BĀṆABHAṬṬA

KĀḌAMBAＲĪ
A Classic Sanskrit Story of
Magical Transformations

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Introduction

The Author

For centuries in India, Bāṇabhaṭṭa (or just Bāṇa, bhaṭṭa being an honorific suffix) has been revered as the storyteller par excellence, and within Indian literature his gadyakāvyā (prose poetry or poetic prose) composition Kādambari has been considered literally and figuratively a peerless story of stories. The unique status of this tale of the moon-god’s infatuation with the maiden Kādambari is indicated by the fact that two modern Indian languages, Kannada and Marathi, take “kādambari”—a woman’s name—to mean “novel, romance, fiction, or tale,” comparable to calling a tragedy a “hamlet” or a novel a “lolita.”

Besides this unusual eponymous use of his heroine’s name, Bāṇa has the added distinction of being an artist from India’s classical period whose dates, give or take a few decades, are established. Even the dating of Kālidāsa—of the classical Indian writers probably the best known both within the subcontinent and abroad, his fame in the West nurtured earlier on by so renowned a literateur as Goethe, who praised Kālidāsa’s play Śakuntalā—varies widely from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. For Bāṇa the situation is quite otherwise. In addition to Kādambari, he told two other stories, both contained in the one narrative entitled Harṣacarita (The Life of Harṣa), a biography of his living king, Harṣavardhana (A.D. 606–647), as well as the circumstances of his own life up to the writing of his biography-cum-panegyric. Since from other sources we can determine with relative certainty Harṣa’s dates (a famous Chinese pilgrim, for instance, documented a visit to Harṣa’s court in A.D. 643) and since we know the composing of the Harṣacarita preceded that of Kādambari (Bāṇa died in medias res while at work on Kādambari), we can with confidence place Bāṇa within the first half of the seventh century.
Although Bāṇa embellished his own life’s story with the traditional nod to mythological connections (to wit, a member of the first branch on his family tree had as playmate a child of the Goddess of Speech), he tells of his mother’s early death and of his father’s nurturing of him until that parent too passed away, leaving the teenager on his own. (Twice-told by Bāṇa is this story of childhood bereavement, first in the Harṣacarita and then in Kādambari where the parrot Vaiśampāyana, our fictional narrator, relates a most pathetic tale of the loss of its remaining parent, an aged father, at the hands of a cruel hunter.) After recovering from what he states was the anguish of a great sorrow, the young man lived a somewhat carefree and self-indulgent life with an amazingly wide variety of friends and acquaintances—if we can take him at his word—each one identified by name and profession, the lengthy list including descriptive poet Veṇībhārata, panegyrist Sūcīvāṇa, dancer Tāṇḍavikā, mendicant Sumati, scribe Govindaka, Jain monk Viradeva, storyteller Jayasena, magician Karāla, and juggler Cakorākṣa. He also visited royal courts; paid his respects, as he (in the translation by E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas, 1897) puts it, “to the schools of the wise”; attended “assemblies of able men deep in priceless discussion”; and plunged “into the circles of clever men dowered with profound natural wisdom”—before returning home, an older and much wiser man.

Bāṇa’s autobiographical sketch also details the author’s stormy relationship with Harṣa, ruler over much of northern India at the end of the Gupta period, an era many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have called India’s Golden Age. Summoned to court to explain the dissolute lifestyle he had fallen into after his father’s death, Bāṇa, the young Brahmin, laments that courtly service is hateful and “full of dangers. My ancestors never had any love for it, I have no hereditary connection with it, . . . still I must certainly go.” And go he did, to appease Harṣa. Some time later Bāṇa returned to his village of Prithikūṭa, located in what is now the modern Indian state of Bihar, and composed the Harṣacarita, narrating Harṣa’s rise to power and ending on the eve of the king’s setting out to conquer the known world—something that both the hero of Kādambari and the hero’s father, the reigning monarch, do. Sophisticated and erudite, the Harṣacarita in and of itself is a stunning display of Bāṇa’s descriptive and poetic talents. It is introduced with a set of verses that pay homage to a variety of poets (among
them Kālidāsa, Subandhu, and Bhāsa) and to famous and legendary literary works (such as the Mahābhārata and the Brhatkathā), giving evidence of Bāṇa’s thorough grounding in the literary tradition. Moreover, the presumably young man takes to task undisciplined poets, chastises poetasters, and has some unkind words for plagiarists, while noting various forms of poetic expression then in vogue. This first of Bāṇa’s two gadyakāvya narratives is that of a mature, experienced, and knowledgeable writer and critic, and suggests that Harṣa’s displeasure may have owed much to that raja’s thwarted desire to have this jewel of an artist enhance his royal atelier.

Other than Kadambari and this extravagant pacan to Harṣa nothing else exists that can be attributed with certainty to Bāṇa, nor can exact dates be assigned even these two narratives. It seems reasonable to assume that he wrote the former when he was not yet a settled householder; the latter, we conclude, he wrote when he had a grown son, for it was the son, Bhuṣanabhaṭṭa, who, upon the death of his father, completed the last third of Kadambari’s elaborately structured story.

Of Bhuṣanabhaṭṭa we know virtually nothing except that he was Bāna’s son. Says Bhuṣanabhaṭṭa:

I bow in reverence to my father,
Master of speech.
This story was his creation,
A task beyond other men’s reach.
The world honored his noble spirit in every home.
Through him I, propelled by
Merit, gained this life.

