

# Shriharsha's Sanskrit *Life of Naishadha*

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE AND TEXT

Shriharsha's twelfth-century masterpiece is the last of the classic Sanskrit Grand Poems (Mahākāvya). It tells the famous love story of Nala and Damayanti, with an emphasis on the dissonant innerness of the main protagonists and with a pronounced Tantric overlay: tradition has it that Shriharsha achieved his poetic prowess by reciting the famous mantra of the "philosopher's stone" (*cintāmaṇi*), which is then imparted to the protagonist, Nala. A tour de force on every level (including syntax, vocabulary, and complexity of thought and imagination), *Life of Naishadha* defies translation but was, perhaps for this very reason, adapted into Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam (in each case, the vernacular versions themselves became classic works). In the passage selected here, a goose is a messenger mediating between Nala and Damayanti, who have yet to meet. The goose describes to the anxious Damayanti King Nala's hopeless love-madness, which is progressing remorselessly through the ten normative stages of infatuation toward the tenth stage, death.

### SHRIHARSHA'S *LIFE OF NAISHADHA* (3.99–114)

The bird could see with total clarity  
that Damayanti was already in love  
with the Nishadha king, so with a smile  
it unlocked the lock on its beak. (3.99)

"Princess," said the goose, "if I'm reading  
you right, there's nothing left for me  
to do. The god of love with his five arrows  
has turned up the heat on both of you,  
and by now you're already  
welded together. (3.100)

His mind is entirely absorbed  
 in you, and that means his other  
 sense organs—eyes ears  
 nose tongue touch—are fasting, and this state  
 of severe self-abnegation has inevitably  
 produced the deathless state of reveling in  
 you, so they have fulfilled their destiny and truly turned  
 into gods.<sup>1</sup> (3.101)

Bodiless Desire must be thinking: ‘Once  
 our two bodies were equal. Mine  
 got burnt, but his was never even  
 slightly boiled.’ On fire with envy, seizing on the fact  
 that *you* are far away, Desire  
 is now scorching  
 his skin.<sup>2</sup> (3.102)

The king stares, unblinking, at your portrait  
 on the wall, drinking you in  
 with eyes red from tears  
 or maybe it’s from the fire  
 you’ve lit inside him. (3.103)

Allow me to restate this problem:

- 1) He’s studying that painting of you
- 2) Unblinking
- 3) With deep attention and affection.
- 4) There are tears in his eyes.
- 5) Those tears are mine, says the eye. That’s what happens  
 if you don’t blink.
- 6) No way, says Love. They’re all mine.
- 7) This dispute remains  
 unsolved. (3.104)

You, lady, live in his heart,  
 but you’re also somehow outside him,  
 in fact you’re his very life’s breath  
 moving through nose and mouth.  
 His mind, too, being utterly absorbed  
 in you, never budes from that wondrous  
 painting, and this, too,  
 is a wonder. (3.105)

You are continually climbing up  
 the tall ladder of his imagination  
 as he showers a rain of sighs.

From thinking only about you  
he's *become* you. (3.106)

What his heart says to you—  
his deepest secret—  
his face openly reveals  
by its pallor, as is only fitting  
for a friend of the moon  
who happens to be a friend  
of his enemy, Desire. (3.107)

He lies at night on his bed.  
Sleep no longer comes to embrace him,  
to kiss his eyes, to drive him mad,  
nor does any other woman  
but you. (3.108)

He's grown thin, pierced in vain  
by the arrows of Desire.  
Only his beauty remains intact.  
Yet even now, after losing almost  
all his body, he's still competing with,  
and defeating, that bodiless god. (3.109)

He's no longer afraid of sin, if sin  
can bring you to him, and he's not ashamed  
to be your slave. It seems that the sharp arrows  
of Desire may have slightly punctured  
his character. (3.110)

Speaking of shame, the expert physicians  
who are treating him, shy as he is, for his high fever  
have nothing whatever to say  
about the etiology of his condition.  
Embarrassment apparently  
is contagious. (3.111)

