Moving To and Fro Between Alakā and Rāmagiri in Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*

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Moving To and Fro Between Alakā and Rāmagiri in Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*

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One of Kālidāsa's better known compositions, the *Meghadūta*, consists of between 110 and 122 stanzas, all in the *mandākrāntā* metre (e.g. Hultzsch 1998: xii-xxvii). Briefly told, the "story" runs as follows: as a punishment for neglect of duty a *yakṣa* has been banished for the duration of one whole year from Kubera's town Alakā in the Himālayas to Rāmagiri south of the Vindhyas. When he sees a rain cloud heading north, he requests it to pass on a message for his wife who was left behind in his native town. In the first stanzas the setting of the monologue that follows is outlined, making the point that the speaker is not a third person or outsider, but one who is personally involved in the situation, fearing for his wife's life. As I have argued elsewhere (Tieken 2014: 92), in this respect, the *Meghadūta* agrees with the lyrical tradition, in which, to understand the poem, one has to find out who the speaker is and what the situation is underlying the words spoken. Only at stanza six does the *yakṣa*'s address to the cloud start, beginning with a description of the route from Rāmagiri to Alakā and next, once Alakā has been reached, zooming in on this city's inhabitants, the *yakṣa*'s own house and, finally, his wife. The text ends with the *yakṣa* dictating the message that the cloud is to deliver to his wife, namely that within another four months he will be home again and be able to alleviate her grief.

The *Meghadūta* stands at the beginning of a highly productive genre of so-called messenger poems (*sandeśakāvya*s), in both Sanskrit and the vernaculars. The main variation between the poems lies in the nature of the messenger: beside Kālidāsa's cloud, we have the wind (in Dhoyī's *Pavanadūta*), a bee (in the anonymous *Bhṛṅgasandeśa*) and a whole range of birds (for instance a goose in Vedāntadeśika's *Haṃsasandeśa*). In the anonymous Tamil *Tamiḻviṭutūtu* a woman directs the Tamil language itself to the god residing in the temple in Madurai to beg him not to neglect her (Dubyanskiy 2005: 272-3). The popularity of the genre in particular in the vernacular literary traditions was no doubt due to the opportunity it offered for descriptions of sites or features of the specific (imagined) linguistic regions.

Although Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* is the oldest known example of a messenger poem, it is apparently hard to believe that this poet was also the very first to produce

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a *sandeśakāvya*. According to Lienhard (1984: 114), the *dūtakāvya*, as he calls it, "was practised long before Kālidāsa's days, probably in Prākrit", concluding that "[we] must assume the messenger poem to be a well-established category of *kāvya* even before Kālidāsa's time". By "Prākrit" Lienhard refers to a non-literary folk tradition, which, as it was "seldom written down" (1984: 126), would explain why the earlier compositions have not come down to us. In a footnote he also refers to several rudimentary examples of messenger poems in Tamil Caṅkam literature discussed by Zvelebil (1974: 205). The same Tamil poems have also been mentioned by Hart (1975: 244-6), and they include *Puṟanāṉūṟu* 67, in which the bard Picir sends a message to King Kiḷḷi through a gander. According to Hart, who dates Tamil Caṅkam poetry at the latest in the beginning of our era, "there can be little doubt that it [the messenger poem] originated in the southern tradition" (1975: 246). Since then, however, it has been shown that the early date of Caṅkam poetry is not as well established as Hart, and most other Tamil scholars with him, like to believe (e.g. Tieken 2001 and 2008).[2] Instead, a good case can be made for dating Caṅkam poetry in the eighth or ninth century, that is, long after Kālidāsa's time. The late date of early Tamil literature also affects Dubyanskiy (2005), who claims that it is unlikely that the messenger poem, which is found practically all over India, goes back to one particular model. In order to identify possible sources of the genre, he suggest that we undertake a thorough study of the tradition in its entirety, beginning with the regional variants. His own study covers those in Tamil, in the tacit understanding that at least a few of these versions are pre-Kālidāsa: he dates Tamil Caṅkam poetry between the first and third centuries AD (Dubyanskiy 2005). However, all regional, vernacular messenger poems, including those in Tamil, are later than Kālidāsa.