When my father went to heaven
The flow of his story
Along with his voice
Was checked on earth.
I, considering the unfinished work to be
A sorrow to the good,
Again set it in motion—
But out of no pride in my poetic skill.
By most scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa has been described as a kavi (poet) of meagre skill, though without the son’s portion Kādambari is no story at all. The tale itself is, most certainly, Bāna’s creation. Equally certain can we be that the son had been privy to his father’s artistic plan, so tightly constructed is the work. Even so, during the past century or so—since the first printed edition from manuscript in 1849—Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa’s contribution has been largely ignored in discussions of the text and Kādambari generally published in two pieces: the Pūrvabhāga (first part), by Bāna, and the Uttarabhāga (second part), by Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa. But no matter how lush and lavish Bāna’s portion might be, it in fact tells no tale. It is as though Kādambari’s parrot narrator, Vaiśampāyana, has raised one foot in salute to Śūdraka (the present raja but in another birth his friend) and remains there, balanced in unstable equilibrium upon the other spindly bird leg. Only after Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa completed the tale do we sense a return to narrative stability. Though more modern critics may dismiss the son’s work as at best prosaic and at worst completely superfluous, India’s tradition collectively has viewed this text differently. Through the ages, over more than a millennium, Kādambari as a whole, both Bāna’s and his son’s parts, has been copied and recopied by scribe after scribe, maintaining the text’s integrity from the seventh century to the present day. What served as the eponymous prototype for the modern novel in Kannada and Marathi is not Bāna’s work alone, it is Bāṇabhaṭṭa-Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa’s sparkling narrative, Kādambari.

The Perfected Tongue and Kāvyā

Bāna wrote in Sanskrit, a language stabilized, probably in the fourth century B.C., by the eminent grammarian Pāṇini and one that has retained the same form ever since—the term “śaṁskṛta,” glossing as “put together,” “refined,” or, when referring to Sanskrit, “the perfected tongue.” From A.D. 300 to 1200 it was almost the only written language of northern India, and, used extensively as a medium of literary composition, its vocabulary grew and developed. For some common words like “king” or “elephant” or “light” there may be scores of completely interchangeable synonyms. Other words have accumulated numerous, sometimes contradictory glosses, though the relevant meaning is usu-
ally provided by context. The temptation to crowd double and triple meanings into a line became the basis for the later literary feats of telling two or three stories simultaneously.

Although Sanskrit is rule-bound and highly inflected, it is also surprisingly elastic, the constrictive nature of its inflections being easily overcome by the use of compounding. Short compounds exist in English, such as “applesauce,” “bluebird,” “horseshoe,” and “newsprint”; in Sanskrit, compounded nouns may contain as many as twenty elements or words. Moreover, compounds can often be broken up in several ways to yield different meanings. For instance in English, at the most fundamental level, “newsprint” might be read as “news print” or as “new sprint.” In an example from Sanskrit, when Candrāpiḍa gazes upon Indrāyudha, he sees a horse that is cakravartinaravāhanacitam (“fit to be a vehicle for a ruler who is sovereign”); or cakravarti-naravāhanaucitam (“fit for Naravāhana, who is a sovereign”); or cakra-varti-naravāhana-ucitam (“fit to be a vehicle for a ruler who displays the wheel [symbol of power]”); or cakra-varti-naravāhana-ucitam (“fit to be a vehicle for Naravāhana, who displays the wheel”). The compounds together with Sanskrit’s incredible range of synonyms and of words with multiple meanings that lend themselves to easy punning comprise the ingredients of kāvya, a rich and complex literary genre.

Kāvya (refined poetical composition) might be likened to a literary high-wire act in which the performer/poet inches along a cable made of traditional story lines and poetic conventions, all the while juggling an array of rhetorical devices. A poem or prose work of kāvya is generally admired or disdained, as the case may be, for its ornamental effects. The story line must be strong, to be sure, but the literary ornamentation needs to be rich. Descriptions run on for pages, filled with various figures of speech, allusions, wordplay, and recondite expressions. Such self-consciously artificial prose was introduced into Western literature in the sixteenth century by John Lyly, whose comedy Euphues, like Kādambarī, lent its protagonist’s name to the lexicon of literary art. More than any of the other extant works by Indian kavis, Bāṇa’s exemplify the best of what might be called style distinguished by controlled extravagance. Kāvya may be in poetry or prose; of practitioners of the latter genre only three major kavis and their works are known today: Subandhu (Vāsavadattā), Bāṇa (Harṣacarita and Kādam-
barī), and Daṇḍin (Daśakumāraka). Each one pushed the art of poetic prose to its limits, but Bāna remains the most respected, with Kāḍambarī ranked as the masterwork of this genre.