He gets scared for no reason,  
thinking you're angry. He laughs  
inappropriately, certain he's won you.  
He follows you everywhere, to no purpose.  
When he thinks you're speaking to him,  
he answers to no point. (3.112)

This king who holds up the earth is like a mighty  
elephant stuck in the mud of a great blindness  
on the Island of Unconsciousness in the middle

of the dark Yamuna River, flowing with an unbroken stream of heartbreak because *you* are not there beside him. Utterly helpless, he hollers: 'Ha! Ha!' (3.113)

He's in bad shape, this king: Desire has been shooting his five arrows at him from both right and left hands, which makes for ten sure hits. He's gone through all the first nine stages of being in love. Let's hope that the tenth will be like the flower unfolding in the empty sky."<sup>3</sup> (3.114)

#### POINTS AND PROGRESSION: HOW TO READ SHRIHARSHA'S *LIFE OF NAISHADHA*

*Gary Tubb (Near Reader)*

"The bird could see with total clarity" and opened its beak to speak. At the beginning of our passage, the goose who will do the talking is presented in terms traditionally applied to a Sanskrit poet, as someone who speaks after having seen the realities of the world as clearly "as if they were a gooseberry in the hand." And the world available to the vision of a poet working in the Sanskrit tradition is a distinctively well-endowed one, given its long history of poetic experimentation, bodies of convention, and familiarity with detailed mythologies and highly developed scholarly disciplines, all of which enhance the possibilities both for that vision and for the expressions of its fruits.

Shriharsha's *Life of Naishadha* is widely viewed as the richest example of the Sanskrit Grand Poem, a genre with a recorded history reaching back a thousand years before his time. The work's fame rests partly on his success in dealing with the considerable burden of the past, especially in managing the genre's two apparently incompatible demands: an insistence on the independence of individual verses, and the need to connect these verses within a larger whole.

The first task entails the expert use of what has been called a "pointed style," in which each verse, syntactically independent from those surrounding it, must deliver to the reader's mind a single punch, resembling the point of a joke in that it involves a combination of recognition (in the readers' discovery that the description or explanation offered is fitting in some way) and surprise (in their feeling of hearing something newly formed). In Shriharsha's verses the power of this punch is enhanced by his constantly shifting selection of elements brought into compressed cooperation, drawn both from everyday life and from the many categories of knowledge and practice accumulated throughout the Sanskrit language's centuries of continuous use.

The second task, that of providing these same verses some continuity within the larger work, begins most broadly with the theme of the poem at hand. The

genre of the Grand Poem is in origin one dealing with the martial topic of a hero's military endeavor and success, but in *Life of Naishadha*, Shriharsha chose as his basic theme a marital one instead, imitating the choice made much earlier by Kalidasa in his *Origin of the Young God*, and using a royal love story taken from the old epic. He thus is able to deal throughout the poem with two of the favorite topics of Indian rulers (and therefore of Sanskrit court poets), that of royal power and its military and political components, and that of sex and the psychology of erotic love. Both topics provide their own frameworks of continuity. And underlying both of them here is a persistent interest in linguistic, philosophical, and spiritual matters.

The product of bringing together so many levels of meaning, through drawing on so many bodies of knowledge, will often be complex, and may rest on details both of the Sanskrit language and of its associated disciplines. Even so, a sensitive translation may convey much of its richness even in English, and an awareness of the dense combinations of meaning characteristic of Shriharsha's verses is useful even in places where only a portion of what the Sanskrit has to offer is reflected directly in the English translation.

I propose to focus on a single verse, occurring near the middle of our passage, in order to describe in some detail how the two tasks I have mentioned are addressed in the Sanskrit verse, and then to comment much more briefly on how the same tasks are approached in the verses leading up to it. Here, again, is the verse:

What his heart says to you—  
his deepest secret—  
his face openly reveals  
by its pallor, as is only fitting  
for a friend of the moon  
who happens to be a friend  
of his enemy, Desire. (3.107)

Here the topic at hand, given that the goose is reporting on the symptoms of love in Nala, is that of the features of his face that indicate his lovesickness: its pallor and its growing thinness. Neither is mentioned explicitly in the original Sanskrit, but both will be obvious to an experienced reader as conventional elements at this point in a love story, and both are in fact clearly indicated through a standard poetic device, in which the description of Nala's face as being a "friend" of the moon is a way of referring to its similarity to the moon, which itself is pale in color and can repeatedly be seen growing thinner. What sets up the punch of the verse is the way in which Shriharsha uses this friendship, interpreting it in another way as well, as the basis for a poetic fancy operating not within the sphere of love but in that of politics.