For examples from before Kālidāsa we have to turn to Sanskrit literature itself. In the search for antecedents of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* attention has been drawn to passages in the earlier literature in which people likewise use animals or inanimate objects as messengers. For instance, in *Ṛgveda* 10.108, Indra and Bṛhaspati send their dog Saramā to find the herd of cattle the Paṇis had robbed from the Aṅgiras. In the dialogue between Saramā and the Paṇis, the former introduces herself as *indrasya dūtī*, or "Indra's messenger" (10.108, 2). In *Ṛgveda* 5.61.17-19 the poet Śyāvāśva requests the Night (vocative *ūrmye*), fast as a charioteer, to convey his poem of praise (*stoma*) to Rathavīti, a great patron and sacrificer.[3] In the *Kāmavilāpajātaka* (297) a criminal's

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[2] For a critique of Shulman's recent attempt (2016) to salvage the early date, see Tieken (2016).

[3] In Hopkins's reference to this passage Rathavīti has become Śyāvāśva's beloved Rathavīthī and for "Night" he quotes *rātri* instead of *ūrmyā* (Hopkins 2004: 33). Evidently, Hopkins did not have a look at the Vedic text himself. According to Hopkins the presence of "messenger poems" like these in the Veda invalidates Hart's argument that the motif had Dravidian roots (Hopkins's 2004: 48, n. 9).

main concern while approaching death through impalement is to satisfy his wife's desire for luxury things. He asks a crow to take the earrings, rings and fine cloths (he had stolen?) and hand them over to her. Obviously, due to such considerations at the moment of death the man in the Jātaka is to end in hell.

A well-known example of an animal functioning as a messenger is found in the epic story of Nala and Damayantī in *Mahābhārata* 3, 50, in which a goose offers Nala to speak on his behalf to Damayantī. Yet another example, this time from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, concerns Rāma's use of the monkey Hanumān to convey a message to Sītā (see, e.g., *Rāmāyaṇa* 4, 43).

A text mentioned in this connection as well is the *Ghaṭakarparakāvya*. [4] In stanza 3 of this short poem of 21 stanzas a woman, left behind by her husband, asks a cloud to press him to come home immediately as otherwise she might die from grief. In stanzas 11-13 the same woman is presented speaking to trees, the *sarja*, *kadamba* and *nīpa* respectively.[5] In Abhinavagupta's commentary the *Ghaṭakarpara* has been ascribed to Kālidāsa. However, this tradition does not seem to have been widely known or accepted. The "nine jewels" (*navaratnas*) at King Vikramāditya's court mentioned in the late medieval *Jyotirvidābharaṇa* include a Kālidāsa as well as a Ghaṭakarpara. With the latter no doubt the author of the poem with the same title is meant. The name, like the title of the poem, was obviously inspired by its final stanza, in which the poet promised to bring water in a broken pot (*ghaṭakarpara*) to any of his colleagues who surpassed him in the use of *yamaka* (note that this final stanza is the only one without *yamaka*).[6] If this is indeed the case, then according to this tradition the *Ghaṭakarpara* was not composed by Kālidāsa or a Kālidāsa. Furthermore, one may question the tradition presented in the *Jyotirvidābharaṇa*, which makes Kālidāsa and Ghaṭakarpara contemporaries. In this connection it may be noted that the *Jyotirvidābharaṇa*, which is probably as late as the sixteenth century (Winternitz 1985: 46, n. 1), is ascribed to Kālidāsa, or a Kālidāsa. We thus seem to be dealing with fiction squared. And this may apply to Abhinavagupta's ascription of the *Ghaṭakarpara* to

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[4] See, e.g., Chakravarti (1927). But note also Lienhard, who has "intentionally dwelt at some length on the Ghaṭakarparakāvya as most histories obstinately defend the viewpoint that this little poem is the forerunner of the 'messenger poem' (dūtakāvya) or 'message poem' (sandeśakāvya) which flourished in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. I think we have shown that this theory is untenable" (1984: 112).

[5] For a description of the contents and partial English translation of the *Ghaṭakarpara*, see Vaudeville (1959).

[6] For such "nick names" in Hāla's *Sattasaī*, see Tieken 1983: 76-7. They are also found in Tamil Caṅkam poetry.

Kālidāsa as well.[7] However, what if the text were the work of the author of the *Meghadūta*? We do not need the *Ghaṭakarpara* to know that the motif of a person, deluded into thinking they could pass on a message to a lover addresses animals or things, was older than Kālidāsa. The epic examples (I leave out the Vedic ones, in which erotic connotations are absent[8]) sufficiently show that it was. Apart from that, within Kālidāsa's own *œuvre* it is the main motif in the fourth act of the *Vikramorvaśīya*, in which king Purūravas in his search for Urvaśī beseeches a peacock to tell him if it has seen his beloved (v. 12, a *carcarī*); and in stanza 8, again a *carcarī*, of that same act he speaks to a cloud, begging it to stop raining and not hinder him in his search for his beloved.[9] The motif has been described by Bhāmaha in his *Kāvyālaṃkāra* 1.42-4. The use of clouds, wind, the moon, bees and birds as messengers is included among the Doṣas, or flaws, as these animals and things do not speak properly and it is impossible to extract meaning from the sounds they produce. However, in certain circumstances it does serve a purpose to abandon realism, such as in the depiction of a lovesick person (*yadi cotkaṇṭhayā yattad unmatta iva bhāṣate tathā bhavatu*).