Moonsong

A straightforward telling of Kāḍambarī might go something like the following. The Goddess of Fortune and a sage named Śvetaketu, produce a son, Puṇḍarīka. Puṇḍarīka falls in love with Mahāśvetā, but, because of his ascetic’s vow, cannot act upon that love. He grieves to death, cursing the moon—which he feels sees but takes no pity on his distress—to know unrequited love from birth to birth. Puṇḍarīka and the moon-god reincarnate as Candrāpiḍā and Vaiśampāyana. Candrāpiḍā woos Kāḍambarī before succumbing to the curse; he dies and reincarnates as Śūdraka. Vaiśampāyana, too, enters another birth, this time as a parrot. One day the parrot (formerly Vaiśampāyana, formerly Puṇḍarīka) is taken by his mother to Śūdraka’s court, and the whole story is narrated to the king, who remembers his true nature as Candrāpiḍā, the moon-god incarnate. He and the parrot grieve to death at being separated from their beloveds of a previous birth. At their deaths, the body of Candrāpiḍā revives, Puṇḍarīka is brought back to earth, marriages take place, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The actual plot of Kāḍambarī, however, has Vaiśampāyana the parrot brought before Śūdraka to tell his story, what he remembers of it, up to that moment. He relates his birth as a parrot, the death of his father at the hands of a hunter, his rescue by a son of the great sage Jābali, and Jābali’s narration of a story he says will bring the parrot to his true senses. The sage’s storytelling takes up the bulk of Kāḍambarī, for it is about the birth of Candrāpiḍā and Vaiśampāyana his friend; Candrāpiḍā’s meeting with Mahāśvetā, who tells her and Puṇḍarīka’s tale of woe; Kāḍambarī’s appearance; the love of Candrāpiḍā and Kāḍambarī; and Vaiśampāyana’s ill-fated encounter with Mahāśvetā where he is cursed to the birth of a parrot. By Jābali’s tale, the parrot comes to know his real identity, as does Śūdraka, and both grieve to death then and there, only to be “reborn” as Candrāpiḍā and Puṇḍarīka, and to be reunited with Kāḍambarī and Mahāśvetā.

In this version—Bāna’s version—of the story, Kāḍambarī has a surprise ending, which follows clues strewn throughout the various narrators’ tales—clues that tell the reader that things are other than they
appear; clues embedded in similes, epithets, actions, and even within the very structure of the descriptive passages. Everything in Bāna’s telling of Kādambarī works in the service of its story—a lover’s tale of birth-death-rebirth—and the entire narrative fairly reverberates with this theme, reinforced on several levels by denotations, connotations, and allusions. The story sets up the theme and then reiterates it, suggests it, echoes it, and finally comes to rest—as does the ocean at the end of the Churning for the Elixir—at the conclusion, where love and birth-death-rebirth are shown to be the very stuff of the cosmos (and of storytelling).

The Cow’s Tail and Framing Lies

The Nātyaśāstra of Bharata, a fourth-century A.D. Sanskrit treatise on Indian aesthetics, states that a play should be shaped like a gopucchāgra (the tip of a cow’s tail), ending in a bushy flare of surprises. In one of his introductory verses to Kādambarī, Bāna notes that a new story, sparkling with frolicking wordplay and lovemaking, creates a most pleasurable curiosity. So it is that Kādambarī’s story is shaped, or plotted, like a gopucchāgra, with the bushy flare of surprises at the startling climax of the story taking place when the Goddess of Fortune enters and hails Śūdraka: “Oh Ornament of the World, oh Husband of Rohiṇi, oh Beloved of the Stars, oh Moon, joy of the eye of Kādambarī!” In Bāna’s (and Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa’s) hands the gopucchāgra becomes a premier example of how to tell a good story—a story, in fact, about the telling of stories. Kādambarī is flush with stories: people tell each other stories; they allude to known stories; and the similes themselves are packed with stories. The major storyteller, Vaiśampāyana the parrot, even bears the name of Hindu India’s most illustrious singer of tales—the narrator of the Mahābhārata. But what makes Kādambarī more than a simple “once upon a time” telling is Bāna’s sophisticated use of several storytelling techniques to ensnare and suspend his reader (as well as his actors) in the storytelling moment. For purposes of illustration, these techniques—what Aristotle, when referring to Homer’s craft, calls the art of framing lies—are what might be called the frame, the prism, and the time-machine.

The frame, a most familiar storytelling device, is a story in the course of which other stories are told. Kādambarī has traditionally been placed in the frame, or emboxed tales category, because it seems to
contain stories embedded within stories much along the lines of the famous “oriental” narrative *A Thousand and One Nights*, or its European counterparts, *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Bāṇa’s construction appears to be a typical frame story, with Śūdraka listening to stories told by a precocious talking parrot. However, *Kādambari* is a story told to Śūdraka by Vaiśampāyana about a story told to Vaiśampāyana by Jābāli, within which is a story told to Candrāpiḍa by Mahāśvetā about a story told to her by Kapitiṇjala, ending with Jābāli’s story preempting the narrative when Śūdraka the auditor becomes Śūdraka the actor. What appears to be unimaginably complex in explanation is elegant in practice, and Bāṇa’s sophisticated use of a rather simple way of getting stories told lends *Kādambari* its almost novelistic air.

The prism is also a common way of getting a story told. Just as a prism disperses light into a spectrum, the prismatic technique might be said to develop a story thoroughly by having a character elicit all the facts and facets of a tale. It is used extensively in the *Mahābhārata* and in a somewhat different form in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The technique involves a series of questions containing clues about the story to come. “Tell me a story, and make it complete,” a child might say, to guide a narrator to relate every single detail of even a known story. In *Kādambari*, each major story is introduced by a series of questions, which, to the canny listener or reader, contain clues about either the events or the relevance to the listener of the tale to come. Again, this is a deceptively simple way of telling a story, but Bāṇa used it to fashion a veritable maze of clues and miscues.

