*, where Śiva and not Viṣṇu is the object of devotion. Such un-inversions and redeployments are thus packed with added layers of reference and reflexivity.

This brings us to the questions of depth and density, which David Shulman and I have already raised in connection with the *HSVD*.⁷⁸ It is easiest to see the potential for growing density in this line of texts in relation to space. If the *HSVD* superimposes Kālidāsa's map of the entire Sanskrit world on the Tamil country, now envisioned as a sacred land whose waterways and mountains embody the sacred rivers and summits of the north with a dominant Vaiṣṇava inflection, Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's poem recalibrates this map by imbuing it with the Śaiva sacred nodes as well. This is particularly apparent in his long and loving description of Kāñcī, now saturated by gods and holy rivers flowing from a great variety of localities and texts. Kāñcī now contains pieces of Ujjayinī and Alakā as described in the *MS*, images and sites redeployed from the *HSVD* (itself responding to Kālidāsa's descriptions), an additional Ganges, Śiva temples, and various local elements coming from Śaiva purāṇas, to mention but a few aspects of this town as it is now portrayed. There seems to be no end to the potential of this sort of thickening on the local level, and it is therefore no surprise to find that in the seventeenth-century *Bhramaradūtakāvya* by Rudra Nyāyapañcānana, the description of Kāñcī that Rāma gives his courier, a bee in this case, extends to no less than thirty-six verses that are divided into two long chunks, one charting Śiva's Kāñcī and the other portraying the Vaiṣṇava map of the same town.⁷⁹ And although the texts mentioned above have a clear investment in Tamil space and its centers, a similar kind of spatial density is also found at the edges, in the description of the fabulous far-off lands that are the destination of the couriers in question. Vedānta Deśika portrays his Laṅkā as embodying Kālidāsa's Alakā, and Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa packs this already-dense description of Laṅkā into a reenvisioned Alakā, which never before seemed so lush and ready to demonstrate its literary assets.

This growing density need not be conceived merely in spatial terms. In fact, the above examples can be seen as instances of engagement with what the poets have identified as the basic units of the courier template. Some of these are geocultural, such as a central city (Ujjayinī, Kāñcī) and the far-off destination (Alakā, Laṅkā). But other units can be seen to stand in relation to a poem's narrative and thematic structure: the description of the miserable

78. Bronner and Shulman 2006: 16–27; 2009: xxiii–xl.

79. *Bhramaradūtakāvya* 41–76. Śiva's Kāñcī is described in 46–67, and Viṣṇukāñcī, so named by the poet (68), in 68–76. In fact, Kāñcī seems to become a fixture of courier poetry produced in the south early on. It is thus significant that Pūrṇasarasvatī locates his message-sender in this sacred Tamil city (*HSPS* 71).

lover, his choice of a courier (a point on which the *HSVBB* is loudly silent), the appeal to the courier's ancestry, the question of who will keep the courier company along the way, or the final dangerous strait he has to cross before reaching his destination. Such units can be highly specific, say, a reference to the compassion the courier will feel on seeing the beloved, or to a private memory that only the two lovers share. But other units are more comprehensive, as in the case of the meditation on the nature of imagination pervading the last part of all three poems I have discussed.

