Kālidāsa’s *Shakuntala* and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*: The Child as Redeemer

**Abstract**

This paper attempts to demonstrate that, though the three-member family (father, mother and child) is celebrated in *Shakuntala* and *The Winter’s Tale*, the child is the most important of the three members in the two plays in terms of plot and theme. The quest of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, the hero and the heroine, is on a deeper level for a child. The king needs an heir to the throne, and so do his subjects for a stable order. Similarly, in *The Winter’s Tale*, the stability of Leontes’ kingdom rests on Perdita, his daughter, after Prince Mamillius dies. In *Shakuntala*, the birth of a son with regal insignia on the palm of his hand not only leads to the reunion of the separated couple, Dushyanta and Shakuntala, but also confers social approval on their match, restores his mother’s reputation, and concludes the play with subdued happiness. Notably, both Perdita and Bharata are discovered and recognized first; and then their respective mothers are “resurrected.” As his name “All-Tamer (Sarva-damana)” indicates, he symbolizes the maturation of his parents’ irrepressible passion into deep and steady conjugal love. The son, born to a king but raised in a hermitage, also resolves another thematic conflict in the play – country versus court. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita also brings together the court and the country in a similar fashion: born to royal parents but raised by a shepherd, she too harmonizes this opposition between town and country. This is how the child serves as a redeemer in these plays.
Kālidāsa’s *Shakuntala* and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*: The Child as Redeemer

This essay argues that although both *Shakuntala* (a play written by Kalidasa in Sanskrit in India about 1700 or 1800 years ago) and *The Winter’s Tale* (a Shakespearean romance first performed around 1610/1611) celebrate the full family – father, mother, and child – the child occupies a central place in the two plays’ narrative and thematic architectures. The discussion of the centrality of the child is here conducted in two parts: Part I addresses the child’s centrality in terms of Plot, and Part II illustrates the child’s significance in terms of Theme.

The earlier scholarship on *Shakuntala* only hints at the child’s importance (Tagore, Gerow, Dev). Several of these critics suggest that the culture of the time did not consider a family complete without a child. But they do not delve into the significance of the child in much depth. Gerow and Tagore only suggest that the child complements the married couple and makes the family whole. This essay, however, goes further and argues that Prince Bharata and Princess Perdita “save” their mothers Shakuntala and Hermione, respectively and “redeem” their fathers Dushyanta and Leontes by serving as mediators in the process of the expiation of their sins and their reunion with their wives. Thapar’s principal interest is to track the transformations of the *Shakuntala* myth through its various versions or renditions from the time of the Mahabharata epic. She is not much interested in the function or the thematic symbolism of the child. In addition, the mainstream critical stance on *Shakuntala* (scholarly as well as popular) from Sir William Jones through Arthur Ryder and in modern blogs such as iloveindia or sacred-texts.com has largely been to treat the play as a tale of love and romance. Treating it simply as a love story has resulted in the all-encompassing role of the child being hitherto largely untold, unanalyzed, and unacknowledged.
Apropos the earlier scholarship, one may grant that in *Shakuntala* the love between King Dushyanta and the heroine Shakuntala is a major concern and that the child Sarva-damana (meaning “all-tamer” alias Bharata, meaning “provider and protector”) appears on the stage for only a short period. It is also granted that he does not figure in the title of the play. However, the son’s crucial role is of the essence because he will restore order and harmony in his parents’ private lives and serve as the pillar of his father’s kingdom in his role as the future reigning monarch. This is also the case in *The Winter’s Tale*: Perdita appears for a short time, relatively speaking, on the stage. When the adult characters (Leontes, Hermione and Polixenes in *The Winter’s Tale*, and Dushyanta and Shakuntala in *Shakuntala*) reunite and occupy the center stage, Bharata (the prince) and Perdita (the princess) remain silent. However, along with all the characters in the plays, the audiences of these two plays know that these children are the future monarchs, the mainstays of the respective kingdoms. As Gowda suggests, both Bharata and Perdita will “launch a new order” (42). Just as the birth of Sarva-damana in *Shakuntala* ensures the continuity of Dushyanta’s Puru dynasty, so in *The Winter’s Tale* does Perdita ensure the continuity of the kingdom of Leontes after the death of Mamillius.

The premise, the foundational theory, behind the critical interpretations in this essay is the notion that the reader and the writer interactively negotiate the meaning of the text. Such interpretations are constructed through the interaction of the formalist concept (in which meaning lies within the text) with the idealist and reader-response theories (in which meaning lies within the reader). Literary critics may thus use their imaginative and interpretative powers for significant insights while all the time fixing their gaze on the text itself (Nystrand). Limaye employs this amalgamated theory of the author-reader transaction in his essay on *The Little Clay*
Cart to disclose several nuances of the heroine’s character and to contribute a fresh meaning to the storm scene in Act V.

One may, however, rightfully be concerned that in literary criticism the scholarship of “discovery” could go too far and overstate its claims. The scholar needs to be on guard for potential excesses. Therefore, this essay posits one among multiple valid constructions of meaning, one reading or interpretation out of many legitimized by the text, namely, the centrality of the child. Another possible reading could be atonement through penance: In The Winter’s Tale, the remorseful Leontes resists the pleas of some of his courtiers for him to remarry and beget an heir, even though the need for one is pressing. Similarly, Dushyanta forbids any observances of the spring festival. In fact, a large portion of Act VI in Shakuntala is taken up by his repentance, his self-blame, and his nostalgic memories of his courtship of Shakuntala. These acts of expiation by the two kings are necessary for them to deserve forgiveness and reunion with their respective wives (after all, they both had cast serious aspersions on the fidelity of their wives). Such atonement is also essential for the creation of audience empathy.