The third storytelling technique, the time-machine, is itself the most ingenious twist of all in *Kādambari*. It is not one of form, as are the frame and the prism, but one of effect, for which it relies on the prestidigitator’s most common ploy: sleight-of-hand. The story usually concerns a man who asks a magician for some sort of display of power or for a favor. The man’s life is changed. Years pass. One day he suddenly finds himself back where he started, as if he had only dreamed away the time, or been enthralled by a story. At no time in any of the versions of the tale is the reader made aware that he and the story’s character are being so deceived. In *Kādambari* Śūdraka and the reader become riders in time as both are caught up in what Jābāli calls the enchantment of the telling. The king is reminded that he has been a
victim of the māyā of his existence, and the reader has enjoyed the art
of storytelling’s greatest mystery and most precious treasure: the power
of illusion. Kadambari is a time-machine story set within a frame that
is expanded by use of the prism. As is said of the parrot Vaiśampāyana
when brought before Śūdraka, “Truly, this is a wonder of wonders.”

A Matter of Manner

If there is one notion used in the Occident to characterize things
oriental it is “profusion.” In the Tudor figures of rhetoric the word
“asiatismus” was defined as “a kynde of endighting [composition] used
of the Asians, full of figures, and wordes, lackying matter.” In 1840
James Mill wrote of India’s two great epics: “They are excessively prolix
and insipid. . . . Inflation; metaphors perpetual, and these the most vio-

ten and strained, often the most unnatural and ridiculous; obscurity;
tautology; repetition; verbosity; confusion; incoherence; distinguish the
Mahabharat and Ramayan.” Closer to our subject, Albrecht Weber in
1853 reviewed Kadambari, which he said “compares most unfavour-
ably with the Daśakumāracharita by a subtlety and tautology which are
almost repugnant, by an outrageous overloading of single words with
epithets: the narrative proceeds in a strain of bombastic nonsense, amidst
which it—and if not it, then the patience of the reader—threatens to
perish altogether: . . Bāna’s prose is an Indian wood, where all pro-
gress is rendered impossible by the undergrowth until the traveller cuts
out a path for himself, and where, even then, he has to reck on mal-

cious wild beasts in the shape of unknown words that affright him.”
It is possible that Weber could not see the trees for the jungle. In fact,
Kadambari whispers the moon’s song in all its parts, not the least of
which are its figures of speech and their careful placement.

Kadambari’s most frequent embellishment is the simile, the use of
which can be separated into two categories: short or undeveloped, and
mythical. The former designation refers to typical similes that make use
of images taken mostly from nature; the latter term denotes compari-
sions to mythical figures or events. Since the mythological similes tell
or imply stories of their own, they are important to an understanding
of a narrative that is itself about the telling of stories. Kadambari con-
tains over one hundred similes referring to stories or myths, of which
similes more than three-quarters are concerned with the myths of the
Churning for the Elixir, the Final Dissolution, and the destruction of the God of Love (see Glossary). While these similes might appear repetitious, they in fact do not repeat themselves, but rather tell the stories of those three events in bits and pieces instead of as complete tales or scenes in the manner of a Homeric or developed simile. In Bāṇa’s narrative each simile is another unique fragment of information, inviting the reader to use his imagination to cement together seemingly redundant material in order to “read” the stories the similes tell and thereby the story Kādambarī tells of birth as implied in the Churning, of death as implied in the Final Dissolution, and of the power of love to conquer all as implied in the destruction (and subsequent revival) of the God of Love. The similes are the basis for these three leitmotifs that grow out of and complement the narrative of the moon-god’s fall into incarnation after incarnation and his love for princess Kādambarī.

The Parrot

The Mahābhārata is one of the Sanskrit canon’s more magnificent examples of the storytelling art. Vyāsa was said to have composed his history of the great war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas and later to have taught it to his pupil Vaiśampāyana. Vaiśampāyana recited the story at a Snake Sacrifice where a bard heard it and in turn recited it to a group of seers, that last telling being what we read as the Mahābhārata. We are also told that Vyāsa taught the story as well to his son Śuka. Śuka means “parrot,” and in the Mahābhārata, this particular character brings the story of the war to the semidivines: Gandharvas (Kādambarī’s and Mahāśvetā’s fathers are Gandharvas), Yakṣas, and Rākṣasas. In Kādambarī Śukanāsa (“he who has a nose like the beak of a parrot”) is the father of Vaiśampāyana, who is later transformed into a parrot and who narrates the story of Kādambarī to Śūdraka, who is, in fact, a divine. Like Vaiśampāyana and Śuka of the Mahābhārata, Kādambarī’s Vaiśampāyana tells stories he is told—he literally “parrots” them. Thus the parrot’s name, Vaiśampāyana, is a clue to his function, not, as is the case with Candrāpiḍā (“he who wears the moon for a crown”), to his identity. Like a real parrot, Vaiśampāyana knows only what he has been told, and even with all the facts and clues at his disposal, he is oblivious to the implications of the events he relates to Śūdraka. This is in the nature of his “parrotiness.” As Mahāśvetā
says, before she damns him to the birth of a parrot, “You do not know anything . . . you speak without paying attention to whether the subject is appropriate.”