The point made is one of treason, in which Nala's secret hopes are openly betrayed by his own face to the god of love, Kamadeva, who because he is torturing Nala in his separation from Damayanti is portrayed as Nala's enemy. The

poetic fancy, a device that often rests on imagining some sentient explanation for the action of an insentient thing, works by justifying this treachery on the part of Nala's face by noting further that the moon is in turn a friend of the god of love; an experienced Sanskrit reader will understand that this is due to the moon's activity as a stimulant of love, and also that in political theory it is considered appropriate for the friend of a friend (of an enemy) to be useful in such a way, but anyone who knows Ella Fitzgerald's "Moonlight in Vermont" and the Beatles' "With a Little Help from My Friends" will understand the same point.

In terms of continuity, both the erotic and the political topics are fitting when viewed against the relevant conventional frameworks. For the love story, the preceding verses will have shown that Shriharsha is following a traditional list of the ten stages of love, and in this verse we have reached the stage of "intention," with its focus on internal hopes and planning. And on the martial side, the verse fits with the lists of topics to be described in a Great Poem as given in the earliest treatises on poetics, in which the first items listed are secret strategizing and the sending of an emissary or spy.

The invented political notion of the face's treachery not only provides the surprising and charming punch of this verse, but is also fitting both in providing a satisfying, albeit imaginary, explanation of the situation and in fitting, in its erotic context, perfectly into the sequence of stages being described. The verse is further enjoyable in that the erotic elements, which are actually the matter at hand, are understood without being explicitly described, while the invented political side is supported in the original Sanskrit by the use of martial terminology (such as naming the love god with reference to his weapon) and of technical terms from the discipline of statecraft (referring to enemies, allies, alliances, and appropriateness).

Other verbal devices in the Sanskrit could be pointed to as contributing to the punch of the verse, such as the fact that its first half, which gives the setup by stating the supposed situation matter-of-factly, is made up entirely of short un-compounded words (eleven in all), while the second half, delivering the punch line by providing the imaginary justification for the situation, is made up largely of two long compounds (and also has eleven words in all, but with most of them in compound).<sup>4</sup>

Here I can mention only a few of the ways in which the verses leading up to verse 107, each in its own way, reflect the two concerns of point and progression. Each verse offers in some form the same combination of a discrete punch, and a place in the larger structure, although not all of them involve to the same extent as this the collecting and compressing of diverse elements.

A principle of conservation of effort (of both poet and audience) is at work, in which if the required element of surprise can be achieved simply by an ingenious connection with something in the everyday world, reliance on conventional or technical material is not required. A clear example is in the first verse spoken

by the goose (3.100), in which the poet speaks of Nala and Damayanti as having already been welded together by the love god, through his application of heat, a procedure familiar to everyone who has seen a blacksmith working at the forge (or the mixing of lac). This is enough to provide the expected punch, but also serves an important function in the parallel task of continuity, by initiating the theme of heat, which will run throughout this passage with the double relevance of being associated both with the fever of lovesickness and with the practice of austerities, referred to metaphorically as “heat” in Sanskrit.

This theme of heat is connected in turn with the mythological story of the goddess Parvati’s love for Shiva and her resulting austerities, told earlier in Kalidasa’s *The Origin of the Young God* and explicitly underlying Shriharsha’s treatment of the love story in his own *Life of Naishadha*, thus providing another way in which individual verses find connections. Heat is prominent in a different way as well in Kalidasa’s poem, in the episode in which the god of love is incinerated by the fire from Shiva’s third eye, resulting in his being bodiless. This fact is referred to repeatedly in Shriharsha’s poem, such as in our verse 102, “Bodiless Desire,” one of many places where Kamadeva’s lack of a body is contrasted to the wholeness and beauty of Nala’s body, here treated somewhat more fully through the comparison and contrast between the ways in which both that god and Nala have been subjected to burning.