There are two crucial aspects that we need to realize about these units. First, it is precisely through repeated takes on such elements—plot junctures, themes, images, and, in some cases, specific geographic sites—that poets in this genre innovate, sometimes radically, as we have seen in Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa's rethinking of imagination. In other words, innovation in this genre is the direct result of repeatedly revisiting the same building blocks, which can be done in a variety of ways, from silence to assigning them new "values," rearranging, relocating, and mixing together different units, so that often the denser a unit becomes with remnants of its precedents, the more novel it is. Second, it is precisely these repeated engagements with the units that make the "original" template what it is. In other words, courier poets do not respond to a clearly defined genre; rather, they define it through their repeated takes, especially in important regional poems such as the *HSVD* and the *Śukasandeśa*. Thus it is no wonder that some of commentators on the *MS* also composed their own courier poems (Pūrṇasarasvatī), and that the first systematic definition of the units that make up the genre by a critic such as Dharmagupta begins to appear in commentaries not on Kālidāsa's *MS* itself but on a poem such as the *Śukasandeśa*. Of course, as Unni has already noted, Dharmagupta's division of the *Śukasandeśa* into twelve parts is constantly mindful of Kālidāsa's *MS*,⁸⁰ which only proves the point that part of what is new about later courier poems is the way they enable us to read the highly influential *MS* anew. I can say that my own experience reading the *HSVBB* was of numerous small discoveries about the *MS*, a poem I have been reading and rereading for more than twenty years, and to some extent about the *HSVD* as well.⁸¹

The preceding statements by no means exhaust the possible range of explanations for the extreme productivity of the courier genre across regions and languages and its resilience well into the colonial and postcolonial eras. I offer here only very tentative hypotheses that require further corroboration while leaving out a variety of issues that seem to me crucial to the larger phenomenon. These include the reconceptualization of space in courier poetry, especially the move toward a greater specificity of place and human characters in some of the later poems; the engagement with modes of courier poetry that come from outside the Sanskrit tradition, as in the case of Tamil *tūtu* poems⁸² or Persian models; and the great variety found among subgenres in different linguistic media. The vastness and vitality of this phenomenon, which make the study of this genre so difficult and necessitate a concentrated and collaborative effort, are also its most intriguing aspects. Why did authors keep coming back to the theme of sending a courier while situating their heroes and heroines in locations and situations that seem to have nothing to do with one another? This question must remain open for now, although if the preceding analysis of the *HSVBB* proves anything, it is that the answer partly lies in the question, in the sense that the long-standing experimentation with

80. See n. 7 above.

81. I am grateful to David Shulman for his help in clarifying my thoughts on this point.

82. Again, the poem by Pūrṇasarasvatī is of particular interest in this connection. A Sanskrit work that adheres to the Kālidāsan template in many aspects from meter to structure, the *HSPS* also taps into the Tamil *tūtu* tradition by presenting its heroine as falling in love with Kṛṣṇa while he was out on a procession (*HSPS* 72); the work also occasionally deploys Dravidian rhyming patterns (see, for example, *HSPS* 81).

this module has, by virtue of its accumulated results, empowered it and made it a particularly potent tool for further experiments.

REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Primary Sources

- Bhramaradūtakāvya* of Rudra Nyāyapañcānana. Edited by Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri. Saṃskṛta-Dūta-Kāvya-Saṃgraha Series 1. Calcutta: Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri, 1940.
- Dayāśataka* of Vedānta Deśika. Edited with Tamil Commentary by Nallūr Śrīnivāsa Rāghavācārya Svāmī. Madras: Visisthadvaita Pracharini Sabha, 1970.
- Haṃsasandeśa* of Pūrṇasarasvatī. Edited by K. Sāmbaśiva Śāstrī. Trivandrum Sanskrit Series 129. Trivandrum: Government Press, 1937.
- Haṃsasandeśa [Haṃsadūta]* of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa. Edited by Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri. Saṃskṛta-Dūta-Kāvya-Saṃgraha Series 4. Calcutta: Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri, 1941.
- Haṃsasandeśa* of Vedānta Deśika. Edited with Commentary by Swetaranyam Narayana Sastry; English Notes and Translation by S. Narayana Iyengar. Madras: Ramasawmy Sastrulu and Sons, 1955.
- HSPS*. See *Haṃsasandeśa* of Pūrṇasarasvatī.
- HSVBB*. See *Haṃsasandeśa [Haṃsadūta]* of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa.
- HSVD*. See *Haṃsasandeśa* of Vedānta Deśika.
- Kāvyaśaṅkārā* of Bhāmaha. Edited by Batuk Nāth Śarmā and Baldev Upādhyāya. Kāśī Sanskrit Series 61, 1928. Rpt. Varanasi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Sansthan, 1981.
- Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa. Edited by S. K. De. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1957.
- Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa with the Commentary of Vallabhadeva. Edited by E. Hultzsch. London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1911.
- Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa with the *Saiñjivani* (by Mallinātha), *Cāritravārdhini*, *Bhāvabodhini*, and *Saudāmanī* Commentaries. Edited by Brahmaśaṅkara Śāstī. Kashi Sanskrit Series 88. Varanasi: Chaukhambā, 1959.
- Meghasandeśa* of Kālidāsa with the Commentaries *Pradīpa* of Dakṣiṇāvartanātha, *Vidyullatā* of Pūrṇasarasvatī, and *Sumanoramaṇī* of Parameśvara. Edited by N. P. Unni. Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1987.
- MS*. See *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa. Edited by S. K. De.
- Samdeśa Rāsaka* of Abdul Rahman. Edited by Śrī Jina Vijaya Muni and Harivallabh Bhayani. Singhi Jain Series 22. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1945.
- Śukasandeśa* of Lakṣmīdāsa. Edited by N. P. Unni. Delhi: NAG Publishers, 1985.
- Vemabhūpālacarita* of Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa. Edited by J. K. Balasubrahmanyam. Srirangam: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1910.