Mahāśvetā and Śukanāsa, when he compares his son to a mindless parrot for not returning with Candrāpiḍa and the army, impute rather negative qualities to parrots, but when Candrāpiḍa offers “advice” to the star-crossed lovers, the parrot Parihāsa and the mynah Kālīndi, he does so with tender humor. And Bāna’s description of parrot Vaiśampāyana’s experiences before and after he becomes aware of his identity as Vaiśampāyana the minister’s son are likewise sensitive and free of derision. On one level Bāna suggests that the parrot is a silly bird; on another level he seems to be implying that there is some deeper truth in the nature of “parrotiness.”

The parrot is a recurrent figure in the Indian literary tradition. In the various tales that include him, he frequently carries messages of love, acts as a go-between for separated lovers, tattles on maidens’ affairs of the heart, and keeps wives from straying. He is such an accoutrement of the lover’s life that the Kāmasūtra recommends his inclusion in the well stocked boudoir. Vaiśampāyana is also, then, the bearer of stories about love. He stands before Śūdraka with two missions intrinsic to the stories he is to tell him: to bring together the essence or soul of Candrāpiḍa that resides in Śūdraka, and its body that is lovingly tended by Kādambarī; and to reunite Candrāpiḍa with Kādambarī, as well as himself, as Puṇḍarīka, with Mahāśvetā. Also one of the God of Love’s epithets, although one not seen in Kādambarī, is “sukavāha,” “he who is parrot-borne,” or “he who has a parrot for a vehicle.” The God of Love is, in fact, transported by the parrot. Vaiśampāyana, then, symbolizes both passion and the storytelling occasion.

The Crest-Jewel of Creation

Kādambarī’s world is a closed one, all actions and states of being overlap or blend into one another. Even the lineages of its main actors turn out to be one: the moon fathers by way of his rays the Apsaras, out of which are eventually born Kādambarī and Mahāśvetā. It is for the latter’s sake that the moon preserves Puṇḍarīka’s body, and it is Kādambarī that he takes to wife in his incarnation as Candrāpiḍa. The moon, of course, is both the hero of Kādambarī and its major image.
Three features of the moon in myth and in nature determine the way certain elements in the narrative are deployed: its "twice-bornedness," its waxings and wanings, and the nature of its light.

*Kādambarī* is a story about birth and death and rebirth, about reincarnation and people who are literally born twice, and about the actual "lord of the twice-born"—the moon. The moon is said to have been first produced from Atri’s eye and then again brought up in the Churning (one of the many names for the sea being Candrajana or moon-progenitor). In the narrative the moon is forced to undergo incarnations “from birth to birth,” respectively becoming Candrāpiḍa and Śūdraka. His companion in the curse is Puṇḍarika, who becomes Vaiśampāyana the minister’s son and Vaiśampāyana the parrot. Just as the moon is lord of the twice-born, so too is the story riddled with “twice-born” actions, events, and images—reverberations of the moon’s and Puṇḍarika’s plunge into incarnation after incarnation.

Not only is the moon twice-born, it also reincarnates as each month it wanes away, its digits or phases said to be devoured by the gods as they enjoy its nectar, and then waxes anew until it becomes full once again. It seems natural, then, for Puṇḍarika, who blamed the full moon for his grief and his impending death, to curse it to know unrequited love from birth to birth. The moon, aggrieved, retaliates, “You, too, in sorrow and joy will be equal to me.” But he relents when he remembers his relationship to Mahāśvetā. He regrets the phrase uttered by Puṇḍarika—"from birth to birth"—for that means Puṇḍarika too will have to suffer at least two births in the mortal world. In their final incarnation, the fourth for the moon and the third for Puṇḍarika, both reach the nadir of their “waning” in spirit: Śūdraka is a childless, shadowy king, and Puṇḍarika is a parrot. At story’s end they “wax” to the fully realized creatures they were in their first incarnation.

The moon’s reflected light is repeatedly referred to, just as clothing, skin, and ornaments are compared to the whiteness of the moon. Moonstones, created out of the concealed rays of the moon, melt under its glow, the trickle being heard throughout *Kādambarī*. Also, Bāna uses reflected light to indicate sensuousness as well as the illusory nature of the world that the story’s actors inhabit. In Western medieval literature, love enters through the eyes. Just so here too. Mahāśvetā is drawn to Puṇḍarika by the scent of the flower he wears over his ear, but it is the sight of him that most affects her: “I gazed on him a very
long time, with longing, drinking him in, as it were. I gazed at him as my senses spun out of control.” A few pages later we are told of Puṇḍarika’s conception. His mother, the Goddess of Fortune, enjoyed sexual union by merely looking upon the sage Śvetaketu, and from that act was born Puṇḍarika. Mahāśvetā’s own whiteness is expressed thus: “She seemed to enter the inside of the beholder by way of his eyes, and to make his mind white.” When Candrāpiḍa saw Kādambarī, he “imagined contact with but the glow of her body to be the bliss of sexual union with her.” And at his first sight of her, he wonders, “Why did not the Creator make all my senses into eyes?”