In several ways, Bharata and Perdita serve as archetypes of “savior” in these plays. It cannot however be overemphasized that the terms “savior” and “redeemer” are here used metaphorically. According to Christian theology, Jesus provides the bridge between heaven and earth, a liaison between God and disobedient human beings. In the popular Christmas carol, “What Child is This,” the baby Jesus, “the King of Kings [who] salvation brings,” is attributed a miraculous redeeming power. Some relevant stories in this context narrate a visit of Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem in the company of his parents when he as a young teenager stays behind and expounds upon the Scriptures and an incident when the child Jesus preaches to the birds and beasts.
In India, the Upanishadic tradition and etymology explain the word “putra” (meaning a son) as one who saves his parents from one type of hell (*punaat traayate iti putram*). Similarly, the Hindu tradition regards a monarch as akin to Vishnu, the second in the Hindu Trinity—Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh. Vishnu’s role is that of protector and sustainer. Bharata, as his name suggests (one who sustains), will fulfill that role as nourisher of his subjects, an unmatched warrior-king (*chakravartin*), and so will Perdita reign as a strong, sagacious queen.

A few more examples of a child hero from Hindu mythology can be cited. Krishna, one of the Hindu gods, even as a little boy, performs miracles: he dances on the hood of an evil serpent and forces it to regurgitate its venom. Another story narrates how Krishna’s foster mother sees the entire universe in his mouth as she inspects him for stolen lumps of butter. The concept of the miraculous child as savior or redeemer thus occurs in both Hindu and Christian cultures. Besides, in monarchical polities, the prince or the princess as a legitimate heir to the throne can generally be looked upon as “savior” functionally and figuratively, in a strictly secular sense, as in these two plays. Some of the redeemer or savior attributes discussed at length in “The Savior Archetype” apply to Bharata and Perdita: a prophetic announcement or foretelling of the birth of the savior, the savior’s royal descent, his or her endangered infancy and non-regal childhood in an ordinary household, and his/her role as intermediary and authenticator of the disgraced and discarded (Gier 257-62). Despite all this elaboration of the “Savior” archetype, the reader should keep in mind (particularly in light of the fact that *The Winter’s Tale* is set in pre-Christian pagan times) that, in this essay, the term “savior” or “redeemer” is employed symbolically.

At this point, a question like “Why compare these two plays?” might need an answer. What makes a comparison between *Shakuntala* and *The Winter’s Tale* compelling or “natural” is
that both plays share a common structure—union, separation, and reunion. Both of them also employ a tension-creating dramatic device of the slandered and rejected lawful wife, a strong desire for a legitimate heir to the throne, and a resolution of thematic conflicts such as the one between court and country through the child figures of Bharata and Perdita. This comparison is all the more inviting in light of the wide cross-cultural gap in many other respects and the huge geographic distance between the settings of *Shakuntala* and *The Winter’s Tale*. The striking similarities lend themselves to further exploration and analysis.

**Part I: The Child’s Centrality to the Narrative Structure**

In *Shakuntala*, the plot comes to a virtual end when King Dushyanta attains his goal by discovering his son Bharata. Similarly, one can make a case that the discovery of Perdita as the princess alive essentially concludes *The Winter’s Tale*. These are the points at which the quest of the heroes Dushyanta and Leontes, “childless” kings, comes to an end. Bharata is recognized first as King Dushyanta’s son; his identity is established first and only then is his mother inferred to be the king’s repudiated wife. Perdita is recognized or “found” first (though the event is only narrated and not staged) as Leontes’ daughter and then her mother Hermione is resurrected. This sequence is noteworthy because the children’s discovery prior to their mothers’ recognition is crucial from a narrative perspective.

It would appear on the first reading of *Shakuntala* that the dominant action of the play is King Dushyanta’s romantic involvement with the pastoral heroine Shakuntala. But there is reason to propose that, below the surface, the king is primarily in search of a biological heir to continue his royal line because he already has a few wives and a harem to boot. One may grant that, in the earlier part of *Shakuntala*, King Dushyanta’s quest for a child may be largely
subconscious; it however becomes manifest in two key episodes. A fast undertaken by the Queen Mother to insure oblations (ritual offerings of food and water) for Dushyantha, in case he dies childless, is the first explicit reference to the childless condition of the king (Ryder 20).\(^5\)

According to Hindu belief, a man can get oblations after his death only if he has a surviving son to perform the requisite rites. The fasting ritual is observed to achieve generational continuity. In *The Winter’s Tale* Polixenes, the friend of Leontes, sees his copy in his son Florizel. A Shakespeare critic observes, “in the succession of generations, Polixenes could see the succession of moments that comprise his own tale” (Reeder 351). Dushyantha will similarly see in Bharata a copy of his own (Ryder 77). If the king had a son at the time, it would not have been necessary for the Queen Mother to observe the vow of fasting to counteract the loss of the obligatory offerings which must necessarily result from her son’s childlessness.

The second incident in *Shakuntala* that emphasizes the king’s lack of a male child occurs in Act VI, in which the occasion of the death of a childless, wealthy merchant reminds Dushyantha of his identical situation. One cannot miss Dushyantha’s immediate identification with the childless merchant. According to the law, the merchant’s property must go to the crown unless an heir can be found. Dushyantha may also worry that in the absence of an heir to his kingdom it could fall prey to other designing monarchs. He reflects, “Thus, when issue fails, wealth passes . . . to a stranger. When I die it will be so with the glory of Puru’s line” (Ryder 67). He further ponders, “The ancestors of Dushyantha are in a doubtful case”:

> For I am childless, and they do not know,
>
> When I am gone, what child of theirs will bring
>
> The scriptural oblation; and their tears
>
> Already mingle with my offering. (68) [Act VI, Stanza 25]
It is Dushyanta’s ultimate goal to alleviate his own fears as well as those of his ancestors at the thought of the kingdom being passed on at his death to someone outside the royal family.

The birth and later the recognition of the boy Bharata allow Dushyanta to achieve this goal while these occurrences also resolve many other obstacles in the plot of the play. The secret marriage of Dushyanta and Shakuntala can be regarded as an obstacle or problem for the two protagonists because it sets in motion a chain of unfortunate events whose adverse effects are annulled only when the king discovers his son at the hermitage of Maricha in the last act. Thus, the child is the solution, the righter of wrongs, the deliverer of his parents.