In the search for antecedents of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* attention has been paid almost exclusively to this particular motif of employing a cloud as a messenger. But this is only one half of the *Meghadūta* and does not as yet lead us to a specific source.

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[7] A question which remains is what may have triggered Abhinavagupta to ascribe the *Ghaṭakarpara* to Kālidāsa, with whom he no doubt will have meant the same Kālidāsa who composed, for instance, the *Meghadūta*. In this connection I would like to draw attention to the final stanza (21) in which the author of the text challenges his colleagues to try to surpass him in the use of *yamaka*, which he illustrates in every stanza of the poem except this one. In this stanza the verb *śap-*, "to curse, to pledge an oath", occurs. As I have shown elsewhere, the plots in all Kālidāsa's works are set in motion by curses. The curse seems to be Kālidāsa's signature, just as the division of a work into two parts was Bāṇa's (Tieken 2005). However, apart from the question if Abhinavagupta knew of such signatures in Kāvya literature, the verb *śap-* in the *Ghaṭakarpara* stanza does not seem to mean "to curse". If anything, it seems to have been used in the meaning "to forswear, renounce" here: "I will forswear all sexual pleasures with women with affectionate natures and, however thirsty I will be, I will bring any handful of water I receive to that poet who surpasses me in the use of *yamaka*, carrying it in a broken pot" (*bhāvānuraktalalanāsurataiḥ śapeyam ālabhya cāmbu tṛṣitaḥ karakośapeyam/jīyeya yena kavinā yamakaiḥ pareṇa tasmai vaheyam udakaṃ ghaṭakarpareṇa//*)

[8] In addition I leave out a Chinese verse by Hsū Kan (i.e. Xu Gan, ca. 170/1-217) quoted by Chakravarti 1927: 286ff.) in which a woman asks clouds to convey a message to her husband ("O floating clouds that swim in heaven above/Bear on your wings these words to him I love"). Chakravarti, with reference to Giles (1927: 119-120), introduces Xu Gan as the translator of Nāgārjuna's *Prajñāmūlaśāstraṭīkā*. However, the poem in question has nothing to do with Xu Gan's translation activity. He was also a poet of so-called five-word-line poems, which represent a purely indigenous Chinese tradition. The poem in question may well be an example of this type of poetry, four of which have survived (Makeham 1985: 2 and 46, n. 17).

[9] For a discussion of these stanzas, see Ghosal (1972).

The other half is the route taken by the cloud from Rāmagiri in the south to Alakā in the north. As I will try to show, this part of the *Meghadūta* does lead us to a specific source, in which it is, moreover, found combined with the use of an animal as a messenger, in this case a monkey,

As to possible sources for the journey motif Dubyanskiy has pointed to, among other Tamil Caṅkam texts, the five *āṟṟuppaṭai* poems in the *Pattuppāṭṭu* collection. These poems are mainly composed of descriptions of the route along which a bard might arrive at a liberal patron. However, as already pointed out above, the early date assigned to this poetic tradition is questionable. Hopkins (2004), for his part, plans a comparative discussion of the related motif of the king's aerial chariot ride with which the South Asian monarch surveys his land. However, the example he produces belongs to the period after Kālidāsa, from Vedāntadeśika's *Saṃkalpasūryodaya* (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries). Furthermore, if with "a chariot ride with which the South Asian king surveys his land" Hopkins refers to the classical *digvijaya*, he overlooks the particular nature of the cloud's route in the *Meghadūta*: that taken in a *digvijaya* is always circular, with the centre at one's right hand (*pradakṣiṇa*) (see, e.g. Tieken 2006: 455-6). In contrast, in the *Meghadūta* the cloud travels from Rāmagiri to Alakā in more or less a straight line following more or less the same route the *yakṣa* had travelled before in the opposite direction. Moving back and forth along the same route is met with in all *sandeśakāvya*s, though the direction may vary, from south to north as in the *Meghadūta* or from north to south as in Vedāntadeśika's *Haṃsasandeśa*.[10] and *Saṃkalpasūryodaya*. Furthermore, in the *samdeśakāvya*s the countries traversed are observed from above as the journey is invariably through the sky. Going back to the *Meghadūta*, the question is where in the literature before Kālidāsa do we find exiles hurrying back through the sky as well? As far as I know, the only other earlier example is found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (6, 111), in which Rāma and Sītā return from Laṅkā to Ayodhyā. In fact, it may well have been this very scene from the *Rāmāyaṇa* that may have been the model on which Kālidāsa grafted the cloud's flight over India in the *Meghadūta*.