While Bāna suggests that the power of reflected light is to deceive and to seduce, he also places throughout the narrative clues and hints about the real import of the story, almost all such help coming from the innumerable moon images and similes positioned carefully throughout the story. When Śūdraka is first introduced it is through the eyes of the narrator of Kādambarī, and the descriptions of the king contain the first intimation that there is something strange about him. Other characters, however stereotypical they may seem, will be seen to have substance, but Śūdraka is an empty vessel. He has no emotional life whatsoever, in sharp contrast to the story’s other actors, who literally die for love or who are tormented beyond all reason by the Maddener. Furthermore, there is not one single moon simile in this first sight of him. Then the Cāḍāla maiden enters and sees him, and the reader shares her vision. She is, in fact, Puṇḍarika’s mother, the Goddess of Fortune, and she knows that Śūdraka is actually the moon incarnate. She sees that: he was seated on a couch of moonstones; his foot rested on a crystal stool that was like the moon bowed in obeisance to him; his face was haloed by a string of pearls like stars taking it for the moon; his forehead was like the eight-day moon. And what does he see? She is like Hari dressed as a woman to retrieve the Elixir; like Bhavānī garbed as a mountaineer; like the Goddess of Fortune darkened by the splendor of the body of Nārāyaṇa; like Rati enveloped by the smoke of the incinerated God of Love. She is, given those similes, a divine wearer of disguise—a goddess hidden, swathed, shaded, enveloped like a chameleon clothed in colors and substances that are not her own. And it is in this particular part of the description of the Goddess of Fortune that the peculiar properties of reflected light come into play for the first time in the story: As she stood in front of Śūdraka her cheek was whitened
by the gleam of an ivory earring attached to one ear, making her resemble night with its face powdered by the beams of the rising moon. She is powdered—disguised; she is struck by the beams of the rising moon—Śūdraka; and she is transformed by the glow of reflected light.

Moon similes do not recur until Jābali’s story where Tārāpiḍa, Candrāpiḍa’s soon-to-be father, is described as “the birthplace of glory, just as the ocean is the birthplace of the nectar-producing moon,” the comparison being a clue to the role he will play in the moon’s first incarnation on earth. (Appropriately, similes pertaining to the Churning are in greater number here, accompanying a short synopsis of that story as well.) Tārāpiḍa’s dream of the moon entering the mouth of his wife, and Śukanāśa’s dream where a god-like being places a punḍarīka lotus in the lap of Śukanāśa’s wife echo the moon’s fall into mortal incarnation and the way Punḍarīka was originally conceived by the Goddess of Fortune as she gazed upon Śvetaketu. The climax of this section is Candrāpiḍa’s birth when “every day the roar of the festival at the birth of the prince increased, as the ocean swells with a murmur at the rise of the moon.” Later, when the adult Candrāpiḍa sets out for his father’s palace, the cavalry that came to accompany him stirred “like the waters of the ocean at the rising of the moon.” And at his approach, “the people, having left their work, appeared like a lotus grove being awakened by the rising of the moon.” His father’s palace, the longest, most minute description in the book, with the coming of Candrāpiḍa resembles “the time of twilight in which is seen the rise of the moon—its crest-jewel.” When Candrāpiḍa undergoes his coronation as heir apparent, the moon similes tumble around him like offering flowers: he is anointed with sandal paste white as moonlight; his garments are white as the moon; he wore garlands that were white as the rays of the moon; and he mounted his golden Lion Throne “just as the Hare-marked Moon mounts the golden peak of Mount Meru.” The last moon simile of Bāṇa’s section occurs when from the terrace of her palace Kādambarī gazes on Candrāpiḍa standing below on the Pleasure Hill: he looked like “the moon resting upon the Rising Mountain.”

The Uttarabhāṣa does not contain much figurative language, Bhuṣanabhāṣṭa obviously being more concerned with getting the rest of the story told than with imitating his father’s skillful way with kāvya. Even so, as the story draws to a close, Bhuṣanabhāṣṭa adeptly positions his moon similes and does so very well indeed. When the messengers
sent to fetch Candrāpiḍa return downcast and weeping, Vilāsavatī fears the worst and unknowingly utters the truth: "Ha! My child! You are the world’s only moon! Candrāpiḍa! You with your moon-like face! You whose form is cool as the moon! You whose qualities are delightful as those of the moon!" This clue is mirrored a few pages later at the narrative’s climax when the Caṇḍāla maiden reveals her own identity as the Goddess of Fortune and that of Śūdraka as the moon: “Oh Ornament of the World, oh Husband of Rohini!, oh Beloved of the Stars, oh moon, oh joy of the eye of Kādambarī!”

The God Who Wears the Moon for a Crown

Śiva is the patron god of literature as well as of Kādambarī, and is himself a study in the themes of birth-death-rebirth and love. His aspects and attributes, delineated in more than one thousand names in the Mahābhārata, are many and varied. He is the ithyphallic god who has the ubiquitous lingam as symbol. He is death to the God of Love, and the passionate husband of Pārvatī—both ascetic and erotic. He is the lord of all creatures, the great lord, and the greatest of the gods. He is not only the lord of literature but is considered to be the originator and the best exponent of other arts such as music and dancing. Though he is associated especially with the act of the Final Dissolution, his worshipers also think of him as the god of creation and preservation. Above all, he is Mahākāla—the Great Death and Time, who destroys all things.