The marriage of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, though lawful, flouts both decorum and social convention and, as such, is perceived as “wrong” by the traditionalists in the play such as Shakuntala’s foster mother Gautami, Kanva’s pupils and the visitor to the hermitage Durvasas. The wedding without witnesses becomes possible because the father is away and the mother figure Gautami is kept in the dark about the affair. One might raise an objection to labeling the secret wedding as “wrong” on the grounds that Shakuntala’s father, after returning home and learning about the marriage, does not blame Shakuntala but blesses the match instead. Therefore, one could argue that the father’s approval can be attributed to his indulgence toward his daughter. However, it must be noted that when the pupils of Kanva’s hermitage travel to the king’s palace to bring Shakuntala to him, one of the pupils, Sharngarava, the “voice of society,” admonishes her for her aggressiveness in marrying a total stranger without the knowledge of the elders (“Thus does unbridled levity burn”). He further chastises her:

Be slow to love, but yet more slow
With secret mate;
With those whose hearts we do not know,
Love turns to hate. (52-3) [Act V, Stanza 24]

Again, Sharngarava berates her furiously, “You self-willed girl! Do you dare show independence?” (53). Gautami, who chaperones Shakuntala, also disapproves of both Dushyanta and Shakuntala for having married clandestinely:

Did she with father speak or mother?

Did you engage her friends in speech?

Your faith was plighted each to other;

Let each be faithful now to each. (50) [Act V, Stanza 16]

Like Sharngarava’s admonition, the curse of Durvasas can be interpreted as strong social condemnation of their willful act, potentially destructive of the authority of the elders and, by extension, of society. The curse of Durvasas affects adversely both the hero and the heroine: Dushyanta loses the memory of Shakuntala and of his having married her. Later, when the curse is lifted and his memory returns, he suffers the pangs of separation from her. Shakuntala, on her part, directly suffers the humiliation of being called a crafty woman of ill repute and of being rejected by her husband. When the family is reunited, what serves to rescue Shakuntala’s reputation and “legitimacy” is the existence of the son, who bears the signs of royalty on the palm of his hand.

As mentioned before, though Dushyanta appears to be out on a sexual adventure, seeking a paramour, his subconscious quest is for a son. In the course of the play, two of his wives, Hansavati and Vasumati, are referred to, and the possibility of more wives is hinted at (17, 21, 28, and 68). There is no lack of wife per se for the hero; it is rather the lack of a male issue, and of a wife as the bearer of that issue. Kalidasa thus seems to suggest (particularly in the second half of the play) that the union of the husband and the wife becomes complete by the addition of
the son, who provides the third essential member to the family unit. Similar to Dushyanta’s quest for a child, Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* also seeks a child and heir. At the opening of the play, however, Leontes in fact already has a son—the young prince Mamillius—who is the pride of Leontes’ existence. The opening scenes of the play reveal the king’s strong affection for his son, as well as foreshadowing the prince’s death and the king’s imminent childless state.

The strong foreshadowing begins in the very first act as Archidamus and Camillo discuss Prince Mamillius, a “gentleman of the greatest promise” (1.1.34-6). They also reflect on how the future hopes of the kingdom rest on him. Archidamus concludes the scene with this prophetic conjecture; “If the King had no son, they [the subjects] would desire to live on crutches till he had one” (1.1.43-5). When Leontes begins suspecting that his wife and his friend are having an affair, Antigonus warns the jealous king and the foreshadowing continues:

\[
\text{Be certain what you do, sir, lest your justice} \\
\text{Prove violence, in the which three great ones suffer,} \\
\text{Yourself, your queen, your son.” (2.1.127-9)}
\]

Highlighted in this warning is the weakening of the triangular family which, when Mamillius dies, cannot be rebuilt until the recovery of the daughter Perdita. This is suggested by the divine prophecy in the play, the oracle at Delphi: “the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found” (3.2.133-5). Leontes’ jealous actions have driven him to a childless and hence an heirless state. It is Perdita who thus fills the space vacated by the death of Mamillius.

In Act V, Scene 1 of *The Winter’s Tale*, before the discovery of Perdita (and the “resurrection” of Hermione), Dion, one of the lords at the court of Leontes, gives a rejoinder to Paulina’s protest that the courtiers of Leontes want him to marry again. Dion attempts to persuade Paulina by explaining to her that if she continues advising Leontes not to re-marry and
beget an heir it will only mean she does not care about the well-being of the kingdom. He states his position emphatically:

If you would not so,

You pity not the state, nor the remembrance

Of his most sovereign name; consider little

What dangers, by his Highness’ fail of issue,

May drop upon his kingdom, and devour

Incertain lookers-on. (5.1.24-9)

To emphasize the importance of a lawful heir for the stability of a kingdom, one Shakespeare critic observes, “This mirroring of the father in the son provides the basis for the transmission of property, values, and the self” (Erickson 821). The audience of *The Winter’s Tale* would have already noted that, after the death of Mamillius, Perdita is the heir-apparent, that she is like the son that Leontes lost. Because the citizens of Sicilia instinctively know how important it is for the peace and stability of the kingdom to have a lawful succession to the throne, they are understandably relieved and joyful at the discovery and recognition of Perdita (5.2.20-9).

Similar to the foreshadowing in *The Winter’s Tale*, the coming of the royal prince Bharata is foreshadowed at the very beginning of *Shakuntala*. Soon after the king enters the hermitage and before he meets Shakuntala, he receives blessings from two ascetics: “May you beget a son to rule earth and heaven,” literally, one who bears imperial signs on his palm (Ryder 4). In Act IV, a heavenly voice refers to Shakuntala as bearing the seed of her husband “for earth’s prosperity” (37). Soon after, two hermit women [one, in the Sanskrit text followed here] bless Shakuntala, “My dear, may you become the mother of a hero” (38). In the same act,
Shakuntala’s foster father Kanva hopes, “And may you bear a kingly son / Like Puru, who shall rule the earth” (39).