After Sītā's abductor Rāvaṇa has been killed by Rāma, the couple, reunited, flies back through the air to Ayodhyā in Rāvaṇa's chariot Puṣpaka. They travel the same route along which they had come, with Rāma pointing out the scenes down below of their earlier adventures. They fly over the dam, or causeway (*setu*, v. 10), built by the monkey army between the mainland and the island Laṅkā. Rāma draws Sītā's attention to Hiraṇyanābha Mountain, which had served Hanumān as a foothold

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[10] And in his *Saṃkalpasūryodaya*, see Hopkins 2002: 55 and 64. The author's aim in this text and his *Haṃsasandeśa* is to glorify the south, its landscapes and its religious institutions (in the *Haṃsasandeśa* the Varadarājaperumāḷ temple in Kāñcīpuram).

and resting place when he jumped over the sea (v. 12). Having arrived on the mainland, they see the Kiṣkindha Forest where Rāma had killed Vālin (v. 14) and Ṛṣyamūka Mountain where he had earlier promised Sugrīva to kill his rival Vālin (v. 15). Crossing the River Pampā they pass Janasthāna where Jaṭāyus had in vain tried to stop Sītā's kidnapper Rāvaṇa (v. 19) and Agastya's *āśrama* along the Godāvarī River (v. 22), and before reaching Ayodhyā itself they fly over Citrakūṭa, where Bharata had tried to persuade Rāma to return to Ayodhyā and take up kingship (v. 20).

While in the *digvijaya* with is circular route the focus is on the length and breadth of the realm, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Meghadūta* the route is determined by the exiles' desire to go home as quickly as possible and with as few detours as possible. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* the route had been covered before and all obstacles along the way had already been adequately dealt with. The heroic feats Rāma performed during the outward journey were not conquests, or attempts at annexation or consolidation of power; several times he tells Sītā they were performed for her sake (*tava hetor* in vv. 3, 10 and 19). In the *Meghadūta,* we have only the return journey. It is not entirely clear, however, if, as is the case in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the cloud's route is exactly the same as the one taken by the *yakṣa* before. In v. 13 the *yakṣa* reassures the cloud that the route he describes will be an agreeable one as there will be many mountaintops for it to rest on.[11] Furthermore, the cloud will be able to refill itself with the water flowing down from the slopes of these mountains. It cannot be ruled out that the *yakṣa* describes a route here which he especially selected for the cloud. On the other hand, the descriptions of the local circumstances along the way do suggest, or rather are meant to suggest, that the *yakṣa* had visited the places himself before. In any case, the route is the shortest one possible, forming a straight line from Rāmagiri to Alakā. This is underlined by the visit to Ujjayinī, which is specifically mentioned to be a detour, or *vakraḥ panthā* (v. 27).[12] The special position which this city – and its shrine dedicated to Śiva – acquires in the text might, incidentally, also tell us something, if not about Kālidāsa, then about his patron.

In both the *Meghadūta* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* the separation of husband and wife was caused by banishment. Beside the moving to and fro between the place of exile and home, there are in the *Meghadūta* other echoes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For instance,

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[11] However, in v. 22 the cloud is asked not to prolong these periods of rest unnecessarily.

[12] Another, similar, journey was undertaken by Hamumāṇ in *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.61. In the battle against Rāvaṇa many monkeys have been killed and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have been wounded. Jāmbavān sends Hanumān to the Himalayas to fetch medicinal plants to cure and revive the wounded, pointing out the route he is to take (*drakṣyasi* "you will see" Kailasa (v. 30), then the *auṣadhiparvata* (31) and next the four *oṣadhi*s (32)). As in the *Meghadūta* speed is required: Hanumān is urged to hurry and come back without delay. Note that in this case the route goes from south to north and back to the south again.