In Kādambarī it is Śiva to whom the poet makes his benediction; it is Śiva as Mahākāla who is the patron god of Ujjayinī, Candrāpiḍa’s birthplace; it is an idol of Śiva to which Mahāśvetā is paying homage when Candrāpiḍa comes upon her practicing austerities; it is Śiva’s acts of the Final Dissolution and of the destruction of the God of Love that dominate the mythical similes; it is Śiva who wears the crescent moon in his hair; and it is Śiva who, as Soma, is one of the guardians of the quarters. Of all the wonderful manifestations of Bāṇa’s intellect and artistry, this is perhaps the most intriguing: the characteristics and powers of the god Śiva and of the work of art Kādambarī are absolutely interchangeable. Śiva is the creator, preserver, and destroyer. Kādambarī is about birth, death, and immutability. Śiva destroyed the God of Love and revived him. Kādambarī revolves around the destructive powers of the God of Love who is ultimately conquered when the
lovers survive the vicissitudes of love and death and time. Śiva is the Great Time, and time is one of the more peculiar, but perfectly integrated, elements of Kādambarī’s time-machine plot. Śiva carries the moon in his hair and is the moon god as Soma, a guardian of one of the quarters, and Kādambarī is shot through with the moon’s presence as a natural object, a god, and an incarnation. Śiva is māyin—the master of illusion, of transformation. Kādambarī is a masterwork of illusion and of transformations.

Bridging Tongues

Kādambarī came to the attention of the Occident when the first edition of it was published in 1849. A year later copies appeared in museums and libraries in India and Europe, and by 1884 the narrative had become a prescribed study for Indian students of Sanskrit. The first English translation, designed for the Indian university B.A. examination, was made of the Uttarabhāga in 1885. An anonymous translation, also of the second part, was published in 1890. In 1896 C. M. Ridding rendered the Pūrvabhāga and an abstract of the Uttarabhāga into English, and forty years later A. A. Scharpe translated Ridding’s various lacunae and the Uttarabhāga into Flemish. This, then, is the first complete English translation of Kādambarī. There is no critical edition of the text, but in three different printed editions consulted only negligible differences were found—a phrase or a compound—which had no effect on the work.

An early Sanskrit manuscript, before the widespread use of paper in India, was a stack of palm leaves, held together by a slender thread. The actual writing on such pages might look like an unbroken line, especially if the composition was prose. The only form of punctuation is a full stop, for Devanāgari (“divine city writing,” the name of the script in which Sanskrit is most often written) contains no commas, semicolons, or quotation marks to serve as guides, nor does a text break into paragraphs or even necessarily into chapters. (In one of the early printed editions of Kādambarī, the solution to such a perceived difficulty was to have spaces of different lengths indicate commas, semicolons, and periods—no doubt to the great consternation of the printer.) Also, given Sanskrit’s inflected nature, word order is free, dependent only on an author’s predilections. All this is to say that an English trans-
lation must violate several aspects of the original Sanskrit. Kādambaṛi, for example, has descriptions that may run on for pages but are in fact a single sentence. It has no paragraphs, no quotation marks, and no chapters. While acceding to certain needs of the reader of English, I have permitted the story to retain much of its continuity. Chapter breaks are a characteristic of some Sanskrit works, but not of this one.

In translating Kādambaṛi I wanted to promote readability while showing how varied and rich were the choices the authors themselves made. For instance, punning is indicated by secondary meanings enclosed in brackets. By this method I avoid footnotes and glossary references that would disturb the story’s flow. If explication of certain puns would make a passage clumsy or would fill a line with parenthetic expressions, I chose to leave the reader with what might be an odd phrase or sentence, but an oddness that indicates some not easily translatable features of its Sanskrit counterpart. The substance of the simile becomes the subject of the pun. For example, in the sentence “He, like the tresses of the Daughter of the Mountain King, glittered with the eyes of peacocks’ tails [are adorned by the moon of the Blue-necked One],” the pun is on “tresses,” which are adorned by the moon [eye] of Nilakaṇṭha [Śiva; peacock]. The Daughter of the Mountain King is Śiva’s wife Pārvatī, who wears her husband’s moon-ornament in her hair. Śiva is blue-throated [nilakaṇṭha] from drinking the poison at the Churning; a peacock has an iridescent-blue throat; and both bear the name Nilakaṇṭha. All puns in Kādambaṛi work this way, as a play on the matter of the simile, thus the occasional tense and subject-verb disagreements of bracketed entries with the subject of the sentence.

When a flower or tree in the original had an English equivalent, I used the English. Breaking the text into paragraphs, and some exceptionally long sentences, such as the description of Tārāpiḍa’s palace, into shorter sentences or even into paragraphs, was made according to my idea of common sense.

Indian names have, or can have, “meaning.” Hara is a name for Śiva, which can be translated as Destroyer. Hari, a name for Kṛṣṇa, cannot be sensibly translated. I chose to translate most epithets and names given to gods and mythical personages that could be translated, but not to do so for the actors in the story. If a name is translated, it is glossed an “epithet” rather than a “name.” Since many different epithets were used for some of the gods mentioned in the narrative, translating them gives
the reader of English the same information the Sanskrit reader has—that various attributes or deeds of these gods are being evoked. The actors, on the other hand, do not receive different names or epithets, their unique names serving to differentiate them from the more commonly known characters with commonly known stories, such as gods and mythical beings.

Kādambarī has two sets of introductory verses and includes two short verses within the Pūrvabhāga. I have tried to give the verses a visual poetic form but have not endowed them with metre or rhyme. Regrettably, the play of sound effects, figurative speech, and meaning in the densely packed lines cannot be approximated.