Since, however, the audience is aware that King Dushyanta is childless and that on a deeper level his quest is for an heir, the story cannot be complete until all these prophesies are fulfilled and the child’s identity as the king’s son is firmly established. This is how the son is crucial for the dénouement of the play. The much-anticipated arrival of the prince is a dominant motif in *Shakuntala*. It is immaterial that his presence on the stage is quite brief. This is also true of Perdita in *The Winter’s Tale*, whose presence on the stage is relatively short (though longer than Sarva-damana’s, who after all is just a child while Perdita is a young woman of sixteen).

Amiya Dev corroborates the significance of the child both in *Shakuntala* and *The Winter’s Tale* when he observes that Sarva-damana and Perdita “are integral to the plot . . . And since the children here are royal heirs . . . *the kingdom can revive*” (173-4). (Emphasis added). It may be no exaggeration to suggest that the development of love between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is simply a “prologue” 6 to the birth and the recovery of their son Sarva-damana.

Perdita’s importance to the dénouement of *The Winter’s Tale* is similarly remarkable, as observed by Pafford, “. . . in the final scene she [Hermione] speaks only to her [Perdita]” but not to her husband Leontes. Besides “the only reason she gives to explain why she has remained apart from her husband is that the Oracle gave hope that Perdita lived” (lxxiv). One notes the significance of act five, scene three, lines 120-128 in this context and realizes that the inducement for Hermione even to say those few words was Paulina’s urging her to turn and notice that “Our Perdita is found” (5.3.121).

On this background, the movement towards the last narrative function, the King’s goal attainment, strikes one as engagingly dramatic: when Shakuntala presents herself before the king
and he repudiates her under the influence of the curse, she has no direct evidence to prove that she is his wife. She has lost the ring, and the son who is predicted to carry auspicious imperial signs on the palm of his hand is yet to be born. The curse of Durvasas, however, excuses the king’s conduct in the eyes of the audience because they see him as not responsible for the failure of his memory. The recovery of the ring lifts the curse of memory loss from Dushyanta, after which the separation from his wife and child sparks intense grief and suffering for him on the conscious level. Finally, when he chances upon a little boy in the final act and sees the insignia of royalty on his palm, he recognizes the child as his son and concludes the child’s mother to be his wife even before seeing her. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the arrival of Perdita with her lover Florizel to the court of her father Leontes sets the stage for her recognition. This is how the family unit, complete with offspring, is affirmed in these plays.

Both Dushyanta and Shakuntala seek the reward of progeny. He desires a son to continue the House of the Purus and to ensure uninterrupted oblations to his ancestors as enjoined by the Vedas. In addition, in the following stanza one notices a father’s tenderness and strong affection for his children:

They show their little buds of teeth
   In peals of causeless laughter;
They hide their trustful heads beneath
   Your heart. And stumbling after
Come sweet, unmeaning sounds that sing
   To you. The father warms
And loves the very dirt they bring
   Upon their little forms. (Ryder 76) [Act 7, Stanza 17]
Shakuntala’s desire for a son is more than a natural female impulse to have a child. In this case, her son saves her from calumny by bearing witness to her chastity because the imperial signs on his palm establish his identity as the king’s son and thereby his mother’s identity as the king’s wife. Dushyanta of course had accused Shakuntala (when she was brought to his palace while she was pregnant) of having stained her honor, of being a loose woman:

A stream that eats away the bank,

Grows foul, and undermines the tree.

So you would stain your honour, while

You plunge me into misery. (51) [Act 5, Stanza 21]

Perdita in The Winter’s Tale also “rescues” her mother; she is the reason why Hermione keeps living during her long exile. When Paulina signals Hermione to note that Perdita is alive and watching, the only person she speaks to about her hope is her daughter Perdita:

for thou shalt hear that I,

Knowing by Paulina that the Oracle

Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserv’d

Myself that I might see the issue. (5.3.125-8)

Hermione thus herself proclaims that Perdita has “preserv’d” or redeemed her. Similarly, Sarvadamana/Bharata keeps his mother Shakuntala alive during her exile, her six long years of darkness and despair. Otherwise, like Hermione, she also might have sought to end her life after Dushyanta repudiated her. At that time, she did invoke the earth to give her an opening, a grave (Ryder 54). It was this thread of hope, her son, who made her misery bearable for her. Anasuya says to her friend Shakuntala:
Even this female bird, endures a long, sorrowful, and lonely night away from her mate because of her hope (that she will be united with him in the morning). Thus, a thread of hope makes bearable even a heavy sorrow of separation. (Act 4, Stanza 16: the author’s translation)

Bharata is also thus the redeemer of his mother Shakuntala.

In the last act of *Shakuntala*, the emphasis is on the fulfillment of the hero’s motivated action (*phalagam*), but it is made amply clear that this fulfillment does not just consist of the reunion of the husband and the wife but the “acquisition” of progeny, of the destined heir to the throne. The recipients of these blessings include the king himself and his subjects because they too will benefit by the lawful heir assuming the administration of the realm, thus ensuring peace and order in the land. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the death of Mamillius deprives Leontes’ subjects of a future king. However, the discovery of Perdita enables them to have a rightful monarch. In *Shakuntala*, the sages have already prophesied the prosperous reign of Bharata and the welfare of the people under his rule. A call for help from Indra, the king of the gods (an external force), takes Dushyanta physically to the hermitage, where he finds his wife and son. But the real “force” that draws him to the hermitage is within him. After his process of penance and purification is complete, Dushyanta is spiritually ready and morally worthy to “find” and receive his family. Before this process was complete, no charioteer of Indra could have aided his reunion with Shakuntala and his gaining a son.