Secondary Sources

- Aufrecht, Theodor. 1900. Nachahmungen des Meghadūta. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 54: 616–20.
- Barnett, L. D. 1927. Review of Pavanadūtam of Dhoyī (edited by Chintaharan Chakravarti). *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2: 349–50.
- Bronner, Yigal. 2010. *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- Bronner, Yigal, and David Shulman. 2006. A Cloud Turned Goose: Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium. *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43: 1–30.
- . 2009. “Self-Surrender” “Peace” “Compassion” and “The Mission of the Goose”: Poems and Prayers from South India by Appayya Dikṣita, Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita and Vedānta Deśika. New York: New York Univ. Press and JJC.
- Chakravarti, Chintaharan. 1927. Origin and Development of Dūtakāvya Literature in Sanskrit. *Indian Historical Quarterly* 3: 273–97.

- De, S. K. 1957. See *Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa in Primary Sources.
- Godakumbura, C. E. 2010. *Sinhalese Literature*, 3rd ed. Battaramula: Department of Cultural Affairs.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. 1980. Draupadī's Hair. *Puruṣārtha* 5: 179–214.
- Hopkins, Steven. 2004. Lovers, Messengers, and Beloved Landscapes: *Sandeśakāvya* in Comparative Perspective. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 8: 29–55.
- Pieris, Anoma. Avian Geographies: An Inquiry into Nationalist Consciousness in Medieval Lanka. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 33: 336–62.
- Radhakrishnan, E. P. 1936. Meghadūta and Its Imitations. *Journal of Oriental Research Madras* 10: 267–74.
- . 1939. Some More Dūtakāvyas in Sanskrit. *Journal of Oriental Research Madras* 13: 23–28.
- Rodriguez Monegal, Emir, and Alastair Reid, eds. 1981. *Borges, a Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*. New York: Dutton.
- Shulman, David. 1980. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- . 2012. *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Somasekhara Sarma, M. 1948. *History of the Reddy Kingdoms (Circa 1325 A.D., to circa 1448 A.D.)*. Waltair: Andhra University.
- Sriramamurti, P. 1972. *Contribution of Andhra to Sanskrit Literature*. Waltair: Andhra University.
- Tubb, Gary, and Yigal Bronner. 2008. Vastutas Tu: Methodology and the New School of Sanskrit Poetics. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36: 619–32.
- Unni, P. N. 1985. See *Śukasandeśa* of Lakṣmīdāsa in Primary Sources.
- . 1987. See *Meghasandeśa* of Kālidāsa in Primary Sources.