In the second of the verses spoken by the goose, “His mind is entirely absorbed” (101), we have once again a more complicated offering, drawing as it does on the technicalities of several bodies of knowledge and on double meanings in the Sanskrit. The verse once again attends to the larger contexts as well, by continuing the motif of yogic austerity and by touching on the theme of Nala’s relationships to the gods, an important topic elsewhere in the poem (and in the epic tale on which it is based).

This verse also marks the beginning, according to the commentators, of connections with the sequential list of ten stages of love, the first of which is visual pleasure. The list promises to provide a straightforward framework for continuity, but it will turn out that Shriharsha partially abandons any strict attention to the list following the verse we first considered (107), although (as so often happens when a competent poet plays with the rules) he follows what is expected closely enough until then to make it clear that his later looseness is deliberate. His playful approach to the conventional list is also suggested by the several instances in which he uses the official name of one of the stages within the verse connected with it (something frowned upon in theory), and is probably also announced implicitly by the mention in the opening verse (99) that he began to speak “with a smile,” and by his admission in the following verse (100) that his job was in fact already accomplished. In any case, it is necessary for the poet to have established a light approach to the ten stages by the time he reaches the last of them in verse

114 (“He’s in bad shape”), since that stage is death, and it is far too soon for Nala to die.

In the verses that follow, many of the connections between adjacent verses will be obvious upon reading them in translation. Thus the topic of fire in verse 102 is continued in verse 103, “The king stares,” where the punch is provided by a poetic fancy in which the redness of Nala’s eyes, in itself a standard symptom caused by sleeplessness due to erotic attachment, is imagined as produced by the internal fire of his fever. Also continued from the previous verse is the attention to the first stage of love with its ocular preoccupation, and in the reference to Nala’s rivalry with gods (since Nala here is called “unblinking,” a traditional epithet of the gods).

Similar techniques for continuity are used in the verses that follow. Verse 104, “Allow me to restate,” obviously contains numerous repetitions of ideas and even words from the verse that precedes it: red eyes, the first stage (mentioned again by name), the lack of blinking, paintings, tears, the action of drinking. The painting appears again in verse 105, which moves to the second stage of love, that of mental attachment, and appears to play with the official name of that stage, rereading it with a slight phonetic change to refer to attachment to a painting. And verse 106, dropping the visual theme while picking up on the theme of breathing introduced in verse 105, moves to the stage of intention or planning (Nala is imagining ways of getting Damayanti, although it is she who is climbing up stairs to reach him), imaginatively achieving its own punch through the poetic figure known as “apparent contradiction” (it is Damayanti who is climbing stairs, but Nala who is panting).

One could similarly trace the various repetitions and modes of continuation that bind the verses together in the remainder of our passage, and the various ways in which each of those verses makes its individual striking point. I hope that enough has already been said to provide some idea of the depth and complexity of meaning that Shriharsha achieves throughout the poem, and of the growing fullness that the accumulating force of that achievement might produce as the poem progresses.

Part of the pleasure in reading Shriharsha is in the growing awareness of the depth that underlies every verse and the knowledge that there are more depths to be plumbed. Such an experience has many parallels in the modern reception of the products of Sanskrit culture, especially the awareness of a depth that goes beyond each pointed moment of enjoyment. There is a traditional saying among learned devotees of Sanskrit literature that to really comprehend the meaning of *Life of Naishadha* is the work of a lifetime. Perhaps this means that the progression of a masterful work of literature continues as long as a life does, or that fully understanding it requires unblinking eyes. Or perhaps this is yet another sort of apparent contradiction. At any rate, Shriharsha teaches us that to enjoy a poem is to look both deeper and broader: there are always more points and further progression.