Similarly, Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* prepares himself to receive Perdita and Hermione through penance and purification. When he realizes what he has done when his son dies and after the presumed death of Hermione, his pangs of sorrow and remorse are immediate. He declares that his penance will be to daily “visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there / Shall be
my recreation” (3.2.236-8). Even after sixteen years, his intense grief is not alleviated. In the beginning of Act V, his courtiers advise him to leave his sorrow behind and seek a new wife, but Leontes refuses to be comforted:

Whilst I remember
Her and her virtues, I cannot forget
My blemishes in them, and so still think of
The wrong I did myself: which was so much,
That heirless it hath made my kingdom, and
Destroy’d the sweet’st companion that e’er man
Bred his hopes out of. (5.1.6-12)

Note, however, that the heirless state of the kingdom is here highlighted as one of the components of Leontes’ grief. In Dushyanta’s grief too, one detects a similar component of self-blame and remorse for “losing” his son:

Verily my lawful wife, the perpetuator
(or support) of my family, was abandoned
by me even though my own self had
been implanted in her, like a plot of
land with seed sown at the right season
and promising a golden harvest. (Kale 242; Act VI, Stanza 24)

Both the kings become acutely aware that, by repudiating their wives, they repudiated their heirs. But by going through intense sorrow and penance, both Leontes and Dushyanta have prepared themselves morally for the discovery of their progeny and the miracle of a reunion with their wives. Just as life becomes bearable for the mothers, Shakuntala and Hermione, because of
the discovery of Bharata and Perdita, similarly, life becomes worth living for the fathers Dushyanta and Leontes when the children are found. One might say that the fathers now can live with themselves, can make peace with themselves.

As mentioned above, a few scholars writing on Shakuntala do touch upon the theme of the child’s important role in the play. A Sanskrit scholar Gerow remarks, “the independent significance of the son [in Shakuntala] should not be underestimated . . . we may be dealing with a view that the love relationship is not itself validated or realized until its fruit has issued” (570). Although Bharata (Sarva-damana), the son of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, does not appear on the stage until the last act, he is an indispensable character due to his mediation between his parents. Furthermore, Dushyanta refers to Bharata as the support of his dynasty: “The hope of my race centers in him” (Ryder 82). Kashyapa (82-3) predicts his future greatness as the sole emperor of the world. The audience will recall Kanva’s earlier prophecies that Shakuntala will bring forth a son “as eastern skies / Bring forth the sun” (42-3). Kanva also calls him a “matchless warrior” [apratiratha], “who knows no fears” (43). In thematic significance, Bharata dominates most of Act VII. Rabindrananth Tagore, India’s most famous Nobel Prize winner for poetry, says, “There [in the celestial hermitage of Kashyapa/Maricha] a single boy fills the loving bosom of the entire forest-world; he absorbs all the liveliness of the trees, creepers, flowers, and foliage. The matrons of the hermitage, in their loving anxiety, are fully taken up with the unruly boy” (Ryder viii).

Although the mechanisms that realize the near-tragedy are different in Shakuntala and The Winter’s Tale, the steps toward the happy dénouement are identical. The mechanism in Shakuntala is Dushyanta’s loss of memory because of Durvasas’ curse; the mechanism in The Winter’s Tale is Leontes’ extreme fit of jealousy. In the former, it leads to the repudiation of Shakuntala and her untold misery; in the latter, it leads to the total isolation of Hermione and the
death of Mamillius, the young prince. In both the plays, the process of the “cleansing” of Dushyanta and Leontes occurs similarly: remorse, guilt, penance, and reconciliation or redemption. In both cases, the children play a crucial role in the “reconciliation” portions of *Shakuntala* and *The Winter’s Tale*. As mentioned above, Sarva-damana and Perdita are “found” first, and then are found the respective heroines—Shakuntala and Hermione.

Another significant piece of evidence involves the “testimony” of a gentleman named Dr. Simon Forman, who witnessed a performance of *The Winter’s Tale* at the Shakespearean theater, The Globe, on May 15, 1611. He does not mention the statue scene (Act 5, Scene 3). Therefore, “it has been thought by some that this happiest of endings represents a later alteration, that in Shakespeare’s original version Hermione, like her prototype in Greene [Greene’s *Pandosto*], actually died as reported in Act III, and that the final scene at first presented what is now only related, the identification of Perdita” (Maxwell 1336) [emphasis the author’s]. If that is the case, the identification of Perdita, like that of Bharata, was also most probably staged and, as such, it strengthens the point about the overwhelming importance of the two children in these plays. Moreover, the very discovery of these two children, Bharata and Perdita, is meant to be a witness, a proof, that the sinners have been granted a pardon.

**Part II: The Child’s Thematic Significance**

Bharata and Perdita are important not just for the plots of the plays but also for the themes of the plays. First is the theme of intergenerational continuity that runs through both *Shakuntala* and *The Winter’s Tale*. A reader is struck by the insistence on the imperative or necessity of progeny across cultures and time. Though the paucity of historical documents and even of archeological evidence characterizes ancient India, one notices that the concern for dynastic continuation has been uppermost in all times in the consciousness of the princely states
within India. One cannot help but notice that concern over the potential heirlessness of a reigning monarch is inherent to the hereditary monarchical system of polity. Producing a legitimate heir and thus ensuring dynastic continuity is a very important concern also in the *Mahabharata* narrative, the epic source of Kālidāsa’s *Shakuntala*. One of the important themes in a critical work entitled *Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories* addresses the issue of securing lawful lineage, producing direct descendents, for the heroes in various versions of the Shakuntala myth (Thapar). Johnson, another translator of *Shakuntala*, emphasizes a similar point:

Balance and resolution is only attained through the birth and recognition of a son and heir (Sarvadamana/Bharata), for a “householder” the purpose of kama. This guarantees the continuity of both order (dharma) and prosperity (artha), not just for the kingdom but for the entire world: Bharata will be cakravartin, a world emperor. The *Mahabharata* version of the story is dominated by this concern, and it is increasingly stressed by Kalidasa in the last two acts of the play. Sarvadamana’s recognition as the true heir legitimizes kama and reconciles it to dharma in both versions.

(xviii)

Readers may note that Kalidasa does not just retain this concern in his play but also invests the son with a narrative and thematic significance far beyond the intensity and human interest displayed in the *Mahabharata* epic.