Rāvaṇa's *Puṣpaka* chariot in which Rāma and Sītā (and the monkey army) return to Ayodhyā had originally belonged to Kubera. When Rāvaṇa drove Kubera away from Laṅkā, he kept the chariot as booty. Upon his return, Rāma gives the chariot to its rightful owner. In the *Meghadūta,* the *yakṣa* was sent into exile by his master, who is none other than this very same Kubera, the lord of Alakā. It is also interesting to see how in v. 1 of *Rāmāyaṇa* 6. 111 the chariot is compared to a big cloud lifted into the sky by the wind (*vimānam utpapāta mahāmeghaḥ śvasanenoddhato yathā*). To this may be added the *yakṣa*'s place of exile, Rāmagiri. Though the *āśrama* at the Rāmagiri, or "Rāma's Mountain", is not mentioned as such in the *Rāmāyaṇa* among the sites visited by Rāma and Sītā, in v.1 of the *Meghadūta* it is said to be the place where Sītā had bathed (*janakatanayāsnānapuṇyodakeṣu ... rāmagiryāśrameṣu*), and, next, in v. 9 its slopes are said to be marked by Rāma's footprints (*śailaṃ ... raghupatipadair aṅkitaṃ*).

It has been suggested previously by others that, for his *Meghadūta,* Kālidāsa may have been inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[13] An early example of this suggestion is found in Mallinātha's commentary (fourteenth century). In his commentary on *Meghadūta* v. 1, Mallinātha refers to earlier scholars who had claimed that Kālidāsa had written the *Meghadūta* with Hanumān's role as messenger in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in mind: *sītāṃ prati rāmasya hanūmatsaṃdeśaṃ manasi nidhāya meghasaṃdeśaṃ kṛtavān ityāhuḥ* (Kale 1979: 3). Note that in v. 97 the *yakṣa* predicts that after the cloud announces itself as a friend of her husband's, the wife will welcome it as Sītā had welcomed the son of the wind (i.e. Hanumān).[14] More recent hints in that direction were made by Bronner and Shulman, who wrote that "in the background of Kālidāsa's basic situation of love-in-separation we find the separated lovers of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* Rāma and Sītā (also the messenger Hanumān)" (Bronner and Shulman 2006: 12-3) and that "Rāma's separation from Sītā ... formed the precedent and background for Kālidāsa's yakṣa" (Bronner 2013: 502).[15] As can be seen, these suggestions are of a very general nature and do not mention, at least not explicitly, what may well be the most specific correspondence between the epic and the poem, namely the straight routes back home taken by the respective exiles. We may instead assume that Kālidāsa borrowed the idea of an inanimate object as messenger in combination with moving

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[13] Rāma and Sītā's return journey from Laṅkā to Ayodhyā through the sky in a *vimāna* takes up a whole canto (13) in Kālidāsa's retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in his *Raghuvaṃśa*.

[14] *ityākhyāte pavanatanayaṃ maithilīvonmukhī sā/tvām utkaṇṭhocchvasitahṛdayā vīkṣya saṃbhāvya caiva//.* The only other reference in the *Meghadūta* to a "text" other than the *Rāmāyaṇa* is found in v. 30, which mentions expert tellers of the stories about Udayana, which have come down to us in texts drawing their material from the "lost" *Bṛhatkathā* (if it ever existed).

[15] See also Keith, who wrote "suggestions for the subject-matter may have been taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where Rāma's deep longing for his lost Sītā offers an obvious prototype for the Yakṣa's sorrow for the wife from whom he is severed" (Keith 1920: 85).

straight home through the air directly from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in which these two features are likewise found together. Or rather, if he borrowed the route from the *Rāmāyaṇa* he may have borrowed the inanimate messenger from that epic as well. In any case, to assume fully-fledged messenger poems from the days before Kālidāsa, which have subsequently been lost, seems wholly unnecessary.

The aerial journey in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a real journey. It is also a pleasant one; Rāma and Sītā are together again and know they will be home soon. In the *Meghadūta*, on the contrary, the journey takes place only in the *yakṣa*'s imagination, and it remains to be seen if he will ever be able to make the journey home and be reunited with his wife again. If, for his *Meghadūta,* Kālidāsa had indeed been inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he played with the contrast here between the epic tradition, which ends happily – Rāma's *abhiṣeka*, the Pāṇḍavas reaching heaven – and the lyric tradition, which revolves around the never-ending separation of the lovers.[16]

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[16] However, the relationship, or, if one wants, the indebtedness, of the *Meghadūta* to the lyrical love poetry tradition is unclear. The earliest collection of such poetry, Hāla's *Sattasaī*, is later than the *Kāmasūtra* – it pokes fun at the learned character of the latter treatise (see Khoroche and Tieken 2009) – and therefore a pre-Kālidāsa date cannot be taken for granted. Providing an outline of the setting of the monologue that follows, as done in stanzas 1-5 in the *Meghadūta*, is also the main concern in the commentaries on the *Sattasaī* (and of those on the Old Tamil Caṅkam poems), but these commentaries are all much later than Kālidāsa.

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