IF I'M READING YOU RIGHT: READING BODIES,  
MINDS, AND POETRY IN *LIFE OF NAISHADHA*

*Thibaut d'Hubert (Far Reader)*

These stanzas from Shriharsha's Sanskrit *Life of Naishadha* offer three "firsts": they depict a first moment of mutual recognition, which is a first union before the protagonists meet in person, and this is the first step in the gradual maturing of their relationship. After obtaining a vision of each other's charms, love awakens in their hearts. This vision is clearly not a direct encounter, nor is it mediated through a portrait, but it is a mental representation impelled by the oral praise of the lover's extraordinary attributes. The arousal of love in absentia—the *amor de lonh* (love from afar) of Shriharsha's close contemporary and Occitan troubadour Jaufré Rudel—may be seen as a *mise-en-abîme* of the very act of savoring poetry: it is the setting into motion of an imaginative process that eventually leads to the transformation of the perceiving subject. What this eventual transformation exactly is or should be is a matter of speculation that fueled some of the most elaborate debates on aesthetics over the centuries. In the domain of poetry, aesthetic experience per se depends on signifiers of the text but lies beyond them, even beyond the signified, and it is distinct from the mundane and psychological manifestation of emotions. A master of the poetic expression of speculative and didactic discourses, Shriharsha plays with the reader and strikes the perfect balance between challenging received knowledge about the symptoms of lovesickness and conveying the emotional density of his characters' experience.

A key figure in this passage is the goose that plays the role of the messenger between Nala and Damayanti. In addition to being equipped with wings that allow him to swiftly convey its message, the goose is itself closely associated with knowledge and speech as it is presented as Brahma's vehicle:

Sarasvati dwells in our beaks  
among the Vedas, her neighbors;  
it is as if, timid, she didn't go astray from them,  
bound as she is  
by the fetter of good company.<sup>5</sup> (3.65)

The bird thus cultivates a special relationship with the craft of speech represented by Sarasvati, goddess of poetry and the arts, and the truthful, unfailing ritual speech of the Vedas. Its perceptive gaze and ability to read people's behaviors enables it to foresee the successful outcome of its mission:

The bird could see with total clarity  
that Damayanti was already in love  
with the Nishadha king, so with a smile  
it unlocked the lock on its beak. (3.99)

The goose, then, finally lets Sarasvati out to perform her duty in sealing this love relationship:

“Princess,” said the goose, “if I’m reading  
you right, there’s nothing left for me  
to do. The god of love with his five arrows  
has turned up the heat on both of you,  
and by now you’re already  
welded together.” (3.100)

The messenger opens his discourse with an eloquent confession regarding the irrelevance of his intervention in this particular case. His ability to read signs already brought him to the conclusion that Damayanti is as tormented by love as Nala. The bird is, of course, not entirely honest when it states that nothing is left for it to do: it must still obtain Damayanti’s confession regarding the reciprocity of her feelings. The description of Nala’s state and of the torments of separation is thus meant to extract these words of confession from Damayanti. Characterizing the goal as a *fait accompli* is part of the goose’s strategy to achieve it.

That Shriharsha deliberately relies on the conventions regarding the various stages of parting’s grief is evident from the last stanza of the passage under scrutiny:

He’s in bad shape, this king: Desire has been shooting  
his five arrows at him from both right and left hands,  
which makes for ten sure hits. He’s gone through all  
the first nine stages of being in love. Let’s hope that the tenth  
will be like the flower unfolding  
in the empty sky. (3.114)

With this verse, the poet turns the five-arrowed god of love into the concrete representation of the ten stages of love in separation of the Sanskrit tradition. These ten stages end with death, which, as this verse suggests, cannot actually occur when a poem is displaying erotic emotion. This is what is meant by the image of the last flower-arrow becoming “like the flower unfolding in the empty sky,” an expression that stands for an impossible event. It is impossible in theory, and it is unlikely to happen in this particular context since the bird already knows that Damayanti will return Nala’s love. The bird uses this idiom to formulate a threat that is meant, again, to precipitate the princess’s confession, as if to say: we have read the relevant treatises, and we know how such things end, so please do not waste precious time and just admit that you love him.