It is interesting to note a similar concern about producing an heir in a kingdom thousands of miles away and in a much later time—in Shakespeare’s England. *The Winter’s Tale* reflects this concern in Leontes’ worry for a legitimate heir to the throne. For Shakespeare’s contemporaries, the memory of Elizabeth I leaving England heirless in 1603 was still fresh.
Indeed, Shakespeare’s “English” plays (based loosely on English history) often echo this anxiety about potential civil strife over the legitimacy of rival claimants to the throne. Several of Shakespeare’s sonnets harp on the theme of leaving an imprint, an heir, literally as well as figuratively. In fact, this concern runs throughout Renaissance literature, from Erasmus’ *Encomium Matrimonii* to Spenser’s *Epithalamion*. In *Shakuntala*, as mentioned above, the Queen Mother undertakes a vow of fasting to “facilitate,” to ensure, a son for King Dushyanta for the continuation of the royal line.

Along with this macro concern over heirlessness in both the plays, there is also a clear micro concern: *The Winter’s Tale* may be seen to reflect Shakespeare’s personal concern as he is getting old and worrying what will become of his property, given that his own son and heir, Hamnet, died a decade before, in 1596. As far as *Shakuntala* is concerned, Dushyanta’s worry also has a personal dimension, besides the larger dimension of the future of the state. After his death, if he dies son-less, he will have to go without the ritual oblations of food and water that are necessary for “sustenance” in the world of the spirits or manes, as will his ancestors (Ryder 68, Act VI, Stanza 25). Incidentally, Dushyanta’s individual fear regarding his “spiritual” future reverberates even today for a Hindu. The performance called *Shraaddha*, a ritual offering to one’s ancestors, occurs in every Hindu household each year.7

However, there is a clear danger in taking too far this idea of Shakespeare’s contemporaries worrying over a legitimate heir. By the time *The Winter’s Tale* was first produced (around 1610-1611), King James I had already been ruling both England and Scotland for eight years. The perceived threat of heirlessness had thus subsided. Besides, it has been known that a court performance of the play was given on the occasion of the wedding of James’ daughter Elizabeth on February 14, 1613 (Maxwell 1334). Moreover, Charles I, the successor to
James I, was born in 1600, more than a decade before the date of *The Winter’s Tale*. It would have been thus rather impolitic and in bad taste (to say the least) to harp too much on the topic of heirlessness.

The thematic richness of both plays also covers various oppositions: (1) country versus court (*The Winter’s Tale* certainly shares this theme with *Shakuntala*) and (2) passion versus restraint. There are subsidiary tensions within each pair: thus in *Shakuntala* under “country versus court” are such oppositions as nature versus nurture, naïveté or innocence versus sophistication or guile, and pious groves versus pleasure gardens. Within the “passion versus restraint” opposition, the reader will note the lust of unbridled youth against the ordered bond of family attachment. In *Shakuntala*, the opposition in both principal pairs is resolved or regularized by the mediation of the son whose qualities, combining the best of the two worlds, strike a rational balance. Though the second theme of *Shakuntala* does not have an exact parallel in *The Winter’s Tale*, it may be pointed out that Perdita also strikes a happy medium between the extremes of Leontes’ jealous rage and Hermione’s abnegation and self-effacement of sixteen years. In fact, Act IV, Scene iv of *The Winter’s Tale* bears testimony to the delicacy and charm as well as the self-respect and strength of purpose of Perdita’s character. Here is no angry outburst, just an assertive affirmation of her worth as an individual. For instance, after Polixenes leaves, threatening her, Perdita says:

I was not much afeared; for once or twice
I was about to speak and tell him plainly,
The selfsame sun that shines on his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike. (4.4.440-4)
Examining the first thematic tension, country versus court, one notes that Shakuntala, raised in the country in her foster father’s penance grove, is endowed with beauty, delicacy and virtue and is therefore compared favorably with the beauties of the court:

The city maids, for all their pains,

Seem not so sweet and good;

Our garden blossoms yield to these

Flower-children of the wood. (Ryder 6) [Act 1, Stanza 16]

The king, watching Shakuntala in a humble bark dress, exclaims that “the meanest vesture glows / On beauty that enchants” (7). Even the clown, who is partial to cities and the ladies of the court (17), admits that Shakuntala surpasses town ladies in beauty and natural charm. There is a suggestion in this compliment to Shakuntala of her ultimate triumph over courtly artifice or the triumph of innocence over urban snobbery. The truth of Shakuntala’s claim (that she is the king’s wife) is finally vindicated against the expediency of Dushyanta’s behavior. The pupils of Kanva, accompanying Shakuntala to the king’s court, also disparage city dwellers and hold up for admiration a life of contemplation in the country, in hermitages and woods:

Free from the world and all its ways,

I see them spending worldly days

As clean men view men smeared with oil,

As pure men, those whom passions soil,

As waking men view men asleep,

As free men, those in bondage deep. (48) [Act V, Stanza 11]

During an altercation with the king, Sharngarava (one of the companions of Shakuntala on her journey to the King’s palace) sarcastically taunts the king:
It would be monstrous to believe

A girl who never lies;

Trust those who study to deceive

And think it very wise. (53) [Act V, Stanza 25]

In *Shakuntala*, the innocence and artlessness of woodland life is thus held up for esteem and emulation vis-à-vis the craftiness and expediency of court life. Similarly, in *The Winter’s Tale*, the arbitrary and impulsive cruelty of Leontes is contrasted with Perdita’s measured behavior, with her optimistic, sunny and spring-like outlook on life.

When court life and forest life are represented to be in mutual tension, one expects a harmonizer. In *Shakuntala*, it is Bharata who resolves this first major tension in the play—the penance grove versus the city. He is raised in a hermitage on celestial hills, but he also wears on the palm of his hand the signs of imperial glory (Dushyanta notices them when he visits Maricha’s hermitage), symbolizing courtly sophistication, military might, and worldly power. He thus represents the two ways of life, since the gifts of both nature and nurture, of the hermitage and the palace are blended in him. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita, the condemned babe, is also raised in the country. She, too, was born a princess but raised by a shepherd, thus blending in herself the palace and the cottage. Polixenes observes that the shepherd girl, Perdita is “too noble for this place” (4.4.159).