The translation is not footnoted, in lieu of which it is thoroughly glossed. All italicized or capitalized words may be found in the glossary. When possible, I have also listed the various Sanskrit words that were translated as synonymous with that particular glossary entry. For example, kusumaśara is translated “Blossom-arrowed God.” Other words in Kādambarī so translated are kusumabāṇa, kusumamārgaṇa, and kusumeṣu. This was done so that the reader might have some idea of how far-ranging Bāṇa could be in his choices and uses of Sanskrit, in many cases to achieve a particular sound effect or to provide variety for its own sake. Additional names or epithets are cross-referenced. Since Kādambarī is about storytelling, many glosses include stories more because I wanted Bāṇa’s allusions to have meaning for a reader outside the Indian tradition, a tradition especially rich in story and myth, than because they are directly relevant to the narrative itself.

Stories are a universal phenomenon, which perhaps explains why there is no such thing as a truly foreign literature. “Exotic” aesthetics, perhaps. “Alien” concerns, certainly. But a literature completely outside our experience of the art of storytelling, hardly. To be sure, there may be literatures and works of literature as yet not experienced by us, but they will speak in the same tongue, that of the story itself. Like so many suspension bridges constructed out of multifarious and fantastical building materials, stories sway over the vast sea between cultures and civilizations that only appear to be ineluctably different from one another. These creations may well contain peculiar elements or tell unusual, unfamiliar stories, but they have certain definable properties that always speak to that pleasurable curiosity that Bāṇa spoke to in his own bridge-building.
If there is a message or a meaning in Bāṇa’s particular bridge of artful communication, it is that play and playfulness are the very soul of the pleasure we take in literary art. That joy, the sheer excitement of discovery in Kādambarī, creates a common ground between seventh-century India and twentieth-century world society. Kādambarī’s story of magical transformations draws the reader into a fairyscape where men and gods freely mingle, where fact and fancy are all of a piece, and where all expectations are overturned. “What a challenge all this is not only to our habitual mode of perception, but to our idea of possible modes of perception and, consequently, of composition!” Well said, some years ago, by Eugene Vinaver about the Arthurian Cycle, the statement also suits Kādambarī. Just as something magical transforms the moon-god, Candrāpiḍa, Vaiśampāyana, Punḍarīka, Kapīñjala, and many other characters in Kādambarī, so too is the reader, playfully, changed by his experience of Bāṇa’s excursion into the magical art of framing lies. Truly, this bushy-tailed storytelling romp is, as Bāṇa himself tells us, a tale for which there is no second.

The Parting Glass

Bhūṣaṇabhaṭṭa notes in his introduction to the last part of Kādambarī that he has been “drunk on the strong wine of Kādambarī,” a play on one of the glosses of “kādambarī”: “spirituous liquor.” In fact the narrative itself is imbued with the spirit of intoxication. Birds, bees, elephants, people, gods, and goddesses are all described as mada, “ardently passionate, intoxicated, exhilarated.” One of the God of Love’s epithets, used several times, is Maddener, which is a translation of madana, a form of mada. Perhaps it is a strange admission, given the supposedly pragmatic world of academics, but I too have been intoxicated by Bāṇa’s elegant story ever since I came across it in my first year of Sanskrit study. Even in a partial, bowdlerized translation, it deeply touched me. I began translating it immediately, taking five years to complete the project, and have never regretted a moment I spent with it. So I take great pleasure in offering, for the first time since it was “discovered” by the Occident, an unabridged, modern English translation of Bāṇa’s masterpiece.

A translation and critical analysis of Kādambarī comprised my Ph.D. dissertation. It was completed in 1979 shortly before the death of one
of my advisers, J. A. B. van Buiten, who was the George V. Bobrinskoy Distinguished Service Professor of Sanskrit and Indic Studies at the University of Chicago. Hans brought to our work an astonishing ease with the Sanskrit language as well as a deep appreciation for its literature. This version of Kādambarī reflects his perspicacity and owes much to his grace and wit. I enjoy the continuing good fortune of having the sensitive guidance and friendship of David Smigeliskis. It was he who gave support and impetus to the final stages of my graduate studies. I shall always be grateful for the faith he had in me and in Kādambarī and for the wisdom he shared about literature and its powers. Clinton Seely—to whom this book is dedicated—listened, edited, questioned, and imparted his own special literary sensibility to this edition of Kādambarī; I owe more to him than a mere dedication could ever state. Virgil Burnett’s illustrations are those of a true Silpirāja—a “king among artists.” I thank this talented, gentil man for the exquisite touch he gave to Kādambarī. I wish also to acknowledge the various and valued contributions of Karl J. Weintraub, Herman Sinaiko, Rocky Miranda, Maureen L. P. Patterson, and James Nye. A special thanks goes to Marlen Oliver, who translated for me Scharpe’s Flemish Uttarabhāga, in the course of which she shared her own astute insights into the persuasions of kāvyā. And I am appreciative of the Danforth Foundation, which awarded me a fellowship that made possible the initial translation project.

Finally, to Bāna, who did not live to see the completion of his Kādambarī, I offer up this prayer: may the spirit and genius of your poetry conquer the impoverishments of my English and bless this, my desire, to realize your achievement.

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