In a way, by openly—and ironically—stating the irrelevance of his function as a messenger, the bird set the tone for the interpretation of the rest of his discourse. As we already saw, the concluding stanza also suggests the connivance between him and the reader regarding the fortunate outcome of his endeavor. More than the progression of Nala through various stages of love in separation, it is his state of constant contemplation of the mental image of Damayanti that the poet wants

to convey. Whereas the term *lovesickness* and the description of its symptoms emphasize the external dimension of parting's grief, Shriharsha focuses on the character's inner states and describes them as a form of austerity: we are dealing with a lover turned ascetic.

In a stanza that describes Nala's anxiousness, the beloved becomes an ethereal entity that pervades her lover's meditative state:

You, lady, live in his heart,  
but you're also somehow outside him,  
in fact you're his very life's breath  
moving through nose and mouth.  
His mind, too, being utterly absorbed  
in you, never budes from that wondrous  
painting, and this, too,  
is a wonder. (3.105)

This stanza shows the total absorption of the mind in the visualization of the still absent beloved. Shriharsha was operating within a paradigm of the stages of love in separation that foregrounds a contemplative approach to love. Separation becomes a means to foster both concentration and the inner heat with which the goose opened its description:

Bodiless Desire must be thinking: "Once  
our two bodies were equal. Mine  
got burnt, but his was never even  
slightly boiled." On fire with envy, seizing on the fact  
that *you* are far away, Desire  
is now scorching  
his skin. (3.102)

The king stares, unblinking, at your portrait  
on the wall, drinking you in  
with eyes red from tears  
or maybe it's from the fire  
you've lit inside him. (3.103)

Desire turns into its own antidote and the fire of passion is alleviated by the fire of austerities. The lover-ascetic is a very productive theme in South Asian literature and we find beautiful early examples of it in Prakrit literature, such as this stanza from Hala's *Seven Hundred Short Poems* (ca. second century CE, Deccan):

Scorched by long, burning, repeated sighs,  
drenched by a stream of tears,  
away from you  
the woman's lower lip  
performs the austerity of water and fire.<sup>6</sup> (*Seven Hundred Short Poems* 2.85/185)

Nala is equally consumed by the love that burns within, which brings him closer to the figure of his tormentor, Desire, who became bodiless after being burnt by Shiva's third eye for attempting to disturb the god's meditation:

He's grown thin, pierced in vain  
by the arrows of Desire.  
Only his beauty remains intact.  
Yet even now, after losing almost  
all his body, he's still competing with,  
and defeating the bodiless god. (3.109)

In the goose's speech, the lovers are already united because the heat of desire welded them together, because Damayanti is the vital breaths of Nala the meditating yogi, and because of the constant reminiscence of his beloved, the object of his contemplation with whom he eventually becomes one:

You are continually climbing up  
the tall ladder of his imagination  
as he showers a rain of sighs.  
From thinking only about you  
he's *become you*. (3.106)

The beauty of the stages of love is not the logic that governs them, which countless theoreticians have described, discussed, and debated, from Andreas Capellanus in medieval Europe to Ibn Hazm and Ibn 'Arabi in the Islamic world to scores of South Asian literary theorists. Rather, it is the array of possible causes that induce the peculiar state of the lover that inspires poets. The poet who contemplates his character and the reader who deciphers the symptom with him are the ashamed physicians of Shriharsha's verse:

Speaking of shame, the expert physicians  
who are treating him, shy as he is, for his high fever  
have nothing whatever to say  
about the etiology of his condition.  
Embarrassment apparently  
is contagious. (3.111)

It is, of course, a fool's game, because, like the goose, everyone knows that love is the root of his symptoms and that none of them are really threatening the lover's life. This feigned confusion keeps creation alive in a perpetual search for the true cause of a pair of lovers' odd behaviors:

Allow me to restate this problem:  
1) He's studying that painting of you  
2) Unblinking  
3) With deep attention and affection.  
4) There are tears in his eyes.

5) Those tears are mine, says the eye. That's what happens  
if you don't blink.

6) No way, says love. They're all mine.

7) This dispute remains  
unsolved. (3.104)