The second thematic opposition in *Shakuntala* is sheer physical passion versus companionate conjugal love. The very first act presents King Dushyanta as swayed by lust as soon as he glimpses Shakuntala’s ravishing beauty:

Her arms are tender shoots; her lips

Are blossoms red and warm;
Bewitching youth begins to flower

In beauty on her form. (Ryder 7) [Act I, Stanza 19]

In another situation Dushyanta says that he cannot stop thinking of her:

It is my body leaves my love, not I;

My body moves away, but not my mind;

For back to her my struggling fancies fly

Like silken banners borne against the wind. (13) [Act I, Stanza 31]

The king at this stage is far from the steady flame of companionate love he comes to feel towards Shakuntala at the end of the play. At this stage, he wonders who the lucky one is that Providence has appointed to be the taster of Shakuntala’s beauty. Most of Act III is in fact a witness to the mounting passion of both Dushyanta and Shakuntala (22-33). The clown taunts the king saying that he has turned a pious grove into a pleasure garden (18). While taking leave of the king as Gautami comes on the scene, Shakuntala too gives him a veiled invitation for more secret enjoyment. She succumbs to the king’s seduction readily enough.

Both Dushyanta and Shakuntala neglect their duties under the intoxication of love. The clown, Dushyanta’s confidant, makes a reference to the king’s neglect of public duties which his absence from the capital necessarily entails (14), and so does the Chamberlain: The King “intermits / The daily audience, nor in judgment sits” (59). Dushyanta readily uses the clown to serve as his proxy at the palace (when the Queen Mother summons him for the “breaking of the fast”), so he can pursue his dalliance with Shakuntala. She in turn neglects her duties as a hostess and tragically fails to welcome Durvasas when he arrives at the hermitage as a “guest.” Given that hospitality toward a guest is a sacred duty of a Hindu, this omission by Shakuntala brings the curse of the irate hermit on her.
The king’s grief over Shakuntala after his separation from her cleanses his love of its baser element of lust and sublimes it gradually into a steady flame of chaste and companionate affection. Act VI reveals this progress of the king’s passion being purified as it passes through the furnace of remorse and self-blame for his unjust repudiation of a blameless wife:

Alas! My smitten heart, that once lay sleeping,

Heard in its dreams my fawn-eyed love’s laments,

And wakened now, awakens but to weeping,

To bitter grief, and tears of penitence. (60) [Act VI, Stanza 7]

He further confesses to the clown that he keeps thinking of Shakuntala’s pitiful state:

When I denied her, then she tried

To join her people. “Stay,” one cried,

Her father’s representative.

She stopped, she turned, she could but give

A tear-dimmed glance to heartless me—

That arrow burns me poisonously. (61) [Act VI, Stanza 9]

When his purification begins, Dushyanta willingly places his “friendly duty” to help the king of the gods over his private grief, when the latter’s charioteer Maatali comes with an assignment for him (Act VI). Barbara Stoler Miller expresses a similar sentiment: “He [Kalidasa] is not advocating unrestrained passion, but passion tempered by duty and duty brought alive by passion” (36). When Dushyanta accomplishes this balance, he is ready and deserving to “recognize” his son and his wife.

Mishrakeshi (named Sanumati in variant texts), a friend of Shakuntala’s mother, observing the fidelity of the king towards Shakuntala, takes a favorable view of him, and the
audience watching the scene through her eyes is meant to share her view. Since Dushyanta is responsible, though unwittingly, for the sad plight of Shakuntala and because principally it is his quest which provides the impetus or motive to the action of the play, his remorse is staged while Shakuntala’s hard penance is only suggested. Dushyanta’s grief and repentance need to be clear and palpable for the audiences of Shakuntala, so they may become readily empathetic toward him. Similarly, in The Winter’s Tale, the repentance of Leontes is displayed while Hermione’s suffering and her long exile from her husband and the palace occur behind the curtain, away from the gaze of the audience. As far as Shakuntala’s suffering and the purification of her youthful passion go, these can only be inferred by her appearance when the reunion of the family takes place in the hermitage of Marich. Dushyanta watches as Shakuntala enters the scene after being informed that her husband has arrived at the hermitage and has recognized Sarvadamana as his son. The king ponders:

The pale, worn face, the careless dress,

The single braid,

Show her still true, me pitiless,

The long vow paid. (79) [Act VII, Stanza 21]

In a similar vein, the passage of sixteen years is indicated by a reference to Hermione’s wrinkles, the toll on her face. Leontes reflects on her appearance when Paulina unveils her statue:

Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing

So aged as this seems. (5.3.28-9)

As noted above, The Winter’s Tale presents Leontes’ grief and penitence as still raw even after a gap of sixteen years: “It is as bitter / Upon thy [Paulina’s] tongue as in my thought” (5.1.18-19). When Florizel shows up at his court, his remorse swells up again:
You have a holy father,

A graceful gentleman; against whose person

(So sacred as it is) I have done sin,

For which, the heavens (taking angry note)

Have left me issueless . . .

. . . What might I have been,

Might I a son and daughter now have look’d on,

Such goodly things as you! (5.1.169-177)

How very visible and obvious do Leontes’ grief and wishful thinking become to the audience!

What their parents learn and achieve – balance and moderation -- through remorse and suffering, through penitence and penance, Sarva-damana (Bharata) and Perdita have innate in them; they will start with a fresh slate. Bharata is also a controller of the animals in the hermitage and, metaphorically, he controls the animal passions to which human beings are subject. His name at the hermitage, Sarva-damana, means “all-restraining.” He tames everybody including himself: “No wonder the hermits call you All-tamer” (Ryder 75). His control of the lion cub can also be figuratively interpreted as control of wildness in people. Bharata thus resolves the second major thematic tension in Shakuntala—unbridled passion versus ordered or restrained love. As aforementioned, while The Winter’s Tale exhibits the irrational jealousy of Leontes, Shakuntala delineates the unbridled sexual passion of the hero and the heroine. If the second thematic opposition is labeled as “excess versus moderation,” the children then definitely bring “redemption” to their parents in the form of moderation and harmony.
That Bharata and Perdita will be great monarchs is a given, considering that Kashyapa and Hermione invoke blessings for them. Kashyapa addresses Dushyanta, “know then that his [Bharata’s] courage will make him emperor” (Ryder 82). Kashyapa resumes his blessing:

Journeying over every sea,

His car will travel easily;

The seven isles of the earth

Will bow before his matchless worth;

Because wild beasts to him were tame,

All-tamer was his common name;

As Bharata he will be known,

For he will bear the world alone. (82-3) [Act VII, Stanza 33]

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione invokes the gods and entreats them for Perdita:

You gods, look down,

And from your sacred vials pour your graces

Upon my daughter’s head! (5.3.121-3)

The audience of *Shakuntala* knows that Kashyapa’s prophecy is bound to be fulfilled because he is a divine sage:

Sprung from the Creator’s children, do I see

Great Kashyapa and Mother Aditi [Kashyapa’s wife]. (Ryder 81) [Act VII, Stanza 27]

By this time, the audience has already noted that Kashyapa’s prediction about Prince Bharata bearing imperial marks on the palm of his hand has come true. In fact, Dushyanta is able to recognize his son precisely because of those imperial marks. Indeed, Bharata does prove to be a
matchless sovereign (*chakravartin*), something which *Shakuntala*’s audiences are likely to have known as a prevalent myth.

Similarly, in the eyes of the spectators of *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione may be invested with magical or supernatural powers of clairvoyance, especially when they see her statue move and even speak. Their awareness that she suffered sixteen years of penance and intense silent sorrow may just have reinforced their feeling of awe for her. Therefore, why wouldn’t Shakespeare’s contemporaries, like the citizens of Sicilia, greet enthusiastically the idea of Hermione’s daughter Perdita as an heir to the throne of Leontes? After all, like Shakespeare, his audiences too have witnessed the glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

Like Bharata in *Shakuntala*, who is a silent witness to the drama of the reunification of his parents but looms large in their consciousness and of the characters present on the stage as the hope of the royal line’s continuity, Perdita in *The Winter’s Tale* also silently watches the breathtaking scene of the “resurrection” of her mother. Here the children stand in the middle of their parents, literally as well as metaphorically, all poised and balanced between the lapses of their fathers (Leontes’ lapse of judgment and Dushyanta’s lapse of memory) and the total self-effacement of their mothers (Both Hermione and Shakuntala do not blame their husbands at the time of their reunions). During these scenes of the reunion of the two sets of parents, Dushyanta-Shakuntala and Leontes-Hermione, the parents’ own minds and hearts, the attention of all the other persons on the stage, and the intense interest of the respective audiences of the two plays are totally centered on Bharata and Perdita. They all know that the real heroes, the repairers of the parents’ lives, the “saviors” of them all, are the prince and the princess, the harbingers of well-being for the respective kingdoms of Dushyanta and Leontes.
Notes

Acknowledgments:

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance granted for this project by Prof. Craig Hemmens, former Director of the BSU Honors College. The author wishes to express his appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Richard Pompian, a retired professor from Boise State University, for looking over two drafts of this paper very critically and making numerous useful suggestions. The author also wants to thank Allison McLean, a former BSU Honors student, for doing bibliographic research. Thanks are due to Prof. Ross Burkhart, Prof. Matthew Hansen, and Ms. Elaine Watson all at Boise State University; Ms. Snehal Limaye, M.A., Tilak Maha Vidyapeeth, Pune, India; Emeritus Professor William Clark of the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point; and Prof. Madhav Deshpande of the University of Michigan. Debts are also acknowledged to Prof. William P. Williams of the University of Akron; Prof. Bruce Sullivan of the University of Northern Arizona; Prof. Michael Fisher of Oberlin College; Professor Emeritus Jerry Alred of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee; and Prof. Jim Stephens of Emporia State University for their insightful comments and suggestions. Special thanks are due to the author’s wife, Diane Limaye, for editing the manuscript and suggesting improvements through all the versions of this essay.

2. The “Aadiparva” (chapters 62-69) in the Mahabharata, an ancient epic of India, contains the story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. This story has been “retold” in many renditions since that time reflecting its enduring appeal and potential for various interpretations. Thapar provides an analysis and review of some of these versions examining the changes wrought by their authors.
3. Sir William Jones, a Calcutta judge in the service of the East India Company, translated *Shakuntala* in English, thus introducing the play to his European contemporaries at the end of the eighteenth century. Arthur Ryder, a professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, whose English translation of *Shakuntala* is used here for quotations, follows the age-old tradition of regarding the play principally as a tale of love and romance.

4. Prof. Madhav Deshpande of the University of Michigan brought to the attention of this author a long scholarly discussion among Sanskrit scholars on the subject of the “spelling” and the etymology of the word “put/ttram” (in a personal e-mail). It is not of much relevance to this paper; the significance of the child (the son, in this case) is relevant and most germane.

5. All page references are to the Dover edition of Arthur Ryder’s translation of *Shakuntala*. It is both affordable and easily available, although it is not literal. Ryder attempts to evoke the spirit rather than the letter of the original. Since there are no numbered lines in *Shakuntala* editions, *act number and stanza number* from Kale’s edition are placed in parentheses after a quotation, for the benefit of those who want to look up the original Sanskrit. Only occasionally is the author’s own translation used when a strictly literal translation is deemed more pertinent.

6. This term used by Rabindranath Tagore is quoted by Dev 213.

7. The ceremony called *Shraaddha* is celebrated on or around the death anniversary of one’s father or grandfather. It is performed only by a male heir or descendent of the family to ensure symbolic provisions for the ancestors before the souls of the dead assume new bodies (reincarnations).
8. Mishrakeshi, to present an example familiar to the Western reader, serves the function of the Chorus in classical Greek plays.

**Works Cited**


